

RESEARCH NOTE

Critical Perspectives on Anti-Government Extremism

Christopher Kehlet Ebbrecht* and Layla van Wieringen

Volume XVIII, Issue 4
December 2024

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/2024.4989

Abstract: While the Global North is still facing the challenge of traditional forms of violent extremism (e.g. right-wing, left-wing, and militant Islamism), intelligence services and scholars alike have highlighted potential threats from novel extremist orientations that have (re) emerged over the past decade. One such variant is captured by the notion of anti-government extremism, which in its most simple form describes extremist attitudes or actions that oppose government and institutions of authority. In this research note, we offer critical perspectives on anti-government extremism as an analytical construct. Specifically, we raise questions concerning the extent to which the current definition of anti-government extremism always captures attitudes and/or actions that are indeed i) extremist, and ii) anti-governmental. We then discuss the implications and potential negative constitutive effects these unanswered conceptual issues may raise in relation to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and conclude with a call for further debate and research on the theoretical and analytical merits of anti-government extremism.

Keywords: Anti-government extremism, radicalisation, political violence, P/CVE

* Corresponding author: Christopher Kehlet Ebbrecht, University of Copenhagen, email: christopher@ebbrecht.dk

Introduction

Over the past years, scholars in the field of preventing and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) have been paying increasing attention to individuals and groups that oppose, distrust, and/or actively revolt against government or state institutions, seemingly motivated by narratives not captured by traditional extremist ideologies, such as right-wing, left-wing, or militant Islamist extremism.¹ In the wake of anti-Covid demonstrations, an apparent global rise in conspiracy thinking, and a growing popularity of fringe groups such as QAnon and sovereign citizen movements like the “Reichsbürger”, this seemingly novel phenomenon has been picked up by professionals and academics alike. In current reports, it goes by many different names, including anti-establishment extremism, anti-elitist extremism, anti-authority extremism, anti-institutional extremism, and anti-democratic extremism.² In this research note, we subsume these different labels under the recently coined umbrella term of anti-government extremism, which appears to be the most common denominator of this phenomenon and, in its most simple form, describes extremist attitudes and/or actions that oppose government and institutions of authority.³

Lately, scholars have emphasised a need for more research into the conceptual and analytical nature and value of anti-government extremism. This need is perhaps most strongly articulated in a special issue of this journal published in 2022, which specifically aimed “to open a scholarly discussion on (...) and give us a better grasp on this slippery AGE [anti-government extremism, ed.] concept and phenomenon.”⁴ Articles in this special issue and a sequel issue⁵ have already contributed to several advancements in the field, including conceptual matters,⁶ analyses of anti-government movements,⁷ threat assessment of anti-government extremism,⁸ and perspectives on anti-government related P/CVE.⁹ However, as noted by Bjørgo and Braddock, one pivotal question remains unanswered: “Is anti-government extremism a useful descriptive or analytical concept at all?”¹⁰

In this research note, we address this gap in the literature by offering a critical perspective on the descriptive and analytical value of anti-government extremism as a concept. Based on current perspectives, we specifically argue that it is questionable to what extent attitudes and actions labelled as anti-government extremism are indeed always i) extremist and/or ii) anti-governmental. After addressing these conceptual inconsistencies in turn, we conclude this research note with a brief discussion of their unanswered status for future research and professional P/CVE related work focusing on anti-government sentiments.

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Anti-Government Extremism

It seems natural that a research note offering critical views on anti-government extremism should start by outlining historical and current perspectives on the phenomenon and concept. In their editorial introduction in the aforementioned special issue, Bjørgo and Braddock describe how anti-government extremism appears to take different expressions in terms of its organisation, relation to conspiracy theory beliefs, collective action modus operandi, and targets of violence. Specifically, they highlight four forms of anti-government extremism: i) movements, networks, and individuals that reject the legitimacy of government on a principle basis, including refusal to adhere to or obey state authorities and regulations; ii) communication of conspiracy theory beliefs that undermine the legitimacy of either government, state institutions, specific policies, or political figures; iii) demonstrations and opposition to specific policy issues; and iv) political violence, threat, harassment, and/or plots targeted against politicians, or government officials.¹¹ The common characteristic of these different expressions is that they all revolve around some

form of opposition to an established government, and thus bare close resemblance to the most basic form of anti-government extremism as defined in the introduction to this research note. In this regard, Sam Jackson emphasises that while this basic definition lacks important nuances (as we will outline below), it is indeed the focus on government as a primary or consistent “source or course of perceived crisis”¹² that sets anti-government extremism apart from other extremist orientations or terrorism in general. Borrowing the terminology of Webber and Kruglanski and their notion of “terrorism legitimizing narratives”, one could say that governments – or state authorities more generally – thus represent the culprit of a perceived grievance which might lead to a moral justification for political violence.¹³

