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Visualisation report of emerging extremist narratives across Europe

**Tina Askanius, Miriam Haselbacher,
Ursula Reeger,
and Jullietta Stoencheva**

**Malmö University and Austrian Academy
of Sciences**

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For more information on this report please contact Tina Askanus, tina.askanus@mau.se

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge on contemporary extremist narratives circulating online in three countries across Europe; Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden. To achieve this, the report draws on a review of an extensive body of previous research and secondary data sources, pursuing two primary objectives: firstly, it maps *what kind of extremist narratives are on offer* across Europe today, and second, it identifies *where across the digital mainstream, these are currently in circulation*.

Upon reviewing the available evidence, **two key topics emerge as central to the proliferation of extremist narratives in Europe**. First, extremist narratives continue to predominantly emerge around anti-migration ideas and sentiments. **Contemporary anti-immigration narratives echo familiar themes and long-standing ideas that European societies are collapsing under the weight of enforced multiculturalism** and/or that European/white populations are being replaced by immigrant communities and in particular Muslim “invaders”. Such anti-immigration narratives, which continue to take on new forms and tap into shifting conspiratorial beliefs and falsehoods, circulate openly today and in mainstream media.

Second, the Covid19 pandemic gave rise to a host of **anti-establishment narratives some of which veered towards illiberal and anti-democratic ideas and behaviours**. These narratives peddled widely circulated conspiracy theories suggesting that a malevolent global elite exploited or orchestrated the pandemic to dismantle European societies, infringe upon civil liberties and harm populations through the vaccination programs. Anti-establishment narratives sparked during the pandemic continue to circulate and take on new forms in online spaces today.

Beyond the key topics outlined by OppAttune - vaccination, migration, silent narratives and protectionism - this report provides evidence that **climate change and gender are emerging as key topics around which new extremist narratives and conspiracy theories tend to gravitate in Europe today**.

In its efforts to identify the key online spaces in which extremist narratives occur, the report finds that these move across a wide range of online spaces ranging from well-known global social media platforms to more fringe and country-specific sites operating at the margins of the digital mainstream. These range from alternative news sites, websites and blogs to fringe video sharing platforms such as *Rumble*, *BitChute*, *Odysee*; the online messaging services *Telegram*, *Discord* and *Viber*; discussion forums like *Reddit* and mainstream social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *TikTok*, *X (formerly Twitter)* and *Instagram*. Some of the online platforms identified are specific to the national contexts. In the Swedish landscape of online media discussion forums *Flashback Forum* and *Familjeliv* along with *SwebbTube* emerge as prominent conduits for extremist narratives and divisive discourse. Specific to the context of Bulgaria are *Spodeli*, *Kaldata*, *Dir* and *BG-Mamma*, all of which are online forums affording anonymous and relatively unmoderated discussions.

In addition, focusing on the transnational and multi-language forum *Reddit*, the report provides preliminary analytical insights into the dynamics of online discussions on migration among ordinary citizens in the three countries. These empirical insights suggest that extremist narratives proliferate across the three subreddits and provide ample evidence of the increasing penetration of exclusionary and stigmatising discourse into the digital mainstream.

1. Introduction

OppAttune tracks the evolution of oppositional ideologies and aims to develop tools to **track, attune and limit the spread of extreme political narratives**. The project operates at micro, meso, and macro levels, comprehensively addressing these issues from the perspective of legal, political, and historical factors to group dynamics, media contexts and the everyday life of citizens. Within the larger OppAttune project, Work package 4, *Media, Machines, and Mobilisations* brings together media and urban scholars to identify and understand contemporary extremist narratives on- and offline and to map their spread across the digital mainstream and into local ecologies. The aim of this first report of the work package is **to identify and map contemporary extremist narratives as these circulate in online spaces across Europe**. It sets out to **map what kind of extremist narratives are on offer and where across the digital mainstream, these are currently in circulation**. As such, the deliverable, along with the Work package at large, contributes specifically to OppAttune's first objective of *tracking* the evolution of extreme political narratives (see Figure 1).

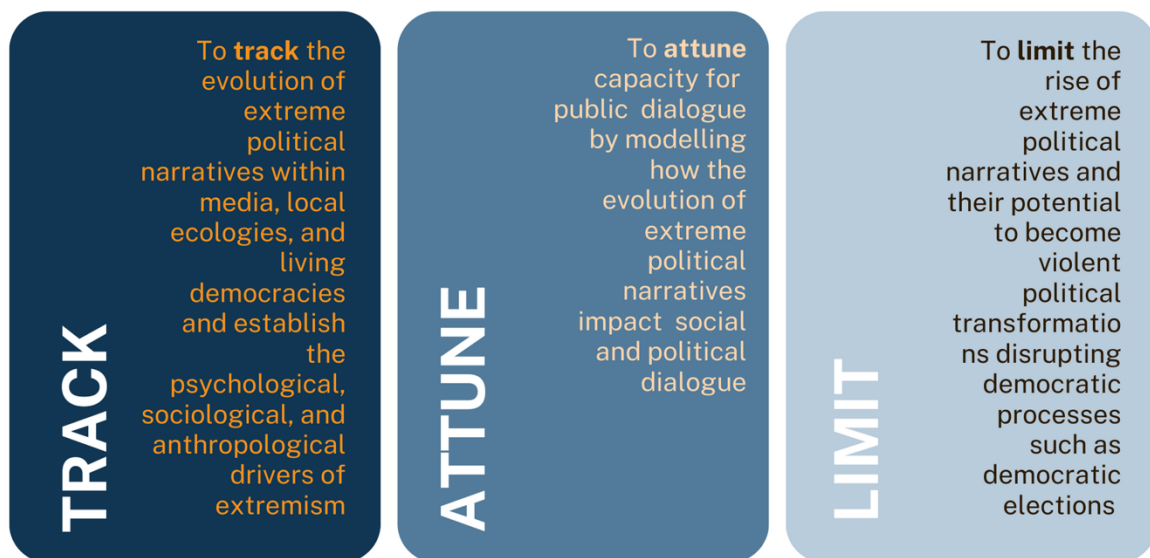


Figure 1. OppAttune key objectives

The report provides a comprehensive overview of existing research synthesising the state-of-the-art insights into the online realm of extremist narratives and so called ‘oppositional ideologies’. We take a case-study approach to zoom in on three national contexts from different European regions: Sweden (northern Europe), Austria (central Europe), and Bulgaria (eastern Europe). While we are unable to cover developments in all European countries, our hope is that such an approach will provide valuable insights into the specificities of the country cases, while at the same time generating insights into broader patterns across Europe. We will also be able to observe how these cases, in turn, contribute to regional trends or dynamics.

The report is based on secondary data from government agencies, civil society organisations, and other independent nonprofit research actors as well as on a systematic literature review offering a synthesis of existing knowledge in the area, with a focus on empirical studies conducted specifically within the three national contexts. Based on a synthesis of these insights, we map the **key topics, actors and platforms** around which extremist narratives are currently circulating throughout Europe. Taking into account that extremist narratives are often “cloaked” to avoid content moderation and de-platformisation, e.g. making use of irony, humor and ambiguity to enter mainstream spaces, we have mined existing literature for evidence of “silent narratives” that are not immediately or easily pigeonholed as extremist, in line with the conceptual framework outlined by the broader OppAttune project (see definitions of key concepts below).

For each country case, we begin by summarizing key extremist narratives identified in the mapping followed by a brief outline of the historical, political, and legal contexts required to understand contemporary developments in the area of political extremism and polarisation in the respective countries and regions of Europe. We then further unpack how these narratives evolve around a series of key topics, actors, and platforms which in conjuncture with seismic events such as the COVID19 pandemic, have shaped the evolution of extremist narratives considerably in recent years. In the final analytical sections of each country case, we present preliminary insights from an ongoing study of online discussions on **migration - one of the hot-button issues around which polarising discourse and extremist belief systems tend to gravitate - in each of the countries**. These insights are based on the first data collection and

topic modelling of online comments from the discussion forum *Reddit* in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden.

This report is the first in a series of deliverables from the work package that follow a three-step approach.

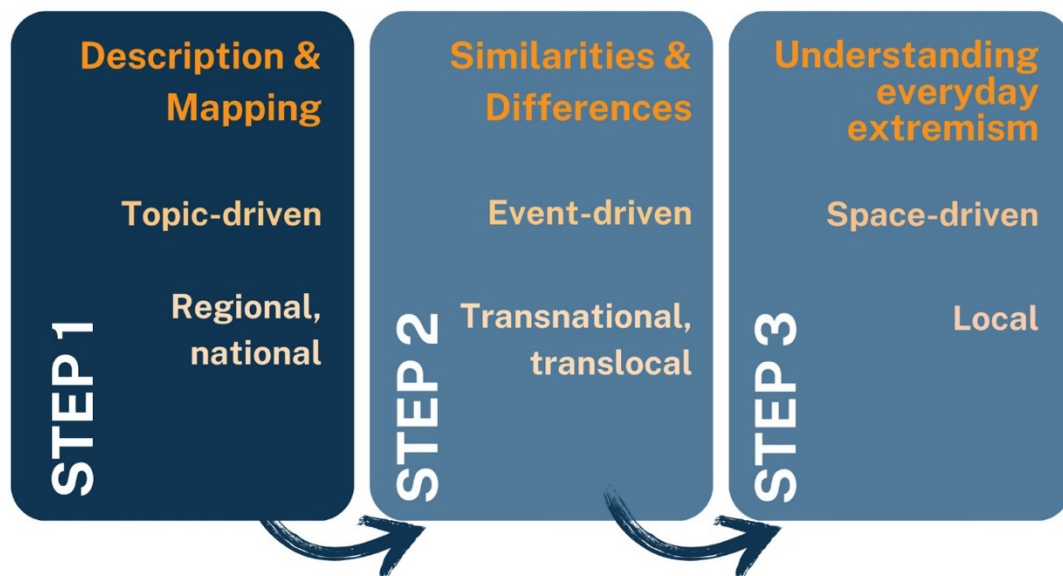


Figure 2. Empirical steps in WP4

This first report is *topic-driven* in that it focuses on extremist narratives around contentious topics as they circulate online in specific national contexts. These relate to the set of topics identified by OppAttune including vaccination, immigration and supply-chain protectionism **but also moves beyond these to identify climate and gender as pivotal topics around which extremist narratives are currently emerging across Europe.**

The second deliverable is *event-driven* and has a distinct translocal focus on narratives emerging around the 2024 European Parliament elections across countries and across on- and offline spaces. As such we contribute to the larger objective of OppAttune of developing methodologies for conducting transnational research. Finally, the third deliverable focuses on everyday negotiations and meaning-making processes around contentious issues within urban environments. It explores everyday extremism from the vantage point of specific *spaces and localities* across Europe.

2. Key concepts and terms

Dovetailing with the larger OppAttune project, the report draws on a number of key concepts central to contemporary scholarship on extremism and political polarisation. These are all “big” contentious concepts which themselves are susceptible to politisation and distortion, and therefore subject to intense academic and political debate, as will also be made evident from the analysis below. In this section, we briefly outline how we understand and approach the concepts most central to this mapping.

2.1. (Everyday) Extremism

The concept of extremism has been criticised for relying on an oversimplified understanding of radicalised ideologies. This simplification stems from the idea that there is a neutral and inherently *good* centre position between two perceived extremes, often delineated as *left* and *right*, or in alternative dichotomies, as religious and secular forms of extremism. This reading of extremism is problematic for various reasons; it not only oversimplifies the complexities of social realities but also tends to homogenise diverse oppositional ideologies. Consequently, this oversimplified understanding is susceptible to misapplication and political instrumentalisation (Sörbon & Wennerhag 2016). OppAttune moves beyond such reductionist readings and delves deeper into the complexity of oppositional ideologies by introducing the concept of everyday extremism.

We may understand the term everyday extremism to have two overlapping implications for research agendas. First of all, it signals a shift in research focus from the overwhelming preoccupation with explicitly violent actors and organisations, often located at the margins of society and politics, and the kinds of media discourse they produce, to a focus on the more pervasive everyday forms of extremist narratives that ordinary citizens are increasingly confronted with as part of their day-to-day lives and media consumption. With the concept of everyday extremism, we aim to understand how extremist narratives penetrate into everyday spheres and are re-negotiated in the everyday life of individuals, online as well as offline.

Two observations were critical in the development of the concept: First, in a double move, oppositional views and opinions expressed on a day-to-day basis have become increasingly polarised, which seems to have led to the shrinking of the mainstream/centre. At the same time, extremist narratives have made their way into public discourse in ways that are blurring the boundaries between fringe and mainstream spaces. Second, the notion implies moving beyond a strict focus on physical violence (against people or property), instead highlighting symbolic and cultural violence as key dimensions of extremism which, even if repackaged as *silent* or hidden, have a clear and concrete impact on violence and polarisation in society. Consequently, when focusing on everyday extremism, we accentuate the discursive-narrative aspects of violence that create the conditions for structural and direct violence to prevail.

Looking beyond the fringes or *the extremes of extremism*, the notion of everyday extremism thus intends to capture the potential, gradual development of extremist narratives, sentiments and attitudes in the general public. As such, we take an interest in the ways in which extremist narratives and conspiracy theories¹ are bleeding into more general popular discontent and widespread sentiments of anti-elitism and distrust in authorities across liberal democracies.

Contemporary forms of extremism circulating online articulated not only overtly through conspiracy theories, hate speech, and disinformation, but tend to make their way into public discourse and *the digital mainstream* by travelling in the guise of irony, ‘edgy’ inside jokes, or otherwise coded language and visuals. Innocuous at first glance, this content subtly reframes extremist ideas, presenting them in a manner that camouflages their true nature, making them seem ordinary and socially acceptable. **Longstanding conspiracy theories in anti-immigration discourse (such as that of White Genocide, the Great Replacement, and general notions of a Jewish-led world order) for example are narrated in new and ostensibly ‘sanitised’ versions.** In these iterations, the rhetoric often downplays or conceals violence through coded language and imagery. We might think of these ‘sanitized’ iterations

¹ At the most basic level, conspiracy narratives constitute an explanation of past, present, or future events or circumstances that cites, as the primary cause, a conspiracy or a small group of powerful individuals acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good (Uscinski 2019). Such individuals or organisations allegedly use their privileged positions (mainly in government or business) as a cover to hide the existence of a secret shadow world where the real power lies (Butter & Knight 2020).

of extremist ideology as instances of everyday extremism articulated through *silent narratives*.

Instead of strictly focusing on hate speech or discourse produced by actors that fall explicitly in the category of violent political extremism (VPE), this report reviews literature on the broad spectrum of extremist narratives articulated in online public discourse. These span a range from seemingly uncontroversial opinions directing hostility towards distinct out-groups to explicitly violent or uncivilised discourse and hate speech (Krzyzanowski & Ekström 2022). The diverse expressions of extremism in settings frequently visited by the wider public, including people unaffiliated with extremist groups, is significant to the normalisation of illiberal and anti-democratic ideas.

2.2. Extremist narratives

Narratives play a crucial role in identifying drivers of political polarisation and understanding the appeal of extremism. In the context of *violent* extremism, RAN (2019)² defines an extremist narrative as “a system of stories that collectively provides a coherent worldview for the purpose of supporting individuals, groups, or movements in the furthering of their illegal violence and violence-assisting activities”.

Moving beyond the predominant focus on explicitly violent and anti-democratic actors and the discourse they produce, we propose a definition of extremist narratives anchored in social identity theory. We subscribe to Berger’s (2018) definition of extremism as a spectrum of beliefs rather than a ‘fixed destination’ (p. 68). Drawing on social identity theory, he argues that, whether violent or nonviolent, extremist movements revolve around the same ‘value proposition’ which holds that the extremist *in-group* offers a *solution* to a *threat-based crisis* that is rooted in the existence of an *out-group*. We take cues from his work to understand extremism as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an outgroup“ (p. 44). Here, hostile actions might designate a

² For a repository of all publications by the Radicalisation Awareness Network see https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/ran-publications_en

range of behaviours, from discriminatory behaviour, hate speech, and harassment to violence and even genocide. At the heart of all extremist ideologies and movements then, are narratives offering identities and subject positions around the demarcation of in-groups and out-groups, and around crisis-solution constructs based on those group identities.

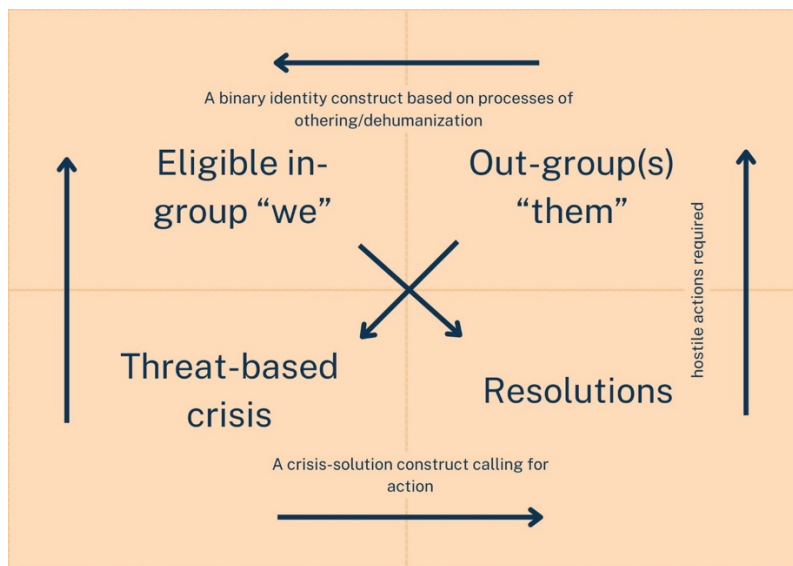


Figure 3. The value proposition of extremist narratives, adapted from Berger (2018)

Importantly, the us/them dichotomy that comes with categorising people into in-groups and out-groups is obviously at the heart of much of mainstream populist political rhetoric today. The creation of political identity is relational and always implies the establishment of difference, which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy and on a conflict between opposing parties (Mouffe 2005). As such, political antagonism built around us/them distinctions are inherent to all political identity formation. Extremist narratives however are characterised by an “overproduction of Othering” (Krasteva 2016) vis-a-vis an out-group. An important difference thus lies in the nature of the measures proposed to solve the conflict between the two groups. **In extremist, as opposed to populist narratives, the us/them distinction is construed around a value proposition of hostility and/or violence** which breaches democratic principles, human rights etc., and ultimately poses a threat to democracy itself.

2.3. Normalisation

The notion of normalization refers to the process by which extreme or radical ideas, beliefs, or behaviors become increasingly accepted, tolerated, or mainstream within a society. Four key factors contribute to the process of normalizing extremism: crisis grievances; technological amplification; celebrity endorsement; and political legitimisation (Ebner 2023).

Specific to the realm of online media, we take the notion of normalization to signal the mechanisms and processes by which narratives, language, and symbols, anchored in extremist ideas, beliefs, or behaviors have increasingly penetrated **the digital mainstream** (Åkerlund 2022), for example circulating on mainstream social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok or on popular discussion forums such as Reddit.

An important concept to understanding normalisation in online settings is what has been dubbed **borderline discourse** (Krzyżanowski 2020). This is discourse that is not explicitly violent or does not qualify as hate speech but that instead merges elements of uncivil discourse (hate speech, antisemitism, and unmitigated racism) with civil discourse borrowed from the previously radical, but today acceptable ‘rational’ and largely legitimate ideas of right-wing populism (Krzyżanowski 2020, p.505). Riding on the back of the broader discursive shifts towards anti-immigration propelled by the electoral successes of far-right populist parties, ordinary people debating online are thus increasingly exposed to and engaging with extremism (Krzyżanowski 2020; Gillespie 2022). Such borderline discourse is ubiquitous in online discussion forums, and other digital spaces where ordinary people spend time online, as evidenced in our empirical insight from Reddit in chapter 4.

3. Three country-cases for exploring extremist narratives emerging across Europe

As a historically robust and longstanding democracy known for its consensus politics and traditionally high levels of trust in democratic institutions and civility in public discourse, Sweden offers a window onto understanding the rapidly changing dynamics of extremist ideologies and the gradual mainstreaming of populist and extremist ideas currently unfolding across advanced liberal democracies in Europe. Bulgaria, with its recent accession to the European Union, stands as a dynamic case of a country in the Post-conflict zone at the intersection of Eastern and Southern Europe. Austria, on the other hand, as a German-speaking country in the Protectionist zone, represents a case within Central Europe. It stands out due to the continuous electoral successes of a far-right populist party, which influences public discourse on contentious topics. Together, the three countries represent a cross-section of Europe, each marked by unique socio-political, historical, and cultural contexts that shape media discourse and the development of extremist narratives. By juxtaposing insights on narratives circulating in each of these countries, we seek to identify overarching patterns, divergences, and nuanced developments that shed light on the broader discursive landscape of extremism in Europe today.

3.1. Emerging extremist narratives: Evidence from Austria

To chart the terrain of extremist narratives in Austria, we first engage with the country's official definition of extremism and delineate what the government defines as extremist movements. The Directorate General for Public Security (DSN), a division of the Ministry of the Interior, is the central security agency of Austria and is responsible for the monitoring of extremist activities. It publishes annual reports on the protection of the constitution, which include a general overview of trends, a risk assessment, as well as annual summaries and focal points. The question of documentation, terminology, and publication regarding extremist activities is by itself highly political and controversial. In Austria, for example, there have been conflicts over the discontinuity and the re-establishment of a separate report on right-wing extremism and in the 2000s, the authorities monitored animal rights activists, who were accused (and later acquitted) of forming a criminal organisation.

In its latest annual report, the DSN distinguishes between three forms of extremism: Left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism and anti-state connections (Ministry of Interior Austria, 2022). The topic of "Islamic extremism and terrorism" is dealt with in a separate chapter. Notably, the authority only employs the term terrorism when addressing Islamic extremism and refrains from using this terminology in other contexts. Also, the Austrian Criminal Code explicitly mentions only "religiously motivated extremist associations" (Art. 247b StGB), which underlines the fact that different legal regimes have emerged for these various movements.

Table 1 highlights the main normative and ideological differences between left- and right-wing extremism: Right-wing extremism typically revolves around an ideology of exclusion, often targeting specific groups or individuals. It seeks to preserve traditional hierarchies and values, sometimes expressing xenophobia or racism. On the other hand, left-wing extremism is characterised by a focus on social equality and inclusivity, often advocating for the radical widening of democracy. While far-right extremism tends to uphold existing social orders, left-wing ideology ultimately aims to transform them in pursuit of a more egalitarian society. The extremist value proposition of political ideologies on both sides of the spectrum lies in the fact

that they reject the legitimacy of state institutions and that they prevalingly display willingness to use violence to achieve political goals.

<u>EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS</u>			
	RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM	LEFT-WING EXTREMISM	ISLAMIC EXTREMISM
Actors	<u>Neo-nazism</u> : Often organised in associations, hooligans, lone wolves <u>New Right</u> : Identitarian Movement, D05 (“the Austrians”)	<u>Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyist groups</u> : heterogenous, usually non-violent <u>Autonomous-anarchist movements</u> : Loosely connected groups	<u>Heterogenous scene and transnational networks</u> : Salafists, ISIS, al-Qaida Single perpetrators, preachers, Influencer preacher, small groups
Ideology	Xenophobic, racist, anti-semitic, National Socialist ideologies. Demand for a social order characterised by social inequality, rejection of the norms and rules of a democratic constitutional state; approval or acceptance of violence	Demand for a social order characterised by social equality, rejection of the norms and rules of a democratic constitutional state, fighting the state by means of violence or by condoning or accepting violence. Anti-state, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist	(Political) ideologisation of Islam as an all-embracing and comprehensive system of life, society and rule; rigorous rejection of existing social orders; rejection of non-believers or apostates; concept of a “true” Islam
Incidents	<u>Hot spots</u> : On- and offline <u>Offences</u> : Incitement to hatred, National Socialist resurgence, and damage to property	<u>Hot spots</u> : Offline <u>Offences</u> : Damage to property and serious damage to property; (violent) actions and protests	<u>Hot spots</u> : On- and offline <u>Offences</u> : Often connected to terrorist offences

Table 1. Definition and characterization of extremist movements based on the annual reports on the protection of the constitution.

Until 2021, the annual reports on the protection of the constitution included statistics on complaints of offences, which clearly indicate that incidents related to right-wing extremism are more numerous than those related to left-wing extremism. Furthermore, the nature of incidents differs significantly. Regarding right-wing extremist incidents, the BVT differentiates between right-wing extremism, xenophobia/racism, antisemitism, and islamophobia, half of which have occurred online. Most of the crimes fall within the scope of incitement to hatred, National Socialist resurgence, and damage to property. Left-wing extremist incidents on the other hand are mostly limited to (serious) damage to property.

The situation regarding Islamic extremism differs. While the authorities state they make a deliberate effort not to conflate Islamist extremism with terrorism, they nonetheless address both aspects within a single chapter, which indicates that the boundaries between them are fluid. Radicalised individual perpetrators with a connection to the Islamic State remain one of the greatest security risks in Austria, which was underscored through the 2020 terrorist attack in Vienna. There was also a high number of foreign fighters in Austria, who pose a security risk when returning home. The internet plays an extraordinary role in the radicalisation of mostly very young people, as actors and groups from the Islamist extremist spectrum have developed a comprehensive online presence via social media and messaging platforms.

As mentioned above, a separate report on right-wing extremism has previously been published. This was discontinued by the government in 2002 but later re-introduced in 2023, with the first report to be published in the autumn of 2024. The Federal Ministry commissioned the Documentation Archive of the Austrian Resistance (DÖW)³, which had already compiled the reports in the past, with this task. This measure was opposed massively by the far-right, populist FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), which submitted several parliamentary inquiries on left-wing extremist activities, attacking the DÖW as well as individual journalists, publishers, and scientists⁴. This effectively demonstrates the political and contentious nature of documenting, defining terms, and publishing information related to extremist activities.

The extremism concept of the DÖW goes beyond the definition of the Ministry of the Interior. The DÖW characterises right-wing extremism not merely by the rejection of the democratic constitutional state but it is viewed as a phenomenon encompassing a spectrum of attributes (see Bailer-Galanda & Neugebauer 1996; Schiedel 2017)⁵. Key ideological elements include the belief in inherent social inequality, the notion of homogeneous peoples and cultures,

³ The Austrian Centre for Austrian Resistance (Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes DÖW) is an archive that collects sources and material regarding resistance and persecution as well as Nazi crimes. It also monitors right-wing extremist activities and it is involved in deradicalisation measures and networks.

⁴ See https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/J/16138/imfname_1583148.pdf and <https://orf.at/stories/3330171/>

⁵ The Extremism Information Center, which is financed by the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria and the first point of contact for all types of extremism, also follows the definition of the DÖW (see Fabris & Reicher, 2021).

prioritisation of the (ethnic) community over the individual, and group-specific hostility towards specific people, along with an authoritarian understanding of the state. In the German speaking-world, the term "Volk" plays a key role within right-wing extremist ideologies. This term translates with nation, people or folk and was used in Nazi Germany to promote the vision of a racially pure and unified German community ("Volksgemeinschaft"). It thus displays ethno-nationalist and supremacist ideologies that are accompanied by a nationalising view of history, meaning that the narratives employed by right-wing extremist worldviews are often revisionist. This in turn influences processes of identity formation as "the memory of the past shapes the conception of current collective identity" (Wodak 2021).

In the following, we will contextualize extremist narratives in Austria, first providing a brief historical overview before delving into an in-depth exploration of trends and developments pertaining to extremist narratives that have infiltrated societal mainstream. In the Austrian context, the discussions on everyday extremism is most pertinent when focused on right-wing extremism. Not only does the far-right occupy a key position in the political mainstream in contemporary Austrian society, far-right ideology, including xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, also manifests in diverse forms outside of institutional politics. Moreover, it has established a significant online presence, further amplifying its impact on public discourse. Understanding the nuances of right-wing extremism is crucial for unpacking its impact on everyday life and society as a whole.

3.1.1. Historical and political context

Political developments of growing chasms and a profusion of extremist narratives in Austria are closely tied to the country's history, its National-Socialist past, and socio-political transformations. The history of modern Austria is characterised by great upheavals that took place during the two world wars, which have transformed the country from a multi-ethnic superpower to a rather small and predominantly German-speaking country. The treaty of Saint Germain (1919) defined the borders of the first Austrian Republic, which were re-instated after World War II and that are still in place today. In Austria, the foundation of the first republic is described by historians as a "state nobody wanted" (Rathkolb 2021, p.1) and as becoming a "republic against its will" (Hochman 2019, p.51). This illustrates the perplexity of a country

that had to redefine its position within a changed geopolitical order and that was in search of a national identity, while the latter is said to have “chronically influenced the development of the Austrian political system” (Gerlich & Campbell 2000, p.40).

The interwar period was consequently marked by uncertainty, rising antisemitism, and social, economic, and political crises that went along with militarisation and the radicalisation of tensions between the two opposing political poles of Social Democrats and Christian Socials. In March of 1933, parliament was suspended, and an authoritarian regime was established, which has come to be known as the period of **Austrofascism**. Despite the provisions stipulating the independence of Germany and Austria, the so-called *Anschluss* took place in March of 1938, and Austro-fascist Austria was incorporated into the National Socialist German Reich. At least 110,000 people in Austria fell victim to persecution by the **National Socialist regime**, among them more than 64,000 Jewish people as well as Roma and Sinti, people with mental or physical disabilities, political opponents and resistance fighters, as well as people who did not conform to the norms of the Nazi regime.

After WWII, Austria was occupied by the allied forces for ten years and was divided into four zones. Milestones on the way to state sovereignty included the Declaration of Independence of April 1945, the Neutrality Law of 1955, and the State Treaty of 1955, which marked the end of the allied administration. The legal framework for Austrian independence also meant that the country has anchored its neutrality constitutionally. This provided the legal framework for the so-called **theory of victimisation**, stating Austria was “the first free country which fell victim to Hitler’s aggression”⁶, thus denying Austria’s co-responsibility for the Nazi era. The theory of victimisation served as a foundational narrative for the Second Republic. Practically, it meant that genuine attempts towards denazification were limited to 1945 and 1946 (see Rathkolb 2021; Falter 2018; Göllner 2018; Wodak & de Cillia 2007) and Austria integrated former Nazis into all parts of society, including politics. It wasn’t until the 1990s that Austrian complicity was addressed openly in parliament, and that funds were established for the victims of National Socialism (see Jabloner et al. 2003). Research on Holocaust memorials reveals that

⁶ Declaration of Independence (1945) quoted in Uhl (2020).

the process of reappraisal is still continuing and remembrance initiatives are subject to constant negotiation and contestation (Uhl 2016).

In 1945, the pre-war political system and the constitutional framework were re-established. The political camps of the first republic were revived in the form of the Social Democratic SPÖ and the Conservative ÖVP. However, unlike in the first republic that was characterized by conflict, the two parties managed to establish a new political culture in the spirit of a consociational democracy (based on power-sharing and negotiation) aiming at defusing the conflicts that had led to the downfall of democracy in the past (see Rathkolb 2021; Pelinka 2019). Until the 1980s, the SPÖ and the ÖVP accounted for more than 80% of the votes, enabling them to rule with stable majorities, dividing practically all areas of social and political life between themselves. This changed in 1986 with the rise of the FPÖ and the foundation of the Green Party, that diversified the party system.

The FPÖ has been described as the parliamentary arm of right-wing extremism due to several ties and linkages with the extremist scene and has had a leading role in normalising and mainstreaming radical views within the political discourse (see Wodak 2021). The party was founded in 1956 as the successor of the VdU (Federation of Independents). Although its electoral success had long remained rather limited, it had been continuously elected to parliament, where it represented the third political camp. The party has been classified as “populist radical right” (Mudde 2007), “radical right populist” (Heinisch & Werner 2019), “extreme right” (Rheindorf & Wodak 2019) and “right-wing extremist” (Bailer n.d.). As a populist far right party, it evokes nationalist sentiments as well as anti-immigrant and anti-establishment fervour. Employing populist tactics, the FPÖ has strategically framed issues related to immigration, national identity, Euroscepticism and scepticism regarding climate change in ways that resonate with disaffected segments of the population.

The electoral success of the FPÖ was accompanied by the loss of votes for the SPÖ and the ÖVP, resulting in changing political majorities and new coalitions. After the ÖVP-FPÖ coalitions in 2000, 2002, and 2017, which ended in internal conflicts and political scandals, a coalition between the Greens and the ÖVP was formed. Despite all scandals, the FPÖ has been

leading in political opinion polls in 2023, currently polling at 30% (as of December 2023)⁷. The topics that have triggered societal polarisation, such as refugee movements or the pandemic, also served as critical junctures for political parties, which often resulted in internal tensions, programmatic realignment, and electoral shifts (see Josipovic & Reeger 2019). For example, following the refugee movements of 2015, the ÖVP made the issue of security in connection with immigration and integration one of its priorities, adopting many of the positions of the FPÖ (Bodlos & Plescia 2018). Other scholars have outlined how the ÖVP has adopted steps in the normalisation of a far-right agenda through a carefully orchestrated system of message control and authoritarianism (Wodak 2022; 2023).

Traditional cleavages of class and religion have not become irrelevant in Austria but they have “lost much of their explanatory power for electoral behaviour” (Dolezal 2008, p.107). Today, these cleavages have been partially replaced by others that shape the political and social landscape, such as those of an ideological, economic, socio-demographic or educational nature. Although cleavage theory has been developed to study party systems and voter alignment (Lipset & Rokkan 1967), recent research has outlined how changes in cleavage structures are connected to the dynamics of polarisation and engagement in political activities (Borbáth et al. 2023, p.631). The authors point especially to “cultural” cleavage which touches upon questions of national identity, sovereignty, and solidarity, and which come to the fore regarding the issue of immigration and European integration.

OppAttune focuses on topics and events that have contributed to the rise of opposing political opinions facilitating the spread of extremist narratives in society. In the past years, such **“hot button topics” in Austria have included the arrival of refugees and immigration in general, the pandemic, climate-related activism, (anti) gender politics as well as global crises and conflicts.** In the next section, we focus on previous research and secondary data on extremist narratives, paying particular attention to societal divisions and polarising tendencies as well as impactful events connected to the topics discussed here.

⁷ <https://apa.at/produkt/apa-wahlrend/>

3.1.2. Extremist narratives: Literature review and secondary data on Austria

In 2023, the research institute *SORA* (Institute for Social Research and Consulting) carried out a study on extremist attitudes in Austria, focusing on right-wing extremism, religious fundamentalism, and COVID-19 conspiracy narratives (see Heinz & Glantschnigg 2023). The study was commissioned by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and was based on a quantitative survey as well as qualitative in-depth interviews. The results outline how extremist narratives (inspired by phenomena such as antisemitism, anti-Muslim racism, biological and/or cultural racism, or sexism) display inter-personal or inter-group hostility, targeting marginalised groups based on their origin, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, and exploiting economic, cultural, or identity-related grievances.

While explicitly right-wing extremist views were held by only two out of 100 Austrians, around a quarter partially aligned with such sentiments, which underlines how right-wing attitudes are tolerated and accepted across larger parts of society. The support for such attitudes is influenced by factors such as social isolation and financial stress, which corresponds with other research that has shown how the “centre” moves towards the fringes of society (see Altreiter et al. 2019; Decker & Brähler 2018; Ebner 2023; Zick & Küpper 2021). The findings of the study underscore the need to engage with the spread of extremist narratives and its impact on society at large, which corresponds with the concept of everyday extremism. While overtly extremist views may be held by a minority only, a substantial portion of the population's partial alignment with such sentiments underscores a concerning level of tolerance and acceptance within broader societal norms.