Although being described as a unique form or variant of extremism, the concept of anti-government extremism has historically been linked to other extremist ideologies. Later in this research note, we will dive deeper into the paradoxes surrounding these ties. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that anti-government extremism is “nothing new”, but, in fact, has a long history. For instance, Bjørgo and Braddock describe how anti-government extremism is deeply connected to three historical “waves of far-left extremism”.¹⁴ Following the historical analysis of the evolution of left-wing extremism by Davies and Zdjelar, they argue that anti-government extremism can be traced back to the anarchist revolutions in Russia and Western Europe from the 1880s to 1920 (the “first wave”), throughout the anti-colonialist opposition from the 1920s to 1960s (“second wave”), and culminating with the rise of the New Left from approximately 1960 to the 1990s (“third wave”).¹⁵ While ideological movements in all these periods shared anti-government sentiments, Bjørgo and Braddock emphasise that there were also important differences between them. For instance, while the anarchist first wave, in general, rejected *all* forms of government or state authority, the anti-colonialist movements opposed *specific* governments. Moreover, New Left movements comprised both anarchist groups (e.g. the German Red Army Fraction or Italian Red Brigades), and Marxist-Leninist groups (e.g. the Japanese Red Army), which opposed Western imperialism.

With the substantial decline in left-wing extremism over the past decades, it seems, however, that anti-government extremism “has increasingly taken a turn towards the far right.”¹⁶ For instance, in a recent conceptual paper, Jackson explicitly subsumes anti-government extremism under certain forms of right-wing extremism “that seeks to restore some imagined golden past,” while acknowledging that such a perspective also may be influenced by his specific US research context.¹⁷ This proposed link between anti-government extremism and right-wing extremism is, however, not isolated to the US, but also marks a general trend noted by both scholars and intelligence services in a European context.¹⁸

Additionally, Jackson also offers several noteworthy perspectives on how to expand and nuance the most basic definition of anti-government extremism. First, he presents a key conceptual distinction between *ideological* anti-government extremism, which opposes government on a general level, and *issue-driven* anti-government extremism, which opposes government on a finite number of policy areas. While he notes that it can be difficult to distinguish the ideological and issue-driven variants from one another and that the boundaries between them are indeed blurred, he argues that the distinction may provide a valuable explanation for cultural variations in the prevalence of anti-government extremism (e.g. differences between the US and Europe).

Second, Jackson emphasises that although anti-government extremists generally oppose the government, they may react to government change in different ways. For instance, while some will retain their anti-government stance and view a new government “as a change without a difference”,¹⁹ others might abandon their (previous) anti-government sentiments and identify with new leadership. While this latter possibility may seem counterintuitive to the

notion of anti-government extremism (as we will discuss in more detail later), he argues that fading government opposition may reflect a position of purely issue-driven anti-government extremism that will disappear with changing policies.

Finally, it is mentioned that there may be cultural differences in both the scope and nature of anti-government extremism. Jackson is, for instance, very transparent about his US-based approach to the subject and notes that anti-government extremism, particularly in its ideological form, may be most present there due to the nation's strong libertarian sociopolitical history. As other researchers show, anti-government extremist movements — although it is difficult to entangle the extent to which these are ideological or issue-driven — also appear to exist in both Australia and several European countries.²⁰

Altogether, the historical and contemporary perspectives outlined above represent important contributions and advancements in understanding the notion of anti-government extremism. At the same time, it is our contention that these current perspectives raise further questions to be answered, particularly regarding the descriptive and analytical value of anti-government extremism as a concept. For instance, if anti-government extremism can be considered a variant of, or subsumed under, either left-wing or right-wing extremism, to what extent is it indeed an “extremist” orientation in its own right? Likewise, if certain anti-government extremist movements can get behind (particular) governments and/or institutions of authority, to what extent are they indeed “anti-governmental”? For the remainder of this research note, we explore these questions in greater detail and discuss their potential implications for the conceptual and analytical value in relation to anti-government extremist research and P/CVE.

While we do not claim to have all the answers to these questions, we believe that an important first step in acquiring them is to voice concerns that can guide future research and P/CVE practice. In this regard, and in commending the important and detailed conceptual work of others, we should also emphasise our specific European research context. Just as Jackson argues that his US-focused approach does not necessarily translate to other cultural contexts, so may it be that the perspectives we offer here will find more merit in some regions or countries in the world than others. Moreover, we should also mention that the following critical perspectives should not be considered a direct critique of any specific academic work on anti-government extremism. Rather, we view our own comments as contributions to the cumulative body of work aimed at better understanding the violent radicalisation towards (anti-government?) extremism.