In the following, we explore patterns in (everyday) extremist narratives in Austria and their circulation online, drawing on a comprehensive literature review and secondary data analysis. While there are several organizations collecting data to monitor and detect harmful narratives and actions, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of such reports. The true extent of the issue may be concealed due to unreported cases, leaving a gap regarding the scope and impact of extremist activities. We will start by delving into the core themes that have propelled the proliferation of extremist discourse in the country and will additionally engage with cross-cutting issues that weave through various narratives, like antisemitism or racism.

Immigration, anti-Muslim attitudes and racism

The first key theme revolves around the dynamics of forced migration and immigration, which has grown in salience in the years following the 2015-16 European border crisis. Austria was one of the countries that accommodated a large number of refugees in 2015, and the accentuation of existing restrictive asylum policies has shaped the political discourse in recent years. The polarisation and varied perspectives on refugees became glaringly apparent in the stark divide between anti-asylum protests and solidarity initiatives. Even as the inflow of refugees gradually diminished, debates surrounding integration policies and border controls persist, sparking a myriad of conflicting opinions within the Austrian populace. Divisive, anti-migration narratives target specific groups, particularly young Muslim males framed as “dangerous” threats to the Austrian population, articulated as an eligible and exclusive in-group. Nationalist sentiments echo in these narratives that build on a dichotomous “us against them” construct in defense of perceived Austrian values.

The narratives in this context span from clearly right-wing extremist themes such as Reconquista, Remigration or the big exchange, to the portrayal of migrants as a security risk. Anti-Muslim narratives often suggest that Muslims, for example, do not wish to integrate, that they are dangerous, or that they sympathise with jihadist terrorism. Right-wing extremist actors currently promote the overarching narrative that “mass migration” is the root cause of various crises (e.g., health care crisis, energy crisis), which is utilized to strategically tap into full mobilization potential of followers (Ministry of Interior Austria 2022, p.22). Such narratives intertwine with broader racist attitudes, reinforcing dichotomous worldviews and casting suspicion on Muslims in general. They are nurtured from simplified discourses in connection to events such as 9/11 or the influx of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan in the last decade as well as in the political discourse when “political actors have used populist rhetoric to link immigrants and people of Muslim faith to political Islamism and terror” (Haselbacher et al. 2021, p.7).

Nativist elements provide a foundation for populist parties to amplify xenophobic and anti-Islam sentiments, depicting immigration as problematic and linking Islam to extremism (see Ajanovic et al. 2016). Recent studies indicate a convergence in rhetoric and party programmes

between the Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the FPÖ, with the ÖVP continuously adopting an anti-immigrant profile (Hadj-Abdou et al. 2021; Hadj-Abdou & Ruedin 2021). This discursive shift has normalised restrictive policies, framing immigration as a threat that necessitates protective measures for Austria against refugees (Rheindorf & Wodak 2018).

There are two organizations collecting data on incidents with a xenophobic background: The documentation centre for Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism (Dokustelle) and the organization ZARA (Civil Courage & Anti-Racism-Work). Both organizations record racist and discriminatory incidents, providing the possibility to report incidents anonymously as well as in person, and offer advice and support to those affected. The Dokustelle was founded in 2014 and has published Anti-Muslim Racism Reports annually since 2015. The organisation defines anti-Muslim racism as “a form of racism specifically directed against Muslims or those perceived as such”. Islamophobia can manifest in different ways, including (systematic) discrimination, hate speech, or violent actions. In 2022, 1,324 attacks against Muslims and people perceived as Muslim were documented. ZARA’s Racism Report 2022 listed a total of 1,479 reports of racism, which was a slight decrease compared to the years before (ZARA 2023).

In 2017, the counselling centre #AgainstOnlineHate was established, which is also based at ZARA. This focus on hate speech online is rather new and stems from the “Hate on the Net” legislative package that came into force on 1 January 2021, aiming to facilitate the pursuit of criminal acts related to hate postings to respond to the sharp increase of hate speech⁸. Since the establishment of the counselling centre, ZARA has received 11,514 reports (1,824 of them in the past 12 months (ZARA, n.d.)). According to the latest hate speech online report, 45% of the incidents were relevant to criminal law and counsellors intervened in 1,350 cases - such as requesting the deletion of hate posts, filing charges, or writing letters of intervention - and in

⁸ The federal chancellery and other Ministries are part of the no hate speech committee Austria, see <https://www.nohatespeech.at/>

114 cases they notified *stopline*, the centre of the Ministry of the Interior for reporting cases of endorsement of National Socialist ideology⁹.

Anti-establishment narratives related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Turning to the context of COVID-19, the government's response to the pandemic emerged as a key divisive factor, sparking controversies and conflicts over health measures and economic policies among citizens (for an overview on the COVID-19 crisis in Austria, see Kittel et al. 2021). Policies and restrictions that were introduced by the government were at the heart of contention, above all the decision over several hard lockdowns or the introduction of the compulsory vaccination. This led to the formation of a diversified resistance movement, nurturing the spread of conspiracy theories and culminating in large demonstrations, similar to developments in Germany. Such “cultures of rejection” were particularly visible online, placing a spotlight on conspiracy theories that were often exploited by populist movements (see Butter 2023; Eberl et al. 2021; Opratko 2022; Thiele 2022).

The report for the protection of the constitution of 2022 highlights the active involvement of right-wing extremist groups during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they strategically merged with citizens protesting pandemic containment measures to exploit their dissatisfaction for their own purposes. Notably, the COVID-19 protest movement not only received offensive support from politically far-right movements, but also exhibited a willingness to cooperate with right-wing extremist groups, representatives from the radical state-rejectionist scene, and adherents of prevalent right-wing conspiracy ideologies. These groups used the demonstrations for mobilisation purposes and to openly exhibit right-wing extremist symbols in public, infusing the discourse with extreme right narratives like the Great Replacement (see Goetz 2020).

Conspiracy theories thereby played a key role and the state-rejectionist scene flourished. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, this scene, notably through demonstrations of COVID-

⁹ Stopline is a reporting centre for people who encounter depictions of sexual abuse involving minors or evidence of endorsement of National Socialist ideology on the internet with the overarching goal to bring about the rapid removal of such posts from the internet.

19 measure opponents (CMG), increased its visibility, particularly in the virtual realm with the establishment of the “Corona-Querfront” website, which spread right-wing extremist conspiracy theories. During the pandemic, various groups attempted to establish themselves in Austria, such as the “Staatenbund Österreich”, “International Common Law Court of Justice Vienna” (ICCV), “Global Common Law Court” (GCLC), “Freeman Movement,” and “One People Public Trust” (OPPT) (Ministry of Interior Austria 2022, p.25).

The previously mentioned study by SORA also explored attitudes towards COVID-19 measures, indicating widespread distrust in public discourse during the pandemic and the emergence of three patterns: rejection, ambivalence, and conspiracy beliefs (see Heinz & Glantschnigg 2023). The latter group tends to adopt extremist and antisemitic narratives. Notably, COVID-19 demonstrations face overall disapproval, with higher acceptance among conspiracy believers. Conspiracy beliefs furthermore mingle with nationalist narratives of “us first”, which demand privileges and preferential treatment for Austrians while opposing vaccination mandates. These narratives often overlap with right-wing extremist ideologies, illustrating a reciprocal relationship where conspiracy theorists adopt extremist narratives and vice versa. This phenomenon extends to claims that crises, such as wars, are part of imagined global conspiracies or serve as distractions from pandemics, which demonstrates the fluidity between conspiracy beliefs, nationalism, and crises.

Narratives related to right-left polarization and the “woke-wars”

In the context of left-right polarization, everyday extremist narratives find new ground in connections to gender and climate. Most recently, **climate-related activism** has been in the spotlight of the media and public discussions in Austria. Especially cases where young people glue themselves to the road and thereby obstruct traffic have caused controversial discussions. Climate-related activism has thus become a pivotal point of contestation. In this context, climate activism serves as a battleground where differing ideologies clash - from people who deny climate change and believe in conspiracy theories to people who aim to bring about drastic changes in lifestyles – all of which is amplifying societal divisions. One of the main concerns relates to the question whether protests and disruptive actions, such as the gluing of protestors to streets, can be considered extremist and whether legal amendments are needed to address

such new forms of activism. At the same time, climate protection and climate-friendly policies are framed as forming part of a “woke” and “left-wing” agenda that is suppressing the needs of individuals.

Within right-wing extremist ideologies, there have persistently existed anti-feminist elements (for Austria see Klammer & Goetz 2017). Anti-feminist narratives within right-wing extremist ideologies in Austria encompass the construction of feminism as a threat, emphasizing familialism and opposing non-conforming family structures (see Olteanu 2017; Mayer & Sauer 2017). These narratives strategically distort feminist and queer theory, aligning opposition to gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive gender policies under the banner of traditional values.

In recent years, the topic of “gender” has emerged as a focal point of mobilisations and heated discussions both on- and offline in Austria, particularly among far-right actors who vehemently denounce it. The overarching far-right narrative centres around “gender ideology”, a nebulous term encompassing policies related to gender equality, sexual education, gender-neutral language, and the public acknowledgement of homosexuality. Narratives on gender and wokeness contend that gender ideologies, which are spread mainly by the (left-leaning) elites and therefore imposed on everyone, seek to eliminate the binary distinction between sexes, ultimately eroding the complementarity of men and women (Mayer et al. 2020). This narrative aligns with right-wing populism and masculinist identity politics, which have emphasized the threat of gender-related politics to shape their exclusionary ideology (Sauer 2020).

There has been a noticeable increase in anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments in Austria, with the topic becoming one of the most controversial ones in online debates. In the past years, several mobilisations by far-right actors as well as campaigns against LGBTIQ+ communities could be observed, including events such as the demonstration against a reading by a drag queen in Vienna or the campaign “#StolzMonat”, where people used the hashtag to agitate against the queer community during pride month. The campaign was started in Germany to “oppose the madness and rededicate pride month” as the Website of the campaign stated. Users replaced their profile pictures with the German (or Austrian) flag to counter the symbol of the

rainbow flag, framing it as a response to alleged attempts by the authorities to replace the national flag with LGBTQI+ symbols.

Within the right-wing spectrum, anti-migrant mobilisation frequently intersects with gender and religion, first and foremost targeting veiled Muslim women and constructing exclusionary narratives on the female body to shape the biopolitics of the Austrian “people” while casting Muslim migrants as non-belonging, excludable, and erasable, a manifestation of necro power (Sauer 2022; Rosenberger & Sauer 2012).

Antisemitic narratives and global conflicts

In 2021, the current government adopted the National Strategy against Anti-Semitism¹⁰ to prevent and combat all forms of antisemitism. This is a prove that antisemitism is an ongoing issue and once again on the rise due to recent developments such as the war in Ukraine or the Israel-Palestine conflict¹¹. The study “Antisemitism 2022” reveals that the occurrence of antisemitic narratives and conspiracy theories remains frequent. For example, 36% of the respondents find the statement “Jews control the international business world” (very/rather) true. Statements displaying agreement with guilt-reversal antisemitism (“Jews today try to take advantage of the fact that they were victims during the Nazi era”) are similarly high, while the approval rates for statements of racist antisemitism (“you can't expect a Jew to be decent”) and Holocaust minimisation are lower.

In addition, the antisemitism reports of the Jewish Community of Vienna’s Reporting Centre for Antisemitism provide an overview of documented incidents (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien 2023). In 2022, 719 incidents were reported, the second highest level in twenty years after the all-time peak during the pandemic. Given the recent escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the sharp increase of antisemitic rhetoric and symbols, the numbers are likely to increase substantially. This was already the case during the Ukraine war, when antisemitic narratives emerged, such as “the war is part of a Jewish world conspiracy”. Such antisemitic

¹⁰ <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/dam/jcr:8bd2975f-0483-4e74-abd9-d66446195d7c/antisemitismusstrategie.pdf>

¹¹ See <https://www.parlament.gv.at/fachinfos/rlw/Antisemitismus-2022/>

narratives attribute blame for all the negative aspects and evils in the world to Jewish people, portraying them as clandestine puppet masters who control politics and the global economy.

Such antisemitic narratives are spread by both left-wing and right-wing groups. Antisemitism can thus have many faces, ranging from narratives that are connected based on supposedly anti-imperialist attitudes criticising the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories or arguments on religious grounds such as Islamised antisemitism (see Küntzel 2020) and Christian anti-Judaism (see Botsch 2014), to racist or nationalist antisemitism and conspiracy theories. At the same time, racist incidents vis-à-vis Muslims have increased with them being collectively held responsible for the attacks of Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023. According to the Extremism Information Centre, both the Anti-Semitism Reporting Office and the Documentation Centre Anti-Muslim Racism and Islamophobia have recorded a massive increase in attacks and incidents in Austria since that date.

Platforms and extremist narratives online

The internet serves as a powerful conduit for the dissemination and amplification of extremist narratives (Conway, 2017), allowing ideologies to traverse between mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and fringe platforms such as Bitchute, Telegram, and Discord that are less monitored. Social media platforms and online forums foster rapid communication and collaboration within the extremist scene. Extremist actors strategically use the internet for recruitment, mobilisation, networking, and coordination, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers to disseminate propaganda and establish alternative networks. Elsewhere, we have outlined how online platforms facilitate the exchange of radical ideas and codes not only among leaders but also ordinary users (Haselbacher et al. 2022). Extremist actors have found several ways to instrumentalise the Internet for their causes by either introducing extremist content covertly into mainstream discourses through memes or posts or by using the Internet as a site of activism by engaging in hacking, doxing, hashtag hijacking, or trolling, to name only a few (Grigori 2022).

Different extremist groups employ distinct approaches online. Actors of the new right strategically leverage pop-cultural elements, adapting their content and language to appeal to a

younger audience as could be observed in particular in relation to the Identitarian Movement Austria (see Goetz et al. 2018). Members of such an Alternative Influence Network strategically position themselves as an alternative to the media system by building credibility through relatability, authenticity, and accountability through a countercultural appeal, for which Martin Sellner from Austria is a notable example (Lewis 2018). However, de-platforming and bans on mainstream spaces have pushed some of these actors towards fringe platforms (Bodden et al. 2023). Fringe platforms, situated at the periphery of the internet, play a crucial role in amplifying extremist movements due to relative anonymity and lax content moderation, making it challenging to trace and monitor the activities of extremist actors. While de-platforming reduces the reach of far-right actors on mainstream platforms, it doesn't eliminate the dissemination of extremist narratives, harassment, and radicalization.

The FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) has carefully curated their online presence and successfully established channels on mainstream platforms for the direct communication with followers. The channel FPÖ-TV on YouTube currently has more than 200.000 followers and produces content on a daily basis¹². On Facebook, it is especially the profiles of high-ranking politicians of the party that are relevant. Telegram on the other hand, plays a significant role in the spread of conspiracy theories, serving as a platform where extremist narratives find fertile ground. This is the case for Islamist extremism and terror (see Bloom et al. 2019) and conspiracy theories as well as right-wing groups (see Zehring & Domahidi 2023; Bovet & Grindrod 2022).

Transnational alliances and unlikely coalitions

The previous section highlights the fact that extremist narratives are not bound by geography and that they spread back and forth between the digital space and local ecologies. Common themes such as anti-immigration or anti-gender rhetoric, nationalist fervour, and critiques of globalization resonate across borders, fostering a sense of solidarity among right-wing extremist groups. Furthermore, narratives often transcend national boundaries, leading to shared discourses and, at times, collaborative efforts and mass mobilisations. This is especially

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/@fpoetv>, accessed 01/2024.

the case for the German-speaking area due to strong socio-economic ties as well as historical and ideological connections between movements, whereby Pan-Germanic ideas play a pivotal role.

The German documentation centre “hass-im-netz.info” (hate-on-the-net.info) highlights the similarities and the convergence of narratives within the German-speaking region. For example, the platform has revealed how right-wing extremist historical narratives across the German-speaking world make references to historical events such as the Reconquista, Crusades, and the Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire, which are reinterpreted to perpetuate the narrative of a historical conflict between the “Christian West” and “Islam”. Campaigns are usually coordinated, extending across the entire German-speaking area, which has become a deliberate form of activism (Kreißel et al. 2018).

Other studies have demonstrated how the framing applied by various far-right actors converge (see Ahmed & Pisoiu 2020), a fact that can be observed in many countries. Hence, the topics that form the grounds of mobilisation as well as the narratives are similar, but they are reinterpreted in a slightly different form, exhibiting extremist frames to varying degrees. In addition to this convergence and interconnectedness, there are imported forms of right-wing extremism that have come to play a role in Austria. Since 2022, the DÖW has been monitoring non-autochthonous forms of right-wing extremism, which was triggered by incidents involving Turkish communities and the Grey Wolves. In addition to Turkish communities, data is collected regarding Bosnian, Croatian, Polish, Serbian, Russian, Slovakian, Czech, and Ukrainian communities in Austria as well as their connections to their countries of origin (Schindler 2023; see Neumann et al. 2022).

Finally, extremist narratives are by no means limited to the right of the political spectrum and may also concern left-leaning ideologies as was shown regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict. However, the insights presented above reveal that right-wing extremist attitudes are prevalent since they are more common, often socially tolerated, and more violent in their display of hostile narratives targeting specific groups based on their ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. Radical left-wing movements in Austria, on the other hand, are comparatively small in number

and are characterised by the overall absence of violence apart from property damage. A review of the scholarly literature as well as secondary sources reveals that occasionally **unlikely coalitions, where people from across the political spectrum mobilise side by side for a common cause**. This was evidenced particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when anarchists, natural-health proponents, anti-vaxxers, and libertarians took to the streets alongside right-wing extremists, resulting in diverse coalitions from “the radical-ecological to the right-nativists” (Bialasiewicz & Eckes 2021; Birchall & Knight 2023).

3.2. Emerging extremist narratives: evidence from Bulgaria

In order to identify key extremist narratives in Bulgaria, we draw on the country’s official framework for assessing extremism. In matters regarding national terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation prevention in Bulgaria, the Security Council at the Council of Ministers holds the primary responsibility for strategic decision-making regarding preventing and countering violent extremism, assessing security threats, proposing measures, and coordinating the work of security agencies. The Ministry of the Interior coordinates the implementation and monitoring of activities outlined in the National Plan for Countering Terrorism, first established in 2008 and most recently updated in 2023. The responsibility to detect, prevent and neutralize threats to the Bulgarian national security, including violent extremism, falls on the State Agency for National Security.

<u>P/CVE FRAMEWORK IN BULGARIA</u>			
	SECURITY COUNCIL	MINISTRY OF INTERIOR	STATE AGENCY NATIONAL SECURITY
Responsibility	Strategic decision-making Assessing security threats Proposing measures Coordinating the work of security agencies	Implementation and monitoring of National Plan for Countering Terrorism	Detect, prevent and neutralize threats to Bulgarian national security (including P/CVE)
Documents	Strategy on Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism 2015-2020 Criminal Code	National Plan for Countering Terrorism	SANS Annual Activity Reports
Key Terms	<u>Strategy 2015-2020:</u> Radicalisation, violent extremism, terrorism <u>Criminal Code:</u> terrorism	Terrorism	International terrorism, ideological extremism

Table 2. P/CVE framework in Bulgaria.

In 2015, the Council of Ministers approved the Bulgarian Strategy on Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism 2015-2020, a document outlining initiatives and policies to prevent and counter these phenomena. However, the Strategy was only partially implemented within the timeline, and the planned drafting of a new Counter-Radicalisation and Terrorism Strategy in 2021 was delayed due to the political crisis. Nevertheless, the document remains a

basis for understanding how the Bulgarian government assesses these phenomena. Although there is no legal definition of terms such as *radicalisation* and *extremism* in Bulgarian legislation, definitions of the following terms are offered in the Strategy:

Radicalisation is to be understood “a process of adopting extreme opinions, views, beliefs and ideologies, to the extent of fierce rejection of all alternatives”. The definition further clarifies the characteristics of radicalisation, namely “a decisive readiness for imposing one’s views and principles over the rest of society, through rejecting the constitutional foundations of democracy and non-respect for fundamental human rights”. This process is said to “very often” lead to support for violence. The definition also addresses ‘violent radicalisation’, defined as “a phenomenon where individuals or groups of people adopt opinions, views and ideas, which might lead to acts of terrorism”.

Violent extremism is “a phenomenon in which individual persons or groups support or carry out ideologically motivated violence in order to achieve their ideological goals.” Here, it is also stated that “extremism and radicalisation that lead to violence are phenomena that threaten the fundamental values of the European Union – democracy, human rights, freedom and the rule of law.”

Terrorism is defined as “any action of criminal nature accompanied by an act of violence which deliberately endangers the lives and safety of the public, and the security of important infrastructure in order to create fear and insecurity in society and to destabilise democratic institutions as a means of achieving concrete political or ideological goals.”

Box 1. Official definitions of key concepts. Bulgarian Strategy on Countering Radicalisation 2015-2020 (translated in Dzhekova et al. 2016b)

It is important to highlight that of these, **only terrorism is classified as a crime under the Criminal Code**, and the definition of terrorism offered in the Strategy differs from the legal definition, where it is defined as “the commission of a *specified* [emphasis added] crime with the aim of causing confusion and fear among the population or to threaten or compel an authority, a member of the public or a representative of a foreign country or an international organization to do or omit something in the scope of their functions” (Criminal Code, Art. 108a) followed by an exhaustive list of specified actions that could be persecuted as terrorist acts. Therefore, the actual number of hate crimes in the country is difficult to account for, as the majority of acts that would fall under this category are not classified as such according to the Criminal Code.

Since 2008, the main responsibility for detecting, preventing and neutralising threats to Bulgarian national security, including (violent) extremism, falls on the State Agency for National Security (SANS). However, this institution has not yet engaged in systematically analysing and/or evaluating extremist tendencies in society at large. Rather, they publish annual activity reports and, when necessary, extra reports on specific issues (Dzhekova et al. 2017). Hence, the most comprehensive official source of secondary data that helps assess the state of the art in terms of extremism and radicalisation in Bulgaria are SANS’ annual activity reports, published on the Agency’s official website from 2016 onwards. In these reports they outline threats, trends and current priorities based on contemporary developments. The reports separately assess threats posed by *international terrorism* (usually focusing on jihadism) and *ideological extremism* (divided into *right-wing* and *left-wing extremism*). The latter term is not defined in the SANS reports, nor is a definition of it found elsewhere in Bulgarian legislation (and neither are the terms ‘political violence’ and ‘religious violence’, despite these being classified as crimes under Bulgarian law) (Dzhekova et al. 2016a).

The latest SANS report (2022) proclaims **the war in Ukraine and the growing instability in the Western Balkans as having the most significant influence on Bulgarian national security**. Other important factors, according to the report, include illegal migration through Bulgaria due to insufficiently secure border control, and religious extremism. Despite the relatively low number of confirmed recent cases of Islamist and Jihadi violence, the bulk of activities against violent extremism in the country remain dedicated to detecting and countering

activities of Islamist violent extremism, both external and homegrown. However, reducing the spreading of these ideologies through prevention and resilience-building has not been prioritised (Dzhekova et al. 2021).

Contrary to Islamist extremism, acts of far-right extremism have been on the rise in recent years (Dzhekova et al. 2016a; 2021). The 2022 SANS report acknowledges an increase in *ideological extremism* in Europe, stating that that “structures from both poles of the extremist sector are focusing efforts in their online propaganda on the negative trends for the European economies as a result of the pandemic-related restrictions and the effects of the war in Ukraine” (SANS 2022, p.18). It also highlights the heightened security risk posed by right-wing radicalisation, which, as SANS points out, increasingly happens online and increasingly targets minors. The report describes the activities of the radical right in Bulgaria as *fragmented*, enjoying a *limited circle of supporters* and *low public support*. Special attention is paid to their *collaboration with far-right actors from other countries*. It is also noted that unlike the far left, which devotes considerable attention to the issue, the Bulgarian far right does not consider the war in Ukraine as a central topic of interest.

When it comes to left-wing extremism, the country’s far-left scene is described as *heterogenous*, reaching *highly limited* membership and *insignificant* public support. Topics of interest for the far left are listed as the USA and NATO, the pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. While the report does not name specific extremist actors or groups on either side of the spectrum, it does mention *extremist activities* performed on the basis of *ideological extremism*, which include the annual national socialist ‘Lukov March’ (which took place again in 2022 despite the organisers’ having failed to obtain a demonstration permit from the local authorities), anti-LGBTQ+ manifestations, and individual confrontations with police officers. Football hooliganism is treated as a distinct form of extremism in a separate chapter, even though the violent actions perpetrated by hooligans are often far-right in nature (e.g. sparking ethnic conflict and attacking LGBTQ+ people) (Dzhekova et al. 2021).

As mentioned earlier in this report, far-right extremist sentiments are of most relevance to everyday extremism, due to the exclusionary nature of far-right ideology. In their report on macro-level drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in Bulgaria, Dzhekova et al. (2021) write that “far-right discourse has *silently become the new normal* in societal life [emphasis

added], a process also facilitated by the participation of nationalist and populist parties in the ruling coalition since 2017, and in Parliament since 2005.” The first far-right party to gain parliamentary representation in 2005 was *Ataka*¹³. In 2017, *United Patriots*¹⁴, a three-party coalition involving Ataka, marked the first time in the history of democratic Bulgaria that a far-right actor became part of a ruling government, as they joined the GERB-led government between 2017 and 2021. This collaboration meant compromise on EU values, particularly minority rights. Most recently, the far-right political scene was joined by *Revival*, today the third-largest party in parliament and the largest opposition party. Other formal extra-parliamentary far-right organisations include the *Bulgarian National Union (BNU)*¹⁵, *Blood & Honour*¹⁶, and *National Resistance*¹⁷. In addition, there are informal groupings of, e.g., skinheads, neo-Nazis, and football hooligans who engage in hooligan acts and hate crimes particularly against Roma, migrants, refugees, and LGBTQ+ people.

In the following, this report identifies and contextualises the contemporary *everyday extremist narratives* in Bulgaria, showing how these tie into societal grievances emerging from the country’s historical context. Next, it provides an overview of current political developments in the country, making explicit the significance of these grievances in the current proliferation of extremist narratives in everyday political negotiations, marked nonetheless by the electoral success of far-right nationalist parties.

¹³ Ataka (Attack) is a Bulgarian nationalist political party founded in 2005 by Volen Siderov. The party consistently won parliamentary seats between 2005 and 2021, acting as opposition until 2017. It also held three mandates for the European Parliament, where it was part of the Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty European parliamentary group. Ataka is against Bulgarian membership of NATO and the EU, and critical of US military bases in Bulgaria. They are also critical of minority groups in the country, especially the Roma, Turkish, and Jews, and they have close ties to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

¹⁴ United Patriots was a three-party ultranationalist/far-right coalition between Ataka, IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), and NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria).

¹⁵ The Bulgarian National Union (BNU) is the direct descendant of the Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions. BNU is the main organiser of the Lukov March, an annual neo-Nazi manifestation commemorating WWII Bulgarian general and Nazi-sympathiser Hristo Lukov, which brings neo-Nazis from around the world to Sofia.

¹⁶ Blood & Honour is an international racist skinhead organisation founded in the UK in 1987, with chapters in many countries, including Bulgaria. The Bulgarian division was founded in Plovdiv in 2003.

¹⁷ National Resistance is an antidemocratic white supremacist organisation, established in 2008.

3.2.1. Historical and political context

Bulgaria's political history has been shaped by a five-century Ottoman rule followed by 50 years of Soviet dominance, fostering resilient Bulgarian nationalism. The historical emphasis on sovereignty in the face of threats has made Bulgarians susceptible to exclusionary discourses, leading to an “overproduction of Othering” (Krasteva 2016, p.179). This strong concern for sovereignty historically shapes skepticism towards Bulgaria's membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO today. The socioeconomic and cultural grievances associated with each of these historical periods contribute to the creation of shared narratives that favour group identity formation and exclusion of ‘Other’ groups perceived to threaten the in-group’s well-being. **Contemporary extremist narratives circulating in Bulgaria revolve around internal minority targeting, migration concerns, Euroscepticism, and opposition to gender equality.** In recent years, far-right actors, notably Revival, have adeptly capitalized on political, economic, and social discontent to gain support and reshape the political landscape. This poses challenges to minority rights and has contributed significantly to opposition to the European Union, challenging the fundamental values of pluralism, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights, it embodies.

Post-Ottoman grievances: ‘Othering’ Turkey and Islam

A significant part of the identity grievances faced by Bulgarians arises from the collective memory of the Ottoman rule. Traces of the Ottoman Empire still inhabit Bulgarian consciousness, which has made **Turks and Muslims the evident ‘Other’ for Bulgarians.** Ever since the reestablishment of Bulgaria after the liberation from the Ottoman Empire, the country has been home to a large Turkish minority, which has been systematically marginalised (Savova-Mahon 2019). The public discourse surrounding the nearly 500-year-long Ottoman rule (1396–1878), the uprisings against it, and the Russo-Turkish War in which Russia’s victory led to the liberation of Bulgaria is characterised by an omnipresent anti-Turkish sentiment and a representation of Turkey and Islam as *dangerous ‘Others’*. In literature from the Ottoman period, the Ottoman rule is often referred to as ‘the Turkish Yoke’, and Islam is presented as a threat to the Bulgarian national identity, of which Orthodox Christianity is described as an integral part. Arguably, growing up with a clearly defined ‘Other’ has made

generations of Bulgarians more prone to adopting nationalist discourses and favouring protectionism.

Post-Soviet transition grievances: Pro-Russia and anti-Turkey narratives

Between 1946 and 1989, Bulgaria was part of the Eastern Bloc. During this period, the social, cultural and political influence of Russia was omnipresent, and much of it remains to this day. During the post-1989 transition from a state socialist to a market economy, and from a one-party state to democracy, Bulgarian society faced a multitude of issues, some due to norms and attitudes carried over from the past, and others the result of the lack and inefficiency of sanctions preventing abuse of political power. In addition to the cultural challenges that the ‘transition’ presented, the slow and controversial process of privatisation, combined with heavy foreign debt and the local currency’s depreciated value, also brought economic challenges. Together, these created a fertile ground for the emergence of new types of extremist narratives.

Stigmatising Turkey as an enemy played a major role in instilling Bulgarians’ gratitude for the Russian liberation and ensuring their unquestioned allegiance to Russia. Hence, during this period, the post-Ottoman inter-ethnic struggles between Bulgarians and Turks were further intensified. Schoolbooks of the Soviet period, the content of which is still partially in use, share a common narrative of a century-long **‘brotherhood’ between Russia and Bulgaria**, emphasizing the role of Russia as a ‘liberator’ of Bulgaria, and excluding Russia’s often negative role in critical episodes of Bulgarian history after the liberation (Filipova 2023). The existence of a Turkish minority was continuously downplayed in the regime’s push for homogeneity. The work of assimilating citizens with a Turkish background culminated with the execution of *the Big Excursion* (*‘Голямата екскурзия’*), an ethnic cleansing campaign against Turks and Muslims led by the Bulgarian Communist leader Todor Zhivkov in 1984-1989. In 1984, Zhivkov passed a bill that obliged Bulgarian citizens to have ‘Bulgarian names’, essentially banning Turkish/Muslim names. Anyone who did not wish to change their name to a Slavic one was persecuted, with over 300,000 people leaving the country to seek refuge in Turkey. The use of force during the renaming campaign sharpened ethnic boundaries, deepened the government's crisis and was arguably a contributing factor to the changes of 1989, which were followed by a resurgence of nationalist problems (Savova-Mahon 2019).

Post-EU accession grievances: The rise of Euroscepticism

Considering setbacks during the transition period, Bulgarian society held high hopes of joining the EU. Bulgarians were optimistic that EU membership would improve their situation, some of the expected benefits being greater economic and political stability, and an improved standard of living. However, many also saw the opportunity for a better life in the newly introduced freedom to live and work anywhere in the EU, and the country observed mass emigration rates, leading to new political challenges such as an ageing population, a decline of the labour force, and a shortage of human capital resources (Bogdanov & Rangelova 2012).

Today, over 30 years after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, the public sentiment seems to be that the **Bulgarian people are the ‘big losers’ of the transition**. Trust in the government is low, corruption levels are high, and the ever-increasing feeling that ‘the system’ only benefits criminals has planted the seed of **Euroscepticism** and **disenchantment with democratic politics**. The ways in which Bulgaria still lags behind Western Europe in terms of living standards undermine the EU’s image as the bearer of progress in Bulgarian minds. Meanwhile, there is no broader historical conversation about the effects of the Soviet totalitarian regime in Bulgarian society outside of closed academic circles. Anti-democratic actors can then wield this lack of public knowledge about the impact of the communist period on contemporary issues (such as the ‘permanent economic crisis’ during the transition period, driving the mass emigration from the country), and their overlap with Bulgaria’s EU accession, to reframe these issues as consequences of democracy (Kelbetcheva 2019). This, in turn, could have increased citizens’ frustration with the EU as an institution, setting the stage for the emergence of anti-EU discourses. Even though the majority of Bulgarians still hold a favourable view of the EU (Wike et al. 2019), a worrying trend has been emerging in recent years, in which the generation of Bulgarians born after the fall of the socialist regime increasingly hold Eurosceptic positions (Nachev 2019).

A decade of political turmoil

Over the past decade, Bulgaria found itself in a period of political upheavals, marked by a combination of **protests, escalations, corruption scandals, pandemic, anti-vaxx inclinations, international conflicts, and a political crisis**. In the next section, we unpack this

complex landscape that was the outcome of the *multitude of grievances* that the Bulgarian population had grappled with and show how it in turn became a catalyst for the intensifying of extremist narratives in the country.

- *2013-2014 protests*

From the beginning of 2013 until mid-2014, a series of mass anti-monopoly protests took place in Bulgaria. The first of their kind in Bulgaria's democratic history, these protests, initially triggered by the significant increase of electricity prices during winter 2012-2013, developed to encapsulate public discontent with a broad aspect of issues, and eventually led to the resignation of the government led by Boyko Borisov's GERB party which had been in power since 2009. However, the following Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)-led government only held office for a turbulent year of five votes of no confidence and a new wave of mass protests, sparked by the appointment of Bulgarian oligarch Delyan Peevski as head of the State Agency of National Security. Protesters levelled allegations against the political elite, contending that they had turned into an *oligarchy* protecting private corporate interests over the well-being of the public – discourse closely resembling *the 1% vs. the 99%* narrative (Iakimova & Vatsov 2018). In an attempt to disarm civic resistance and maintain the status quo, the accused politicians began to distort the narrative, claiming that the protests were driven by private interests and/or funded by foreign actors such as *George Soros* and *US organizations*. This strategic use of propaganda and post-truth techniques injected inverted meanings into social discontent, and protesters found themselves accused of promoting private and foreign interests (Iakimova & Vatsov 2018). Today, over 10 years later, it appears that this technique succeeded in translating the socioeconomic population gap into an ideological gap.