To What Extent is Anti-Government Extremism Indeed “Extremist”?

To discuss the “extremist” nature of anti-government extremism, it is necessary to first offer some definitions on the concept of extremism itself. While commonly acknowledged as highly contested, there seems to have emerged a consensual view that extremism denotes the final stage or position that follows a process of cognitive (attitudes) and/or behavioural (actions) radicalisation.²¹ Extremism is usually categorised into different violent extremist ideologies or “orientations” — e.g. right-wing, left-wing, religious, nationalist/separatist, and single-issue extremism²² What sets these extremist orientations apart is that they differ in terms of who they regard as the main culprit of their particular grievance(s), and the main objectives they strive towards.²³ For example, as described by Doosje et al., the main concern of many right-wing extremist groups is safeguarding the perceived high-status position of the “white race”,

where immigrants are considered a key threat. For left-wing extremists, the main concern is often a more equitable distribution of wealth, goods, and resources, where the constitutive unjust effects of capitalism are seen as the core enemy.

While acknowledging the existence of these specific variants of extremism, there are some who have started to pay greater attention to the *generic* aspects of violent extremism—i.e. the psychological underpinnings that *all* specific extremist orientations share.²⁴ From a generic perspective:

“(...) extremism in itself can be defined as an intense desire for and/or pursuit of universal and comprehensive change in one’s own and the common life socially, culturally and/or societally, where the concern for human coexistence is set aside (Bertelsen, 2016; 2018). Such a definition accentuates extremism as both a) an attitude towards constructing or reconstructing one’s life or sociocultural context in a significantly different way than they currently are constituted (Schmid, 2013) and b) intolerance and setting aside concerns about human coexistence (Bertelsen, 2016).”²⁵

In addition, various scholars have come to acknowledge that *the legitimisation of violent action* in pursuit of this “universal and comprehensive change” is another core characteristic which allows us to distinguish extremism from related concepts of political protest like “radicalism” and “activism”.²⁶ While radicals and activists alike might support similar social, political, or ideological changes, radicals often only support or engage in illegal action without endorsing or carrying out violence that targets civilians, whereas activists typically operate within the bounds of peaceful and/or lawful methods. Extremists, on the other hand, justify the use of violence as a necessary and acceptable means to achieve their goals, viewing such actions as integral to the process of enacting profound transformation.

These defining features of violent extremism give rise to at least two questions regarding the extremist nature of movements, attitudes, and actions associated with anti-government extremism. First, to what extent can anti-government extremism indeed be considered extremist in a generic and/or specific sense? Second, to what extent does anti-government extremism involve a cognitive and/or behavioural legitimisation of violence? Starting with the latter question, it seems that the justification of terrorist violence inherent to generic extremism cannot always be found in anti-government sentiments and movements labelled as such. For instance, while there were numerous anti-government protests during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, most of these events were indeed democratic in nature with relatively few protesters engaging in violent or illegal activities.²⁷ Similarly, despite alarmist discourses in the public debate, the amount of actual terrorist attacks planned or committed by anti-government extremists appears to be sparse and, in prevalence, hardly comparable to those by right-wing extremist groups or jihadist movements more generally. The 2021 attack against the US Capitol is arguably the most well-known violent manifestation of anti-government extremism to date, although, here too, questions remain about the extent to which the event truly constituted a terrorist attack, or rather an “insurrection”, “siege”, or “rally”. All in all, this general lack of (justification for) terrorist violence begs the question as to whether the observed *general* rise in anti-government sentiments usually has more to do with “radicalism” — i.e. government or state opposition that may appear controversial, counter-mainstream, and in some cases even illegal, but does not (generally) endorse or use violence against civilian populations — rather than extremism in itself. In the end, it suggests that only a handful of people in the so-called anti-government movement may actually be eligible for being labelled as extremists.²⁸