- *2020-2021 protests*

In 2020, a new wave of anti-corruption protests erupted, as investigations uncovered that PM Boyko Borisov and other government officials had been involved in a series of corruption schemes, including misplacement of EU subsidies, money laundering, and abuse of power. In light of these scandals, protesters called for the resignation of Borisov, General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, and everyone involved in the revealed misconduct. Borisov refused to resign, instead gradually intensifying his attempts to discredit the protesters, who subsequently refused to

leave the streets as protests continued until the expiration of the government's mandate in 2021. Importantly, the backdrop to these protests was the emergent COVID-19 pandemic, the government response to which added an additional layer of public discontent. Government-mandated social distancing policies and bans on large gatherings were viewed more as an attempt to halt the protests than a legitimate concern about limiting the spread of the virus.

- *2021-2023 political crisis*

Following the protests and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2021 and 2023 Bulgaria faced a period of political instability that saw five rounds of elections within two years. The political crisis was further exacerbated by deep divisions within Bulgarian society, the ongoing pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. The inability to establish a lasting government left the country governed for extended periods by interim cabinets appointed by the pro-Russian president Rumen Radev.

The protests gave rise to a new bloc of political parties calling themselves *parties of change*. These parties, differing in ideologies and programs, were united by one promise: to not collaborate with any of the *status quo parties*. However, the election results proved this promise impossible to keep, not only due to major disagreements among the newly formed parties, but also due to solid voter support for the *status quo parties*. The first two election rounds failed to form a government, and the third one resulted in an unstable government agreement with center-right PP-DB's Kiril Petkov as PM, which fell by a vote of no confidence after merely seven months, making it the first Bulgarian government to lose such a vote. The reason was internal conflicts among the four ruling parties over the response to the invasion of Ukraine, the lifting of the veto on North Macedonia's EU accession talks, and the handling of the pandemic.

The next election round saw a rise of far right and pro-Russian parties, driven by public discontent over the economic effects of the EU sanctions to Russia. The severe consequences of the conflict in Ukraine sent Bulgaria into an energy crisis and the local currency suffered high inflation. This, along with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated East/West divides among the population, and pro-Russian far-right Revival rose to become the fourth-

largest party. With tension between the parties becoming even more pronounced, forming a government once again proved impossible.

On 2 April 2023, Bulgaria held its fifth election round within a two-year period, an unprecedented political crisis for the country. Ideological divisions reached a peak following a pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and historically high inflation, and parties therefore agreed it was time to compromise. The outcome was a unique ‘rotation’ agreement between the two largest parties, GERB (which retained its position as the country’s largest party), and center-right *party of change* PP-DB. In June 2023, PP-DB’s Nikolay Denkov assumed the PM post for nine months, after which he is to resign voluntarily, and the two parties are to vote in GERB’s Maria Gabriel as PM for another nine months. After 18 months, the arrangement is to be evaluated and a way forward is to be decided. This arrangement means a breaking of PP-DB’s pre-election promise to not collaborate with the *parties of the status quo*, which disappointed many voters.

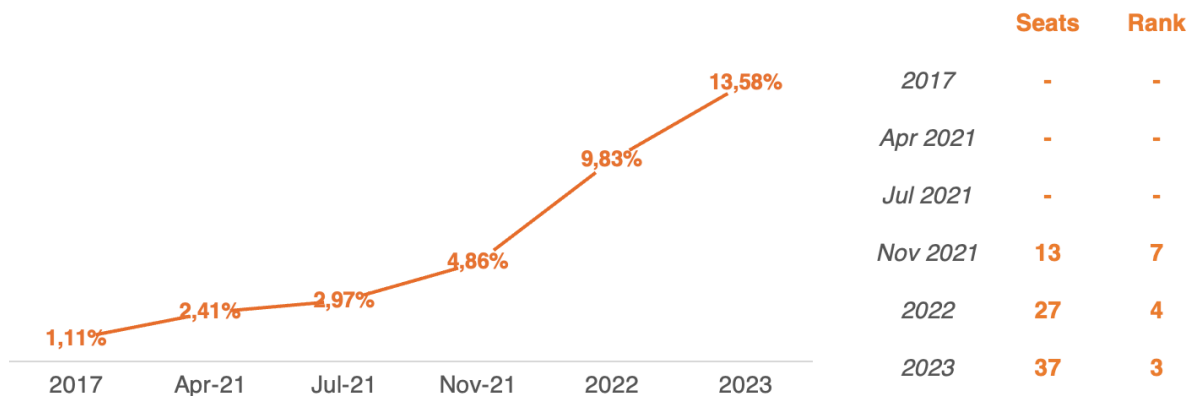


Figure 4. Revival election results 2017-2023

While the full effects of this period remain unknown, it is evident that the recent political crisis delayed important judicial and economic reforms, led to a loss of confidence in the government and institutions, and heightened feelings of uncertainty in Bulgarian society. Against this backdrop, the proliferation of extremist narratives has flourished, the political climate has become more polarized, and support for the far right has gradually increased with every voting round, as is evident in Revival’s electoral success (Figure 4). **The party is currently the third-largest in parliament, and its members consistently promote nationalist and anti-West**

narratives, pro-Russian attitudes, and scepticism towards EU values. In November 2022, for example, the party proposed a law that would label individuals and organizations receiving funding from abroad as *foreign agents* (Amnesty International 2023). They have also demanded referendums on entering the Eurozone and retracting Bulgaria's NATO membership. Notably, Revival have claimed a pro-Russian stance in the Russia-Ukraine war and have been vocally opposed to sending aid to Ukraine.

3.2.2. Extremist narratives: Literature review and secondary data on Bulgaria

Upon reviewing the available evidence, it becomes apparent that fully assessing the circulation of extremist narratives in Bulgaria is challenging, due to the scarcity of both official statistics and academic research on the subject. However, the current political developments are indicative of their taking a stronghold among the Bulgarian population.

The most recent overview of anti-democratic narratives in the country is the 2018 HSSF “Anti-Democratic Propaganda” report (Znepolski et al. 2018). This study identified four main narratives that formed the basis of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria at the time: **Europe is dying; Russia is rising; Bulgaria's pro-European elites are venal; the US/NATO is a global hegemon/puppet-master.** Importantly, the study highlights, these narratives are often woven together and presented as consequences of each other.

Additionally, despite Bulgarian authorities' relatively positive assessment of the threat of extremism in the country, international organisations have been critical of Bulgaria's situation, particularly where discrimination against minorities is concerned. In 2022, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) identified **Roma and LGBTQ+ individuals as primary targets of intolerance, hate and prejudice in Bulgaria.** It criticised the Bulgarian government for not taking the necessary measures to address these forms of hatred (ECRI 2022). In February 2023, in a controversial decision that raised concerns amongst several international human rights organisations, the Bulgarian Supreme Court banned the possibility of changing a person's gender on legal documents. Critics argue that this decision essentially eliminates transgender people's legal gender recognition, potentially leading to a conflict with the European Court of Human Rights (ECRI 2022).

While research on the role of specific online media in processes of radicalisation in Bulgaria is still scarce, SANS (2022) highlights that extremist propaganda is increasingly present online. Facebook is by far the most used social media platform in Bulgaria, and YouTube and Facebook are the second and third most-visited websites respectively (Reuters 2023). In addition, the 2023 Reuters Digital News report identifies Facebook as the most popular social media news source for citizens (Reuters 2023). Several studies have linked Facebook to the spread of extremist narratives, disinformation, and conspiracy theories (Mladenova & Valova 2022; Panchev 2013; Stoencheva 2021). YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit are also among the most popular sites. Twitter, albeit less prominent, has been the subject to critical scrutiny with regards to the spread of disinformation on the platform, notably around the Covid pandemic (Nakov et al. 2021). As the Reuters Digital News report shows, messaging apps also play a critical role in the dissemination of extremist content. Viber and Facebook Messenger are the most prominent messaging apps in Bulgaria, followed by WhatsApp and Telegram. Further, a range of anonymous online forums used by Bulgarians, both national and international, have been identified as spaces where extremist narratives tend to circulate. Among these are the international forum Reddit, and local Bulgarian forums such as Spodeli.net, Kaldata.com, Dir.bg and BG-Mamma.com.

Below, we track the extremist narratives currently circulating in Bulgaria and tie them to the historical *grievances* and contemporary struggles that underlie their emergence. Grievances serve as a powerful mobilisation driver. Social movements have long utilized grievances to initiate action (Johnston et al. 1994), and in social identity and crisis-solution narrative constructions, grievances find context as integral elements of a larger identity-based conflict, to the point that some scholars view grievances as a necessary component of extremism (Berger 2018).

Anti-Roma narratives

Despite anti-Turkey sentiments remaining strong throughout the Soviet period, a different ethnic ‘Other’-group took the central spot as the main scapegoat during the transition period: **the Roma**. Despite their having lived in Bulgaria since the Ottoman period, it was during the communist period that they abandoned their ‘nomadic’ way of life and settled into towns and

villages, as the regime's *zero unemployment* policy forced many of them into forms of labour eligible to the state. However, entering the transition, existing social differences and inequalities became increasingly visible, and the Roma, who largely worked in low-skilled positions, found themselves deprived of opportunities. As ethnic Bulgarians increasingly moved into cities, the Roma population became more and more segregated.

Today, discrimination against Roma is common and often overt, both online and offline. As per the most recent census of 2021, the Roma are the most economically disadvantaged minority group in Bulgaria, as well as the group with the lowest level of education, the highest crime rate, the highest number of youth marriages, and the lowest level of integration. The majority of Roma speak the Romani language as their mother tongue, and the most marginalised among them have limited or no knowledge of Bulgarian while living in segregated, Roma-only neighbourhoods (NSI 2022). As such, hate against the Roma has become normalized for Bulgarians. In a survey conducted by Alpha Research, 21,6% of Bulgarians stated that they 'hated' the Roma (for comparison, the next most-hated ethnic group was the Turkish, with 4,9% of the respondents stating that they 'hated' them) (Ivanova et al. 2020). Well-established public stereotypes ascribe any person of Roma ethnicity to a discursively constructed homogenised 'out-group' with a set of fixed characteristics including "poverty, illiteracy (or un-culturedness), insubordination, theft, cheating, lying, laziness, savagery, deviance, [...] uncontrolled reproduction, and [...] terrorism" (Canut 2019, p.401). The portrayal of the Roma minority as a uniform group of outlaws with primitive ways of living, which are implied to be essential and inherent to the Roma ethnicity, is as widespread as the use of derogatory terms towards them (e.g. *mangali*).

In addition, the Roma are 'Othered' as a racial threat in a crisis narrative construction characteristic of extremist narratives. In an echo of the far-right conspiracy theory of *The Great Replacement*, and in line with how far-right extremist discourses from the West portray non-white refugees and immigrants as a threat to society and a tool for eradicating the white race (Ekman 2022), a prominent narrative in Bulgaria is that the country is at risk of being *taken over* by the Roma, both in number (due to their high birth rates compared to native Bulgarians) and culturally. An additional factor fuelling this narrative is the fact that many Roma practice

Islam. Roma ‘Others’ are often uniformly defined as Muslim (or even Islamist), in contrast to ‘traditional Christian’ Bulgarians.

Islamophobic narratives of the ‘Muslim threat’

The deep-rooted fear of Islam against the background of the Ottoman rule has made Bulgarians particularly receptive to the anti-Muslim sentiments that have surged transnationally in recent years. During the 2015-16 migration crisis, as elsewhere in Europe, Islamophobic narratives surged in Bulgarian far-right rhetoric. Interestingly, however, despite the Bulgarian far right’s initial interest in the topic, the issue of the *migration crisis* did not gain as much attention in Bulgaria as in Western European countries. Therefore, far right actors continued directing their Islamophobic rhetoric at the country’s existing minorities (GPAHE n.d.). A public opinion survey by Alpha Research showed that the levels of tolerance towards ‘Muslims’ is generally lower than those towards ‘Turks’ and ‘Pomaks’¹⁸ (Ivanova et al. 2020), which the authors considered related to the growing Islamophobia around the globe. For example, the divergence between the global and the national in the attitude towards Muslims becomes apparent in the survey by the large difference between the reported relative acceptance of Turks, Pomaks, and, to a lesser extent, Muslims on the one hand, and the view that ‘extreme religious manifestations’ are primarily inherent to practicing Muslims on the other hand. The former is explained by the authors with the likelihood of the respondents associating the question with acquaintances who are members of these groups, while the latter echoes a broader transnational trend encompassing a rise in Islamophobic sentiments, where thinking of **Islam as a new world threat** likely comes to the foreground (Ivanova et al. 2020).

Narratives on gender roles and female grievances

The recent emphasis on nationalist discourses in Bulgaria has been accompanied by **a rise in sexism and homophobia**. Bulgaria is currently one of the most LGBTQ+-unfriendly countries in the EU (Eurobarometer 2023), and one of the few which do not recognise any form of legal partnership between same-sex couples. In recent years, the LGBTQ+ movement has not only

¹⁸ Communities of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, believed to have converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule (Apostolov, 2018).

been under escalating attack in public debates and on right-wing media, but has also been increasingly subjected to **hate speech, death threats, and physical violence**.

Mole (2016) links the negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community within CEE countries to the EU's support for their equality, arguing that the EU's liberal position on the matter presents an opportunity for nationalist politicians to draw a symbolic line between the *decadent West* and the *traditional East*. Nationalist parties gain symbolic strength for using anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric through framing the traditional family, and specifically masculinity, as an ideal of the national "body" (Krasteva 2016, p.186). The post-transition image of *real Bulgarian men* in Bulgarian culture – described as strong, patriotic protectors of the nation and their families – is often discursively intertwined with references to Christianity, traditional values, and the nuclear Bulgarian family. Discourses presenting different sexualities/gender identities as 'Others' are also supported by the Orthodox Church and justified by the Biblical story of male and female creation. These tropes, frequently deployed by far-right populist actors and popularised on social media, are part of a new type of ethno-nationalistic discourse, characterised by xenophobia, anti-Europeanism, Orthodox fundamentalism, and exploitation of hate as a political tool to be directed at whichever 'Other' (ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities) fits their political agenda (Luleva 2018). Hence, LGBTQ+ people serve as a preferred 'Other' for conservative, nationalist, religious, and right-wing actors. These convergences between heterogenous types of actors, uniting around opposition to feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and social and political gains for gender equality, have been dubbed anti-gender movements (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). In these movements, terms like *gender*, *gender theory* and *gender ideology* act as common frames, grouping different discourses – LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, sex/gender education in schools, religious freedom, etc. – as one *common enemy*. This unclarity of meanings carries the phantasmic character of a conspiracy, in which feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, and the global elite are accused of successfully introducing into national and EU politics and documents. In Bulgaria, anti-gender activism started relatively late compared to other CEE countries such as Poland and Croatia, where pro-life movements became a natural habitat for development of anti-gender discourses (Darakchi 2019). The *symbolic glue* for Bulgarians turned out to be the controversy around the translation for the term *gender* in the Istanbul Convention, where the meaning of the word *gender* (as

pronounced in English, but spelled in Cyrillic) was used as an *empty signifier* (Mayer & Sauer 2017) for “a myth-like neologism, [accumulating] any kind of meanings of fear, rage, and scorn expressed by the populist position” (Bankov 2020, p.347).

Extremist narratives emerging in the wake of political instability and intersecting crises

In light of the recent political turmoils, several factors contributed to the proliferation of extremist narratives in everyday discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic generated an uptick in *conspiratorial anti-establishment* discourse. The Russia-Ukraine war also had a profound impact on public discourse, leading to a *surge in pro-Russian sentiments*, fueled by discontent over the *economic consequences of EU sanctions*. Geopolitical tensions reached a peak after the pandemic, coupled with historically high inflation. The far-right pro-Russian party Revival adeptly leveraged public discontent surrounding the pandemic response, orchestrating protests and transforming dissatisfaction into political support. The resulting political crisis of 2021-2023, characterized by five election rounds within two years, favored Revival, which is now the third-largest party in parliament garnering support from pro-Russian far-right factions and citizens concerned about increased living costs.

Apart from its involvement in anti-COVID-measure protests, Revival is associated with fuelling several other acts of intolerance. In May 2023, the party organised an anti-EU ‘peace march’ in Sofia, during which protesters vandalised the local office building of the European Commission and the European Parliament with red paint (Semonsen 2023). A month later, Revival party activists blocked cinema screenings of the Belgian film ‘*Close*’ in several Bulgarian cities, including Sofia, where it was due to air during Sofia Pride Week, claiming that the film promoted paedophilia and ‘gender propaganda’. Their party supporters have also been openly antisemitic on several occasions: in June 2023, persons linked to the party vandalised a Sofia bar by drawing the Star of David on its door, and in July, the Organisation of the Jews in Bulgaria ‘Shalom’ opened a hate-speech case against Revival after an antisemitic meme was posted on the party’s official Telegram channel (Todorov 2023).

As elsewhere in Europe and the world (see e.g. Curley et al. 2022; Davies et al. 2021; Galais & Guinjoan 2023; Mylonas & Whalley 2022), tensions around the COVID-related public

restrictions became a catalyst for the popularisation of far-right politics in Bulgaria. Specifically, the far-right nationalist party Revival successfully utilised public discontent with the country's pandemic response and managed to translate it into political support. Previously an outer-parliamentary actor, Revival was a recurring participant in the anti-government protests, where it recruited supporters by being explicitly vocal against social distancing rules, mask-wearing mandates, and vaccination certificates. **Bulgaria was the country in Europe with lowest vaccination rate against COVID-19 (Statista 2023). Historically known as a vaccine-hesitant country, a majority of Bulgarians were opposed to COVID-19 vaccination mandates (Pancheva et al. 2023),** and Revival's engagement with the question drew the attention of a large portion of Bulgarians looking for a political alternative at a time when they felt betrayed by the political elite on a multitude of fronts, including vaccination policies.

3.3. Emerging extremist narratives: Evidence from Sweden

In its annual reports which outline security threats against Swedish democracy, the Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) distinguishes between counterterrorism and countersubversion. Counterterrorism primarily focuses on preventing terrorist attacks within Sweden, while countersubversion targets politically motivated groups and individuals, such as political and religious extremists, engaging systematically in criminal acts to bring about societal change (SÄPO 2021). A review of their reports dating from 2001 onward reveals that, in addition to significant intelligence threats from countries such as Russia, China, and Iran, historical terrorism threats have been linked to international violent Islamic extremism, with particular emphasis on Al-Qaeda (Rostami & Askanius 2021). Concurrently, movements associated with violent far-left and far-right ideologies have been categorised as domestic countersubversion movements.

As in many other Western countries, the predominant focus in Swedish security and surveillance practices has been on violent Islamic extremism in the years following 9/11. This is despite the fact that Sweden, alongside Germany, the UK, and Spain, stands out as having more far-right terrorism violence per capita than any other Western European country (Ravndal 2018). This indicates that Swedish authorities have followed a familiar pattern across post-9/11 Western democracies in which the overwhelming tendency has been to single out the ‘outside’ threat posed by Islamic terrorism at the expense of so-called home-grown violence.

This has, however, started to change recently. In their threat assessments, the Swedish Security Service suggests that the greatest threat of terrorist attacks come from violent Islamic extremism *and* far-right extremism (SÄPO 2021; 2022). Most recent reports estimate that the threat from far-right extremism has increased, inter alia, as a result of several far-right attacks in other countries as well as a steady rise in activities and hate crimes by far-right groups within Sweden.

As of late, public desecrations of the Quran in cities across the country, orchestrated among others by far-right activist Rasmus Paludan and Salwan Momika, a self-proclaimed liberal atheist, have incited riots and the storming of Swedish embassies, resulted in complications for

the country's NATO accession, and triggered a widespread diplomatic crisis. Following the widespread international uproar and social unrest in the country, Sweden's security agency elevated its terrorism threat level from “increased” to “high” in August 2023, marking the second-highest designation on a five-point scale.

The latest reports align with a series of mappings and threat assessments from recent years, consistently confirming this trend in a wealth of evidence presented by various authorities and organisations, including the Swedish Defence Research Agency (Kaati et al. 2019), the Swedish Defence University (Ranstorp and Ahlin 2020), the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism (Kaati et al. 2020), the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF 2016), and the foundation Expo (Expo 2021, 2022), all of which raise warnings about the rise in far-right activity and violence across the country. Some of these reports document the ways in which the movement is increasingly mobilising online (see, e.g., Kaati 2017b) and, in the process, expanding the repertoire for organising action, building networks and alliances, and spreading online propaganda and conspiracy theories.

3.3.1. Historical and political context

Over the years the years, Sweden has been described as a robust democracy with a well-functioning legal system, stable political institutions, high levels of civic participation, a vibrant associational life, and high voter turnout (Charron et al. 2013; Rothstein 2018). The Social Democratic Party has historically been a dominant force in the development of a strong welfare state and in Swedish politics more generally, but coalition governments are common. In recent years, however, it has been increasingly difficult to form stable government coalitions as the political landscape has undergone considerable transformations, with new political parties and movements challenging the legitimacy of long-established actors following conventional lines on the ideological left-right continuum (Elgenius & Wennerhag 2018). After the 2018 election, it took several months to form a government due to the fragmented political landscape and the electoral gains of the far-right party, the Sweden Democrats (SD).

Ever since its entry into parliament in 2010, The Sweden Democrats, which has roots in the Neo-Nazi grassroots movement of the late 1980s, has been considered outside the political

mainstream and has faced isolation for decades due to their controversial positions and origin story. This changed in 2022, however, when the right-wing coalition bloc won with a slim majority of 176 mandates to 173 and the party became the second largest in parliament, with 20,5% of the votes. For the first time in Swedish history, the centre-right Moderates, along with the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, broke the cordon sanitaire, which up until then had effectively barred the SD from any role in government, and today the three parties depend on support from the Sweden Democrats to govern. These developments are ushering in a new era of political contestation and a paradigm shift in Swedish politics (Rothstein 2023). Among the first actions taken by the new government were abolishing the feminist foreign policy created in 2014, and with the political agreement, Tidöavtalet, the nation has embarked on a trajectory aimed at enhancing immigration restrictions, intensifying surveillance efforts, and augmenting penalties for violent offenses, among a myriad of other wide-reaching policy changes.

Despite the declaration by the leaders of the Sweden Democrats of a zero-tolerance stance on racism, and their efforts to purge the party of its original associations with fascist and neo-Nazi circles, several even very recent examples of racist, antidemocratic, illiberal, anti-Muslim, and Antisemitic statements made by prominent figures in the SD continue to proliferate (Rothstein 2023). Throughout its history, the SD has faced challenges in eliminating extremist elements within the party. Persistent power struggles between the SD and its radicalised youth wing, the Sweden Democrat Youth (SDU), reached a climax with the widespread expulsion of SDU members and the subsequent dissolution of SDU in 2017. The leaders of the radical faction were expelled from the party and went on to establish the political party *Alternative for Sweden* (AFS) prior to the 2018 elections. AFS distinguishes itself from other right-wing parties by hard-lining a policy of return migration and mass deportation and advocating for a “Swexit” from the European Union (Switzer 2024).

In recent years and dovetailing on far-right populists in a wide range of other Western countries, most prominently the US, the SD has embarked on its so-called “culture wars” against ‘wokeism’ (understood as a broad moniker for liberal, progressive politics concerned with racial and social justice), feminism and LGBTQ+ rights, in a widespread attempt to reshape culture policies and values around nationalist and conservative lines (Harding 2022). Overall, the

Sweden Democrats have had a huge impact on public discourse over the past decade, in particular on issues related to migration, integration, crime, and law and order (see e.g. Elgenius & Rydgren 2017; Rydgren & van der Meiden 2019; Mulinari & Neergaard 2013; Jungar 2022). As such, the party has been a major player in shifting ‘the Overton window’ (see Daniels 2018) of what is considered socially acceptable policy and civil discourse, consistently spreading and mainstreaming ideas that were previously considered extreme. As an influential force in mainstream parliamentary politics, operating on the democratic playing field, the party has long ceased to figure in the official mappings of far-right extremism. Yet, its ties to and influence on the broader landscape of actors on the far-right, non- violent as well as violent, should not be underestimated.

The party's journey from Pariah to the political mainstream should ultimately be understood in the context of the development of the broader landscape of heterogenous, extra-parliamentarian actors, political pundits/influencers and alternative media that make up the far-right movement in Sweden today. In this context, the extensive network of alternative media such as Fria Tider, Samnytt and RIKS, which until recently have served as a mouthpiece to the party, packaged as a news channel operating on YouTube, have played an essential role in the party's development.

The border crisis of 2015-16 and the transformation of the far-right

A series of recent events has shaped the development of extremist narratives in important ways. First, much like in Austria, **Sweden has experienced a considerable uptick in far-right activism and a proliferation of extremist discourse in the years following the 2015-16 border crisis** in Europe. In the years following the influx of refugees and migrants, the far-right in Sweden—much like elsewhere in Europe—evolved from a fragmented and loosely connected formation of groups and organisations, often in open conflict with one another, to an increasingly tight-knit network of formal and informal groups and individual actors who collaborate and form alliances across group affiliations and ideological differences. This solidification of a networked social movement, or ‘a network of networks’ (Switzer 2024) has been undergirded and facilitated in part by both mainstream and fringe social-media platforms and in part by the extensive web of alternative far-right news media, which in Sweden have

managed to create a considerable counter-public of hyper-partisan alternative news spheres around issues related to immigration, Islam and anti-feminism in recent years (Ihlebaek & Nygaard 2021).

In the immediate aftermath of the refugee crisis, vigilante groups such as Soldiers of Odin started emerging. Spurred by the incidents in Köln, Germany, during New Year's Eve in 2015, and a general shift towards a more hostile public discourse on immigration and refugees (Yantseva 2020), Soldiers of Odin first emerged in Finland and soon afterwards in Sweden in early 2016 (Gardell 2019). Through mobilisation on social media, particularly on Facebook, these groups became increasingly visible across Swedish cities, signalling a resurgence of explicitly racist street politics. The rise of ephemeral networks operating across hybrid online/offline spaces, such as Soldiers of Odin, reflects a broader trend across Europe, where movements like PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) in Germany and street gangs like the English Defence League have significantly influenced public discourse and occupied public spaces in the aftermath of the border crisis (Ekman 2019).

One of the most visible actors propagating extremism in recent years has been the neo-Nazi organisation, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Classified by Swedish authorities as violent extremist, the Nordic Resistance Movement openly promotes violence and considers armed revolution as the most direct route to achieving their goals. In the time following the 2015 European border crisis, up to the 2018 election, the NRM has had significant impact on the political discourse in the country. In certain regards, their modus operandi of combining street activism and digital activism was successful in that they, considering their relatively modest numbers, managed to punch above their weight in terms of the attention and visibility they have gained online and in mainstream news coverage. Beyond intimidating minorities and spreading fear in public, NRM members, many of whom are previously convicted felons, have been prosecuted during the most recent cycle of violence, and convicted of incitement to racial hatred, arson, bombing attacks against refugee shelters, the production of illegal arms, illegal possession of arms, preparation for crime, as well as attacks and harassment targeting researchers and journalists, etc. Activities peaked around the 2018 election year, but have since dropped. The decrease in activities in recent years is partly due to the fact that the NRM has

lost organisational strength and subsequently had to change its strategy. Instead of encouraging its activists to spread as much physical propaganda as possible, the NRM leadership has been forced to focus on fewer actions with potentially greater impact. This is despite the fact that the organisation ran in municipal elections in four municipalities. The decrease in the number of activities and its electoral defeats is evidence that the NMR has, for now, lost its hegemonic position in the movement (Expo 2022).

Other active groups that have disseminated substantial volumes of propaganda in the streets and online in recent years include The Free Sweden (DFS), Alternative for Sweden (AfS), The Network (Nätverket), Stram Kurs/Rasmus Paludan and the far-right fight club, Gym XIV - a relatively new phenomenon to the Swedish context (Expo 2022). Whereas the larger groups in the movement have decreased in activity level during 2022, the number of active actors in the country has increased (Expo 2023; Sarnecki et al. 2023). The trend towards a more heterogeneous environment consisting of smaller groups and networks has gained momentum already in 2018-2019 but has stalled in 2021 during the pandemic, when social activities were difficult to engage in due to restrictions. However, in 2022, the pattern resumed. The groups that have emerged since 2021 primarily are smaller local groups that have chosen to engage in political activities independently, instead of joining the bigger, nationwide organisations such as Alternative for Sweden or NMR (Expo 2023).

Sweden is considered a hub for extreme-right movements in the Nordic region. Several monitoring groups and state actors, including the Swedish Security Service have identified right-wing terrorism in the past several years as a growing and deepening threat against Swedish democracy. Sweden is described as an outlier in the Scandinavian context, having witnessed considerably more extreme-right violence and militancy in the past two decades than its Nordic neighbours (Ravndal 2018). At the same time, identifying and isolating the actors that pose a threat is becoming an increasingly hard task. The Swedish Security Service has warned against the blurring of boundaries and against a development in which violent right-wing ideology is normalising and increasingly propagated outside of the constellations that have traditionally been understood to constitute violent extremism (SÄPO 2021).

Pandemic grievances and the radicalisation of The Freedom Movement

Second, as is the case elsewhere in Europe, **the COVID-19 pandemic became a focal point for the formation and renewal of extremist narratives** circulating in the country. In Sweden, far-right actors played a key role in the spread of anti-democratic narratives that grew in the wake of the societal instability and uncertainties caused by the pandemic. In Sweden, protests were mainly organised by the so-called Freedom movement that had formed in March 2021 and had brought together a motley array of actors protesting the introduction of vaccination certificates and perceived encroachment on civil liberties due to public health restrictions. As such, the Freedom Movement was a specific organisation but the term has become synonymous with the broader series of public demonstrations 'for freedom and truth' that took place in major cities across the country during 2021 and the beginning of 2022. Overall, the Swedish far-right took an ambivalent stance on the pandemic and the measures taken to prevent its spread by the government. Because the Swedish authorities did not enforce any strict lockdown policy or mask mandates as was the case elsewhere in the world, the pandemic did not offer such a direct opportunity for far-right actors as it did elsewhere. Key social-movement actors on this vector, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR), Alternative for Sweden (AfS), and Det Fria Sverige (DFS), had no clear line until the vaccine passport issue arose in the latter half of 2021. Whereas these actors had initially supported the restrictions implemented by the state, their position changed over time and their official stance aligned more clearly with the libertarian and anti-State views of far-right movements elsewhere in the world. The shift happened partly because of inspiration from the far-right mobilisations in Europe and North America, and partly because the restrictions started to have a negative impact on their own offline activities. The neo-Nazi organisation NMR joined the ranks of protesters just as several people active in the Freedom Movement were also active in the Network, a loosely organised but important coalition of far-right actors operating through a range of front organisations and public activities (Sarnecki et al. 2023; Expo 2021; 2022).

Finally, these relatively dramatic changes to the political landscape, **the growing political polarisation and social divides should be understood against the backdrop of the widening inequality gap** in the country. Along with the rest of the Nordic countries, Sweden enjoys a reputation of being among the most progressive, affluent, egalitarian, and aspirational nations

of the world. Nordic households are recognised as some of the wealthiest globally (The Lancet 2023). Despite this, disparities within Sweden, including rising income inequality and relative income poverty, have outpaced the average observed in Nordic countries by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in recent decades (Lancet 2023). Development towards increasing economic inequality, in tandem with the political developments described above are posing challenges to the social cohesion and democratic development of Swedish society.

3.3.2. Extremist narratives: Literature Review and secondary data on Sweden

Numerous academic studies investigating public discourse circulating in the online ecosystem of fringe platforms and mainstream social media have documented the recent rise and widespread circulation of extremist narratives in Sweden that hinge on various aspects of far-right ideology. These include xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, white supremacism (Askanius 2021a; 2021b; Ekman 2015; 2019; 2021; 2022; Horsti 2017; Merrill & Åkerlund 2018; Törnberg & Wahlström, 2018; Wahlström et al. 2021; Åkerlund 2022), eco-fascism (Darwish 2024; Sarnecki 2021) and authoritarianism (Ekström 2023) as well as anti-feminism, misogyny, and homophobia (Askanius et al. 2024a; Törnberg & Törnberg 2016). These studies identify extremist narratives circulating in online spaces ranging from websites and blogs run by far-right groups to fringe video sharing platforms such as Rumble, BitChute, Odysee and SwebbTube, the online messaging service Telegram and mainstream social media platforms YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram. Specific to the Swedish landscape of online media are discussion forums Flashback Forum and Familjeliv (Family Life) both of which stand out as notable conduits for extremist narratives and authoritarian discourse.

The vast majority of studies on online extremism in the Swedish context focuses on discourse related to immigration and Islam, reflecting how contestation and polarisation gravitate towards these topics in particular. Using a combination of computational methods and qualitative methods, Wahlström et al. (2021) analyse the occurrence of violent and dehumanising language in online comments posted to Sweden's largest anti-immigration group on Facebook, 'Stand up for Sweden'. Their study show how anti-immigrant and right-wing populist themes were present in most discussion threads in the group. The computational

analysis demonstrated that dehumanisation and calls for violent action were primarily linked to expressions of negative emotions and topics such as crime, victimisation, and a failing state. Corroborating these results, their qualitative analysis indicated that top posts provided opportunities for “moral micro-shocking among the participants, serving to maintain commitment and to legitimize violence” (Wahlström et al. 2021, p.3307). The narratives converged around depictions of immigrants as inherently criminal and immoral, and of a failing state. This gave rise to emotions such as vindictiveness, disgust, and hate, and to calls for retribution and deportation among the users of the forum. Violence is legitimised and framed as ‘educational’ and as a ‘just retribution’ in the face of the existential threat posed by immigration and the crisis of multiculturalism. The authors argue that in such a discursive context, far-right violence comes to be regarded as not only acceptable but even desirable for users who engage in these narratives over time.

Also focusing on Facebook, Ekman (2019) identifies a tendency towards increasingly overt racism on Swedish-speaking Facebook groups where users are debating issues pertaining to crime and migration. Racist discourses, he argues, rely on affect to gain attention and circulation, meaning that the technical and social affordances of social-media platforms allow for affective interactions in counter-audiences such as Stand up for Sweden. Over the years, the group has established a space where user interaction amplifies racist comments and responses published by Facebook users, turning racial antagonism (Farkas, Schou and Neumeyer 2018) into discursive violence. Consequently, these **online discussions on migration and migrants in mainstream social-media platforms are pushing the boundaries of what is publicly acceptable language and normalising dehumanising and violent narratives**. Facebook emerges as a prominent site for the circulation of extremist narratives across the findings of all of these studies.

Sweden's extensive network of alternative news media

Sweden’s landscape of hyper-partisan alternative media is an important source of extremist narratives and key to understanding the rise of the far-right in the country. While ideologically diverse these media however share an anti-immigration position, hostility towards establishment journalism, and a commitment to unrestricted freedom of speech (Holt 2019).

By rejecting journalistic standards of objectivity, they consider themselves a corrective to the deceitful and corrupt mainstream journalism, often referred to as 'Lögnmedia' (Lügen media/Lying Press). Journalists in turn are considered to be in cahoots with the political elite and are therefore referred to as 'traitors'. In the period following Russia's aggression war against Ukraine, pro-Russian narratives have been circulating across the ecosystem of alternative media in Sweden. While Russia's war against Ukraine remains a contentious topic, sharply dividing opinions, alternative media persistently propagate messages portraying Putin as a heroic figure fighting against what they perceive as Western decadence, moral decline, and the influence of the Deep State and "the globalists" (Sarnecki et al. 2023).