At the same time, for those arguably rare instances where the legitimisation of violence is indeed a part of anti-government sentiments or ideologies, it still remains difficult to see the merits of anti-government extremism as a *specific* extremist orientation. This relates back to our previous comments on the ways that specific strands of extremism differ in what they consider to be the main culprit of their particular grievance(s) and the main objectives they strive towards.²⁹ As Jackson argues, anti-government extremism — in contrast to other varieties of extremism — does not target the government as a proxy, but as *the* intended target of their ideology. In other words, to anti-government extremists, “the government is not a victim that stands in for a broader target that the actor hopes will be terrorized by their act.”³⁰ With this quotation, Jackson appears to refer to the difference between *performative* versus *instrumental* forms of (ideological) violence. Performative violence is symbolic in nature, in the sense that the violent act serves as “moral messaging,”³¹ whereas instrumental violence is aimed at serving a strategic purpose. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, terrorist acts are inherently performative (at least to some extent), as their ultimate goal is to spread fear in society and send a message of ideological superiority to their perceived “audience.”³² As such, performativity (or symbolic messaging) is the core characteristic that sets terrorist acts apart from insurgency violence, war crimes, and homicides. Since Jackson maintains that this secondary objective is missing in anti-government extremists’ ideologies, where the government appears to be targeted for instrumental reasons instead, one may question whether this truly constitutes ideological “extremism” in the traditional sense.³³

The merits of labelling anti-government extremism as a specific extremist orientation in its own right can seem even harder to justify given its relations to other extremist ideologies. Indeed, if anti-government extremism historically has been associated with far-left anarchism,³⁴ and now has taken a turn to the far-right,³⁵ it seems that—at least theoretically—it *can* run the full spectrum of (political) extremist ideologies. It is therefore questionable what, if anything, sets it apart from both left-wing and right-wing extremism – or even nationalist or separatist extremism, when looking at specific anti-governmental manifestations such as the anti-colonialist movements in Europe during the 20th century,³⁶ or contemporary American Sovereign Citizen Movements and the German Reichsbürger movement.³⁷ In other words, in those cases where anti-government movements or sentiments include a legitimisation of violence, it is quite easy to see how such attitudes and/or actions match generic aspects of extremism quite well—e.g. the intense desire or pursuit of comprehensive change where the concern for human coexistence is set aside—and yet difficult to see how they move beyond these generic features and take a specific form of their own.

Following this reasoning, the current comparison between anti-governmentalism and right-wing extremism has received ample scholarly attention. Traditionally, within the field of P/CVE, anti-governmental attitudes were considered to be a key *characteristic* of right-wing extremist movements, rather than a form of extremism in itself. Indeed, over the past decades, various scholars and actors have explicitly operationalised right-wing extremism in relation to anti-governmentalism.³⁸ For example, according to Johnson, between 1993 and 1999, the FBI provided various definitions of right-wing extremism, each of which encompassed the element of anti-governmentalism as a central feature.³⁹ Furthermore, in 2013, Gruenewald and colleagues defined individuals and groups adhering to the far-right as, among others, “suspicious of centralized federal authority, reverent of individual liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes),” and noted that they “believe in conspiracy theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty and a belief that one’s personal and/or national “way of life” is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent”, which very much mirrors the contemporary descriptions of respective anti-government extremist groups.⁴⁰

More recently, others—much like Jackson—have proposed that anti-government extremism is, in fact, a specific *variant* of right-wing extremism, which should be considered against a broader typology of various extremist manifestations.⁴¹ For example, according to Perliger, right-wing extremism consists of four distinct types of social movements—respectively white supremacists, pro-life activists, fundamentalists and anti-governmentalists.⁴² While such distinctions do not render the concept of anti-governmentalism useless per se, they do raise questions about its exact relation to right-wing extremism. To what extent does the emergence of “anti-government extremism” as a category on its own reflect a more general change in our understanding of right-wing extremism – moving away from *conservatism* as its main central feature, and embracing the objective of radical societal *change* instead? Although Jackson suggests that the relation between right-wing extremism and anti-governmentalism is ultimately context-specific (with stronger convergence in the US, but less of an overlap in Europe) – this answer is not satisfactory when our understanding of right-wing extremism in itself appears to be shifting, too.⁴³

Finally, it has been suggested that anti-governmental attitudes or institutional distrust are rather *risk factors* for ideological radicalisation more generally⁴⁴ which raises even more questions about the validity of “anti-government extremism” as a distinct concept. In taking a risk-factor approach, the causal relation between anti-government sentiments and (radicalisation towards) extremism becomes blurred even more, which is a caveat that has generally remained unaddressed by scholars. Are Covid-scepticism or conspiracy-thinking the *result* or the *cause* of government distrust?⁴⁵ While existing reflections on anti-government extremism seem to imply that the former precedes the latter – there is currently insufficient empirical evidence that can support this assumption.

To What Extent is Anti-Government Extremism Indeed “Anti-Government”?