The post-pandemic landscape of extremist narratives

Released in 2023, one of the latest government reports charts the major players, encompassing organisations as well as networks, collectively forming what this report terms as antidemocratic extremist environments as these evolved during and in the wake of the pandemic (Sarnecki et al. 2023). Corroborating previous mappings (see e.g. SÄPO 2022; Expo 2021), these environments are described as heterogeneous and bound together by various, sometimes contradicting ideological components. While the current landscape of organisations and networks diverge in terms of their adherence to violence (direct and symbolic), they seem to share the objective of dismantling or subverting the liberal democratic system of governance. Their pursuits include fostering widespread political turmoil in society by disseminating conspiracy propaganda and disinformation, as well as employing online threats and violence.

Much like in Austria, the grievances put forward in far-right narratives, converging with the broader COVID-19 protests, presented revamped versions of long-standing violent tropes and conspiracy theories. Online conspiracy narratives surrounding the pandemic rehashed core tenets of Deep State conspiracies, disseminating ideas that the Swedish government was betraying its citizens, engaging in population control, or, in some more sinister strains of the Great Reset conspiracy, committing genocide against its own population (Sarnecki et al. 2023).

Through these alliances, the narratives surrounding COVID-19 protests in Sweden became intricately intertwined with far-right ideologies, propagated through a web of conspiracy

theories and calls for radical actions. In some instances, these narratives went so far as to endorse violence and issue threats against government officials, scientists, politicians, and journalists. Among the conspiratorial narratives circulating were that of the Deep State, New World Order, the ‘Plandemic’ and the Great Reset. Ideas about the deep state exist in several variations but are based on the notion that there is a state within the state – a secret shadow government holding the real power. The state within the state is claimed to consist of deep state agents, who can be politicians and representatives of various societal institutions, celebrities, or others accused of committing various types of abuses, including such involving children.

Another narrative about the deep deception of democracy and its imminent collapse is that of the New World Order. It revolves around notions of a communist regime or a totalitarian world government, a society of inhumane control where constant surveillance prevails, and any deviation is mercilessly punished. It involves a hierarchical slave society where ordinary people are deprived of their freedom through monitoring, governance, and control. This regime is said to have already been implemented or is in the process of being implemented. Other commonly occurring conspiracy theories revolve around the Great Reset - an initiative of the World Economic Forum (WEF) aimed at reducing global inequality and expanding environmentally sustainable strategies in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to common interpretations among the networks emerging around the pandemic, this is, in fact, a plan to transform society and gradually deprive the population of their basic human rights (Sarnecki et al. 2023, p.48). Research indicates that while the protest narratives were not exclusively violent or orchestrated by far-right actors alone, the involvement of such actors and the infusion of anti-democratic ideas have significantly influenced the direction of the narratives that circulated online (Askanius et al. 2024b).

A key finding of the report is that there has been a shift in the pattern of composition and activities within extremist environments in the years following the pandemic. This shift aligns with observations made by the Swedish Security Services whose recent annual reports have affirmed the departure from formal organisations and memberships towards more fluid movements characterised by loosely connected networks of actors. This change is evident in various acts of lone perpetrator violence, including several school attacks and the politically

motivated murder committed by a former member of the neo-Nazi organisation NMR that took place at the political festival Almedalen in the summer of 2022.

Narratives shifting form - the turn to humour, irony, and innuendo

Another major discernible trend in the nature of extremist narratives circulating in Sweden is a shift in the *forms* that these take and the imagery and symbolism that they draw on. Following global trends in online extremism, narratives tend to tone down explicitly violent discourse or hate speech to evade detection by algorithms and law enforcement. Instead, narratives often make references to mainstream popular culture, or draw on humour, irony, and innuendo to cloak extremism and carry harmful ideas and images into the digital mainstream. This makes extremist ideas more palatable to a general audience and allows for a degree of plausible deniability, making it more challenging for platforms and authorities to identify and take action against such content. These tactics have, for example, been used by white supremacists in the country to spread racist conspiracy theories and death threats against politicians, journalists, and researchers, cloaked as ‘ambiguously humorous’ memes (Askanius 2021a; Askanius & Keller 2021). Similarly, Åkerlund’s (2021) research shows how covert and coded far-right discourse is normalised, over time and across different online spaces. In her study of the online occurrence of the term ‘culture enricher’ (Swedish: kulturberikare), once a neo-Nazi expression which over time has turned into a more general derogatory term for immigrants, she illustrates how it functions as a dog whistle, allowing people to spread hateful messages against minorities ‘in plain sight’. The term offers a way of expressing in-group affinity around a community of ‘aggrieved white Swedes’, while simultaneously signaling hostility towards the ‘establishment’ and ‘immigrants’ as generalised and antagonist out-groups. Mapping its movement across the Swedish web, her research also identifies the online discussion platform *Flashback Forum* as a key instrument in the laundering of hate and extremist narratives into the digital mainstream in Sweden. This observation is reflected in the research of Askanius et al. (2024a) focusing on the discourse of violent misogyny, anti-feminism, and male supremacism circulating on the platform. Their study finds that *Flashback Forum* can be considered a breeding ground for conspiratorial ideas and in-group/out-group conflicts that bleed into more extremist belief systems, at the core of contemporary extremist narratives emerging around issues related to gender and sexuality. In a similar vein, and also drawing on an analysis of online commentary

from this influential forum, Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) investigate explicitly violent narratives targeting women and Muslim minorities emerging at the intersection of Islamophobia and anti-feminism on the platform.

In doing so, these studies capture key components of extremist narratives as these are articulated in everyday online spaces, which users cannot necessarily be expected to visit with the specific intent of seeking out extremist ideas or communities. They show how people increasingly encounter extremist messages and ideas in their ordinary lives online, e.g., on mainstream social-media platforms and discussion forums that are not dedicated to or organised by any particular political group or agenda per se.

In the following chapter we provide empirical examples showcasing how these very processes unfold in an everyday online space such as Reddit.

4. Extremist narratives in everyday online spaces: Empirical insights from Reddit

This chapter presents empirical insights from an ongoing study of online discussions on migration – a hot-button topic around which polarising discourse, extremist narratives and conspiracies increasingly tend to gravitate across Europe. Our reflections are based on the preliminary analysis of a data corpus of online comments from the three subsections of Reddit in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden; r/Austria (n=5633), r/Bulgarian (n=4713) and r/Sweden (n=9656) respectively. For the purpose of this report, and for enriching the secondary data analysis with illustrative examples and visualisations, the qualitative approach to examining the Reddit data we take here was informed by the following steps. First, based on the findings of the mapping presented above and a close reading of a smaller sample of comments (n=500) from each subreddit, we generated a list of country-specific search words with which we made inquiries into the total population of comments.¹⁹ This provided us with a purposive selection of comments which we approached drawing on narrative inquiry asking the following questions: *Who is 'we'/the ingroup? Who are 'they'/ the out-group? What is the nature of the crisis/threat? What are the proposed solutions to the crisis/threat, and what actions are required to achieve this?*

Reddit provides a particularly pertinent platform for transnational empirical analysis of online deliberations. As a text-based discussion forum, it provide a window to the kind of casual, informal and often spontaneous political conversations and interactions people across many European countries tend to engage in as part of their everyday lives online. The platform is thus relevant to all three countries and its organisation into country-specific subreddits allow for strategic selections and targeted inquiries into specific national and linguistic contexts (e.g. separating Austrian discourse from the larger German-speaking community online). Whereas other online platforms popular for engaging in political debate, such as Twitter, tend to attract 'elite users' such as politicians, journalists, influencers and celebrities, Reddit is a space

¹⁹ The data has been scraped by our partners at the Jožef Stefan Institute in Slovenia. The data corpus contains: 9656 comments posted between June-December 2023 in r/Sweden, a subreddit with 649,471 members; 5633 comments posted between January-December 2023 in r/Austria, a subreddit with 497,374 members; 4713 comments posted between January 2023- January 2024 in r/Bulgaria, a subreddit with 200,429 members.

inhabited by ‘ordinary people’ engaging anonymously. It is also not among the online spaces notorious for harbouring explicitly violent “uncensored” content that cater to extremist political actors specifically. These features allow us to capture how extremist narratives circulate in a mainstream space dedicated to ordinary users, engaging in topics of political and societal concerns online.

4.1. ‘Quran burnings’, ‘no-go zones’ and ‘imported criminals’: Empirical insights from r/Sweden

The topic of immigration and failing integration emerges as a prominent topic on r/Sweden, with almost 10,000 comments posted between July and December 2023 (twice as many as r/Austria and r/Bulgaria had in one year). Within these, immigration is discussed in a range of contexts varying from *desired immigration* (reserved for highly educated professionals from Western countries) to *immigration as a crisis* (with immigrants and asylum seekers from Africa and The Middle East as the most common scapegoat/‘Other’). In r/Sweden, the picture of immigrants as ‘Others’ is frequently connected to *crises/threats* such as organized crime, lack of integration, abuse of state subsidies, and a risk to Sweden’s national security.

Organized crime is the most frequently recurring articulation of a *crisis* invoked in relation to immigration discussions in Sweden. The narrative links Sweden’s gang violence to the influx of immigrants. Discussions depict a crisis scenario with gang criminals running rampant and the police surrendering to rioters and vandals. Sweden is portrayed as being controlled by foreign ‘mafia’, teetering on the brink of systemic collapse. “Clans and gang criminals have infiltrated authorities, political parties, police, courts, run medical centres, work in banks etc. We cannot reduce immigration even if we wanted to”, one user writes.



Figure 5. Illustrative quotes from r/Sweden

Proposed solutions range from harsher prison sentences and background checks on criminals' relatives to offering rewards for tips leading to prosecution. Additionally, ideas include involving teachers in monitoring criminally suspected youth and punishing the families of convicted individuals. One suggestion reads: “Deport the entire immediate family when someone is convicted of organized crime and is foreign. When clan and family are more

important than the individual, the only way is to treat them as one.” Another user adds: “Deport the scum!”

An additional crisis construct triggering anti-immigration narratives emerges around the discussion of so-called ‘no-go zones’ in Swedish suburbs. Users invoke this term to suggest that certain areas in Sweden have become so dangerous that law enforcement or other services avoid entering them. These areas, described to have high crime rates and serious socioeconomic challenges, are framed as a consequence of immigration policies and the presence of certain immigrant communities that are by nature “unable to assimilate”.

This alleged inability or unwillingness to integrate often occur in conjunction with Islamophobic statements. Islam is generally depicted as an oppressive religion intertwined with a presumed ‘clan culture’ and a family perspective deemed incompatible with Swedish values. Muslims are frequently ‘Othered’ due to their perceived, and sometimes considered ‘abnormally’ strong family ties. Critics argue that these ties hinder integration and may serve as a potential gateway to criminality. The term ‘clan culture’ is invoked to describe these familial connections, with ‘clan’ often replacing ‘family’ even in contexts unrelated to crime. According to some Redditors, inherent cultural differences between Swedish and ‘Muslim’ societies are viewed as a barrier preventing assimilation in Sweden. One user argues: “The aim [of Muslim immigrants] is often to keep their children away from Swedish friends, lest they get the idea of being able to choose one’s own partner, or, God forbid, stop being Muslim. I don’t think crime is acceptable in MENA, but clan culture is, and corruption is a natural part of these societies and much of what is considered abhorrent by Swedes is part of the completely traditional religious control in these societies. What makes you think they would drop this when they step over the border into Europe?”

The proposed solutions rest on the idea that immigrants who wish to assimilate in Sweden are under threat by these strong family ties. “The problem is that the suburbs are unfortunately full of people who look at Swedish society and Swedes with contempt. These individuals see immigrants who want to assimilate as traitors and will do anything to make life miserable for

those who want to assimilate”, a redditor suggests. More exclusionary solutions presented are stopping immigration from certain parts of the world or banning Islam in Sweden.

Discussions on labor immigration reveal a distinct association of immigrants from Africa and the Middle East with low-paying occupations, such as elderly care, public transportation, and sanitation, in contrast to immigrants from Western countries or East Asia, who are more frequently linked to roles in IT and engineering. This dichotomy is evident in the discourse that clearly outlines specific job categories attributed to different *groups*. A self-proclaimed pro-immigration redditor notes the necessity of immigrants in filling low-paid positions like healthcare, transportation, and food services to allow *real* Swedes access to high-paying jobs after higher education. In comments expressing an immigration-critical position, a more pronounced divide between good and bad immigrants emerges, portraying East Asians as occupying essential higher-education roles while depicting Middle Easterners as incapable or unqualified for ‘proper jobs’, and sometimes even ‘inherently criminal’, as indicated in the following comment: “Strange how Indians are mostly IT workers, restaurant workers and food deliverers while some others are murderers and drug dealers.”

Discussions around a series of Quran burnings in Sweden that unfolded on public squares, in front of mosques and embassies around Sweden in 2022 and 2023 have also triggered intense debate and further polarized discourse on Islam and immigration in the country. On the one hand, the Quran burnings are discussed as a threat to Swedish national security, attributing blame to immigration for an international relation crisis. The situation is intensified by Turkey’s veto on Sweden joining NATO and the elevation of the internal threat level in 2023. The murder of a Swedish citizen in Brussels by a self-proclaimed ISIS sympathizer additionally sharpened the rhetoric on this topic. On the other hand, some of the more radical views praise the Quran burnings for making Sweden a more unattractive country for Muslim immigrants. The narrative emerging around the public response to Quran burnings, which resulted in several demonstrations turning violent, suggests that Muslims’ behaviour is indicative of their reluctance to embrace freedom of speech, which is discursively equated with integration into Swedish society.

The Quran burning acts have sparked a debate about the boundaries of free speech, with some commenters arguing that desecrating a holy script constituted incitement against an ethnic group, rather than an act of free speech, and others countering with the symbolic importance of protecting the Swedish right to freedom of expression. “Just look at how [immigrants] react to the Quran burnings in Sweden. They know it’s a right we have here and yet they want to change it. And that is probably why the pendulum has swung and will probably swing even more. People are tired of us always having to do more, change our ways, adapt, etc.”, one user wrote, while another stated “I think freedom of speech is important, but I don’t buy the argument why it should be ok to burn the Quran because it is done to offend Muslims. All it does is dilute an already troubled world.”

Finally, the conflict between Israel and Hamas following **Hamas’ attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023 intensified anti-immigration narratives on the platform**. On the platform there are calls to identify pro-Palestine protesters from demonstration footage and deport these, as these demonstrations are understood as overt acts of antisemitism and protesters are labelled as ‘terror supporters’ who do not belong in Sweden. The pro-Palestine protests further fueled arguments that migrants from Arabic nations are *incapable of integration*: “The conflict between Palestine and Israel highlights exactly this, with hundreds of thousands of people from this part of the world chanting anti-Semitic songs that imply genocide all around Europe. Obviously, there is a red thread throughout Europe, none of these countries seem to be able to get these people to participate in society no matter what their strategy is.”

4.2. ‘Brain drainers’, ‘Eurogays’ and ‘4-star hotel Ukrainians’: Empirical insights from r/Bulgaria

On r/Bulgaria, the search for ‘migration’/‘migrant’ resulted in a corpus of 4723 comments posted between January 9th, 2023 – January 9th, 2024. Unlike r/Austria and r/Sweden, where discourses around migration were largely limited to immigration, the discussions taking place here involve both emigration and immigration-related issues. These ranged from practical advice on moving abroad to critique of the state having caused a *brain drain* from the country, discontent with those who choose to emigrate, and ‘Othering’ of asylum seekers seeking refuge in Bulgaria. This primarily concerns Ukrainian refugees, although this started to change when

an agreement was reached between Austria and Bulgaria in late 2023 to lift Austria's veto and allow Bulgaria to join the Schengen zone.

When it comes to narratives surrounding emigration, the crisis-construct is most prominently articulated around the shortage of labour force due to the continuous *brain drain* from the country. This perspective is coupled with views of emigrants as *national traitors* that have 'sold their skills' to foreign powers instead of investing these in building a better future for Bulgarians. A counter-narrative to this is that more and more people choose to return, and Bulgaria is becoming an attractive destination for many conservative Europeans tired with the migration/LGBTQ+ policies of *the decadent West*. Anti-EU sentiments are clearly identifiable in these discourses, with notions such as *умнокрасив* ('smart-and-beautiful'), *Еврогей* ('Eurogay'), *грантаджия* ('grant recipient') or *либераст* ('libtard') used to describe those with pro-West orientations. Even the act of returning to Bulgaria after studying abroad, although positively viewed by some, is seen as a threat by others who fear that Western education 'indoctrinates' young Bulgarians, leading them to 'import' *decadent Western ideologies* into Bulgarian society. An intriguing contrast emerges between the discourses in the Swedish and the Bulgarian sample regarding views on family. In the Bulgarian data, Western societies are depicted as 'promiscuous' due to their high divorce rates, and the perception that Bulgarians who have lived abroad do not value the family as much upon their return fuels anti-West sentiments. This differs from the discussions in Sweden, where close family ties and loyalty to one's family are described as highly problematic and *anti-Swedish*.



Figure 6. Illustrative quotes from r/Bulgaria

The war in Ukraine, which has brought an influx of Ukrainian asylum seekers into Bulgaria, has put the issue of immigration on the agenda for Bulgarians. The pro-/anti-Russian sentiment divide among Bulgarians becomes particularly visible in the discussions on this recent immigration wave. While many Bulgarians were initially positive to accommodating Ukrainians, a significant share of those commenting are sharply opposed to Bulgaria opening its borders to Ukrainian refugees. Anti-immigration sentiments in this context are driven by the

perceived privileged position of Ukrainian refugees, who are said to arrive in “fancy cars” and stay in “expensive hotels.” In one such discussion thread a user states: “It played a huge role that they were accommodated in 4-star hotels, not in gyms like in Germany. This annoyed many Bulgarians immensely”. In June 2023, heavy rains caused severe flooding in several Bulgarian villages with a dense elderly population, destroying many homes. The insufficient assistance provided to these citizens by the state is juxtaposed with the “generous” daily allowance received by refugees, further exacerbating we/them divides and anti-Ukrainian sentiments.

In December 2023, Bulgaria was partially accepted into the Schengen area, with air and sea border control from other EU-member states scheduled to stop at the end of March 2024. The agreement between Austria and Bulgaria, resulting in Austria lifting the veto on Bulgaria’s Schengen membership, was met with distrust on Reddit, and the spread of disinformation quickly followed. The reason for the public outcry was a clause in the agreement demanding that Bulgaria and Romania take back all asylum seekers for whom they are responsible in accordance with the Dublin Regulation. A series of disinformation statements thus posed that the agreement with Austria entailed an obligation on Bulgaria’s part to accept “tens of thousands” of refugees, as well as build more refugee centres. Sweeping statements like “Bulgaria will become the largest refugee camp in the world” and “An unlimited number of refugees will enter the country” are to be found in these discussions. The agreement was framed as a diplomatic failure risking the security of the country, and the looming *crisis* was becoming more like the *decadent West*. **“Finally, Sofia will also look like a European capital! We will have knife attacks, bombs, religious-based tensions, and a constantly grumbling Islamist core that will roar for rights while creating terrorist cells. Congratulations, we finally reached Europe!”**, one user writes. Critics of this rhetoric often resort to we/them divides between Bulgarians/Westerners instead. “It’s funny how Bulgarians and other Eastern Europeans who are more conservative and hate MENA people think they have something in common with the Western conservatives in their thinking of preserving Europe clean, without realizing that those Western conservatives don’t include most Eastern Europeans in their ideal for a ‘clean’ Europe”, argues one redditor. Among the proposed solutions in the discussion are

increased border security, just as calls for violent vigilantism at the Bulgarian borders occurs in the comments.

4.3. ‘The Muslim threat’ and ‘woke wars’: Empirical insights from r/Austria

At the time of the data collection, r/Austria had some 500.000 members. For the data scrape, we searched r/Austria using the words ‘migration’ and ‘asylum’ which resulted in 5633 comments between January and December 2023. For the purpose of this analysis, we identified threads and comments that contained elements of extremist narratives, which is only a small fraction of the discussion on Reddit. The majority of the comments on the forum revolve around practical issues such as job market access or housing relevant to migrants. There are also several voices who support immigration and criticise asylum and integration policies for their perceived restrictiveness. These liberal perspectives often demonstrate compassion and empathy and propose nuanced solutions to challenges related to immigration in Austria. Keywords around which extremist narratives occur are ‘Asylant’ (116 comments), a pejorative term in German for asylum seekers, *criminal* and *crime* (‘kriminell’ and ‘Kriminalität’) (82 comments). The comments that showcase extremist discourse use derogatory terms or create adversaries, some explicitly and others more subtly. Noticeably, the themes identified in the case study of Austria above, such as gender, climate change, and the pandemic, resurface in connection with everyday conversations on migration. These intersections reflect the entangled nature of broader societal tensions embedded within these topics.

The comments provide insights into extremist narratives that have made their way into everyday online spaces where immigration, asylum, and integration is discussed. The *we* in such narratives often represents the native population, here Austrian citizens, who position themselves vis-à-vis immigrant out-groups. The quotes illustrate how people voice concerns about maintaining control over who enters the country, touching upon issues of identity and belonging. The opposite is usually construed as immigrants and asylum-seekers, who are perceived as potential threats to the social fabric. At the core of the crisis narrative is the fear of cultural erosion, economic strain, and security risks posed by the out-group. Proposed solutions in the Austrian discussions range from stricter immigration and asylum policies to

immediate deportation for those deemed undesirable and dangerous. The actions required involve reinforcing borders, tightening asylum laws, and implementing more rigorous background checks. Specific grievances include dissatisfaction with decision-makers and politicians, leading people to blame either the EU or national politics, or *the left* which is believed to have enforced the imperative of a welcoming culture.



Figure 7. Illustrative quotes from r/Austria

Much like in Sweden, a recurrent topic revolves around failed integration measures as well as the unwillingness of immigrants and asylum seekers to integrate: “These people cannot be integrated, not en masse. Individually, completely isolated from their home culture, forced to adapt, perhaps somehow, but certainly not in larger groups.” Integration is usually seen as a one-way process and something only immigrants are responsible for. This recurring theme frequently emerges in relation to often repeated misconceptions/falsehoods about social benefits, perpetuating the narrative that refugees lead a life of luxury. On this note, one user states: “It looks as if they are living here in order to live like kings in retirement in their homeland. This raises questions about long-term integration and co-existence.”

Similar to the discourse in Sweden, a prominent theme in Austrian revolves around categorizations between different groups of immigrants, delineating between *good* and *desired* migrants and those perceived as a burden. One user argues: “Most people are not fundamentally against immigration and asylum, but they do have something against asylum seekers who bring Islamist ideas to the country. Hardly anyone is against people moving here from Thailand, for example”. These changing enemy constructs are commonplace in everyday discussions on migration, and who is considered an *unwanted* and *burdensome* immigrant has changed considerably over time. Currently, the primary focus is on young men from Muslim-majority countries, especially Afghanistan, who are widely perceived as a security risk. This perception is intertwined with concerns about sexualised violence and Islam as an inherently violent and “terrorist religion”.

A recurring topic in these conversations is the fear of being branded as right-wing when voicing concerns about immigration. This sentiment is often conveyed by users through the phrase “das wird man ja noch sagen dürfen” (one should still be allowed to say that). This fear of ideological categorization reflects broader societal dynamics, where concerns and opinions are sometimes stifled by the fear of being misunderstood or politically pigeonholed, or, as a user stated in a comment: “People are more likely to act out in extreme ways elsewhere if they are denied an opinion, a double-edged sword when it comes to sensitive issues.” Another user identifies the pandemic as a turning point in this regard, arguing that “**Since corona, everything has become very heated and it feels like are only extreme positions remain**”.

The vilification of political opponents thereby is among the most common themes on Reddit, which comes to the fore by calling others “radical leftie” or by speaking of a “FPÖ-bot-farm” that is active on Reddit. In the context of such *left vs. right* discussions, the topic of gender often pops up. Terms often used in this context include are ‘woke’ and ‘gender’ itself. While not the most predominant topic in the subreddit, comments on these issues are highly divisive and confrontational. One user, for example, sarcastically states: “Thank you to all these woke, left-wing, green do-gooders who got us into this mess”. Terms such as ‘woke’ are frequently wielded to provoke and mock other users, framing an alleged culture war in which a left-wing elite is seen as seeking to dictate societal norms. Users will, for example, bemoan the use of gender-neutral language, contending that it is only used when convenient, but avoided in discussion of negatively charged topics, such as terrorists, hate posters, criminals, or rapists, who are talked about by only using the male version of the noun. By asserting that “toxic men and the patriarchy are blamed for everything”, users challenge liberal notions suggesting that a power imbalance between genders and gender-based discrimination continue to persist across liberal democracies. Such contentions reflect a deepening cynicism towards the broader discourse on gender equality across liberal democracies.

5. Concluding discussions

In the turbulent landscape of recent political developments, the confluence of migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the persistent conflicts in the Middle East, has given rise to an alarming surge in political polarisation and extremism. As the world grapples with multifaceted challenges, the complex interplay of these crises has created fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root and for anti-democratic sentiments and narratives to flourish across Europe. It is within this tumultuous political landscape that this report sets out to provide an in-dept account of first, *what* kind of extremist ideas and narratives ordinary citizens across Europe may encounter as they navigate their daily lives online, and second, provide insights into *where* across the spectrum of online media, these may manifest.

5.1. What are the key narratives?

Taking a case study approach to understanding broader trends and patterns across European regions, the report provides insights from Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden. Upon reviewing the available evidence from these national contexts, **two key topics emerge as central to the proliferation of everyday extremist discourse in Europe.** The first revolves around the dynamics of forced migration and immigration, which has grown in salience in the years following the 2015-16 European border crisis, especially in Sweden and Austria. In essence, contemporary forms of anti-immigration narratives are weaved together by a tapestry of harmful and exclusionary ideas and belief systems including xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia, racism, white supremacism, eco-fascism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and homophobia. In Sweden and Austria, they tend to target specific groups, particularly young Muslim males framed as “dangerous” threats to the “native” population. **These anti-immigration narratives echo familiar themes and long-standing ideas that European societies are collapsing under the weight of enforced multiculturalism** and/or European/white populations are being replaced by immigrant communities and in particular Muslim “invaders”. Anti-migration/migrant narratives in Bulgaria, on the other hand are, influenced by Bulgaria’s role as a ‘transit country’ rather than a destination country, as well as economic factors. The narratives therefore focus on protecting Bulgarian borders from ‘illegal

migration' into Europe and the economic means of migrants from Western Europe and asylum seekers from Ukraine. Immigration from the MENA region is described as a 'looming threat' to be avoided at any cost, to protect the country from 'collapsing like the West'. Such anti-immigration narratives, which continue to take on new forms and tap into shifting conspiratorial beliefs and falsehoods, circulate openly today.

Second, various forms of anti-establishment ideas, some of which veer towards illiberal and anti-democratic ideas and behaviours, proliferate across Europe. Importantly, the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to a host of new anti-establishment narratives in all three countries examined in this report. Large demonstrations, initially diverse in their coalitions, were quickly co-opted by right-wing extremist groups, including neo-Nazis. Contentious issues surrounding lockdowns and compulsory vaccination amplified anti-government sentiments, and fueled narratives pitting "the people" against a distant and treacherous elite. In Bulgaria, the Covid-19 pandemic generated an uptick in conspiratorial anti-establishment discourse propelled by far-right and pro-Russian forces. The party Revival successfully leveraged public discontent surrounding the pandemic response, orchestrating protests and transforming dissatisfaction into electoral gains. Anti-establishment narratives circulating around the pandemic peddled widely circulated conspiracy theories suggesting that a malevolent global elite exploited or orchestrated the pandemic to dismantle European societies, infringe upon civil liberties and harm populations through the vaccination programs. Various iterations of the narratives sparked during the pandemic continue to circulate and take on new forms in online spaces today.

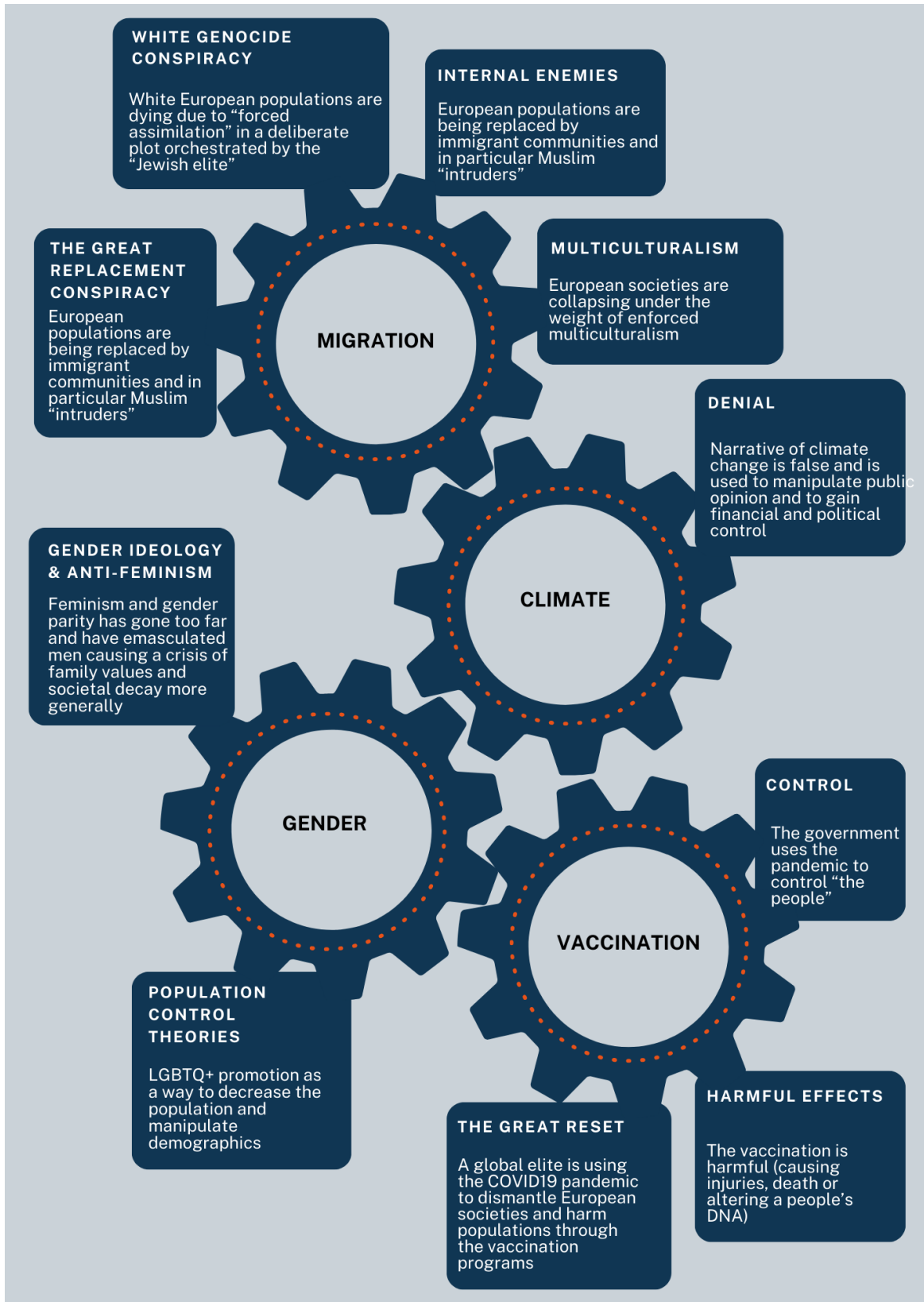


Figure 8. Emerging extremist narratives around key topics

In Bulgaria, anti-establishment narratives further tend to evolve around Euroscepticism and geopolitical influences from Russia. Anti-Western/EU narratives are on the rise, tethered to perceived economic disadvantages and the “brain drain” of the country. This narrative serves to underscore a perceived cultural and economic divide between the “decadent West” and the “traditional East”. In recent years, far-right actors, notably Revival, have adeptly capitalized on political, economic, and social discontent to gain support and reshape the political landscape. This poses challenges to minority rights and has contributed significantly to opposition to the European Union, challenging the fundamental values of pluralism, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights, it embodies. In Sweden too, actors within the vast online network of alternative news media, presenting themselves as anti-establishment and a corrective to mainstream media, have also been found to peddle pro-Russian ideas and interests.

Beyond the key topics outlined by OppAttune - vaccination, migration, silent narratives and protectionism - this report provides evidence that **climate change and gender are emerging as key topics around which new extremist narratives and conspiracy theories tend to gravitate in Europe today.**

The deepening climate crisis and climate-change activism has become deeply polarised and increasingly intertwined in identity politics and ideological trenches. Disruptive and spectacular actions by climate activists, some of whom have been gluing themselves to streets or stopping planes from taking off in airports have led to the framing of the climate justice movement as extremist in some circles. Denial of climate change and accusations of a left-wing conspiracy is triggering oppositional thinking that contributes to polarisation around this urgent issue.

Further, debates over gender and “wokeness” is intensifying across Europe creating new extremist narratives that promote anti-feminism, misogyny and homo/transphobia. Struggles over notions of gender, gender roles, gender fluidity and family values have become emblematic of a broader “culture war” and is generating polarizing discussions around “gender ideology” and the perceived “emasculatation of men” in liberal democracies.

5.2. Where do they circulate?

In addressing **where across the digital mainstream people may encounter extremism**, the report finds that extremist narratives are ubiquitous and can be identified across a wide range of online spaces. These range from well-known global social media platforms to more fringe and country-specific sites operating at the margins of the digital mainstream. Such online spaces include alternative news sites, websites and blogs; fringe video sharing platforms such as *Rumble*, *BitChute*, *Odysee*; the online messaging services *Telegram*, *Discord* and *Viber*; discussion forums like *Reddit*; mainstream social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *TikTok*, *X (formerly Twitter)* and *Instagram*. Some of the online platforms identified are specific to the national contexts. In the Swedish landscape of online media discussion forums *Flashback Forum* and *Familieliv* along with *SwebbTube* emerge as prominent conduits for extremist narratives and divisive discourse. Specific to the context of Bulgaria are *Spodeli*, *Kaldata*, *Dir* and *BG-Mamma*, all of which are online forums affording anonymous and relatively unmoderated discussions. These findings are indicative of how citizens increasingly encounter extremist messages and ideas in their ordinary lives online, not least mainstream social-media platforms and discussion forums that are not dedicated to or organised by any particular political group or agenda per se.

These findings are further corroborated by the empirical insights from an ongoing study of the discussion forum *Reddit* presented in chapter 4. Analyzing online discussion on *Reddit* provides us with the opportunity **to captures the potential, gradual development of extremist narratives, sentiments and attitudes in the general public**. Interactions across the three subreddits provide ample evidence of the increasing penetration of exclusionary and stigmatising discourse into the digital mainstream, which will be subject to further analysis in our forthcoming work.

Finally, a major discernible trend identified in the nature of extremist narratives emerging in Europe concern a shift in the *forms* these take i.e. the language, imagery and symbolism they draw on. Following global trends in online extremism, narratives circulating online, tend to tone down explicitly violent discourse to evade detection by algorithms and law enforcement. Instead, they draw on coded language, humour, irony, and innuendo to cloak extremism and

carry harmful ideas into the digital mainstream. This makes extremist ideas more palatable to a general audience and allows for a degree of plausible deniability, making it more challenging for platforms and authorities to identify and take action against such content. We found evidence of these discursive shifts is the Swedish context in particular, and the cross-regional patterns of these trends will be subject to further analysis in the next steps of the work package.

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