In addition to the considerations outlined above, the notion of “anti-governmentalism” raises questions as well. Overall, understanding the current wave of general institutional distrust through the lens of “anti-governmentalism” suggests that groups and individuals that sympathise with this sentiment denounce all forms of government, as is common for those anti-governmentalists self-identifying as anarchists.⁴⁶ In reality, however, it is increasingly acknowledged that the wave of radicalised conspiracy thinkers the Global North is currently facing takes a (sometimes contradictory) stance towards prevailing (democratic) powers and institutions.⁴⁷ In the context of the United States, for example, various anti-government extremist groups have proven to be strong supporters of Donald Trump — including the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers and various QAnon strands.⁴⁸ Although scholars such as Jackson provide various scenarios for how anti-governmental extremist groups may evolve in the wake of a change in government leadership, the core critique – that anti-governmentalists do not appear to be *anti-government* per se (or, at the very least, are still able to find authority in existing political structures and/or institutions) — still holds up.

The US is not unique in this regard, as similar examples can be found in other countries as well. For example, in the Netherlands, the far-right party Forum for Democracy (FvD) has become a prevalent political actor spreading conspiracy theories, antisemitic rhetoric, climate change denialism, and pro-Russian discourse.⁴⁹ Over the years, its frontman Thierry Baudet has turned into an important voice of anti-government sentiments and vaccination scepticism. In 2022, Baudet even publicly declared his belief in a reptilian world order — although this was later downplayed as a “metaphor” — in reference to David Icke’s antisemitic conspiracy theory,

which has recently regained popularity among anti-governmentalists.⁵⁰ Although it is hard to say whether ‘true’ anti-governmentalists acknowledge Baudet and his FvD party as a legitimate political authority, both were frequently featured at anti-government protests in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

These observations are mirrored in other political contexts as well. Wolfgang Gedeon, a politician affiliated with the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), previously suggested that the Covid-19 virus was, in fact, created as an American bioweapon.⁵¹ Moreover, in the United Kingdom, pro-Brexit politician Nigel Farage has been accused of spreading conspiracy theories in relation to the European Union, portraying it as an undemocratic and corrupt institution that seeks to undermine national sovereignty, and about the philanthropist George Soros, suggesting that Soros and his Open Society Foundations have undue influence over global politics.⁵² Other internationally known politicians, such as Matteo Salvini (Italy), and heads of state, including Viktor Orbán (Hungary) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), have similarly been accused of spreading anti-globalist, anti-immigration and/or anti-vaccination conspiracies.

The examples above resonate with empirical studies suggesting that there is indeed a link between populism and the belief in (and spreading of) misinformation and conspiracy theories more generally.⁵³ To illustrate, the conspiracist idea that the Covid-pandemic was not just a man-made crisis but was systemically coordinated by a malicious government (the so-called “plandemic” theory) strongly resonates among populist political parties in general.⁵⁴ This is not surprising, considering populism itself appeals to a divide between “the elite” and “the people”, which mirrors the rhetoric of anti-governmentalists.⁵⁵ Moreover, as Frens, Van Buuren and Bakker show, both draw on the use of so-called “empty signifiers”,⁵⁶ referring to words or phrases “frequently used by groups that seek to gain a voice in the political sphere” but that are essentially devoid of any meaning.⁵⁷ Altogether, the observation that anti-governmentalism is, in fact, very much featured by (and possibly even amplified) by political authorities might justify moving beyond an anti-government focus at large. It could be valuable to explore other conceptualisations, such as “anti-authoritarian extremism” or “anti-institutional extremism”—a shift already observed in the discourse of the Dutch General Intelligence Agency and Danish Intelligence Service—to reflect how such attitudes can manifest themselves in a conventional governmental setting as well.⁵⁸ Additionally, these broader concepts acknowledge that sentiments of hostility or distrust are not focused on the government per se, but also extend to academic institutions, medical professionals (including so-called “Big Pharma”) and the media at large.⁵⁹

Lastly, drawing on the differentiation between ideological and issue-driven anti-government extremism as introduced by Jackson, one may wonder to what extent these specific forms can indeed be considered “anti-government”.⁶⁰ This is particularly the case for the strand of “issue-driven anti-government extremism”, which, as Jackson writes, “opposes a government because of that government’s stance (or course of action) on an issue.”⁶¹ Jackson mentions issues such as immigration, economic policies, and abortion rights as examples of topics that issue-driven anti-government extremists may focus on. However, it remains unclear to what extent such a movement is then *anti-government* per se, since it is not the government itself, but dissatisfaction with governmental policies and/or decisions that lie at the heart of this ideological strand. It thus raises the pressing question of where “regular” opposition towards a specific governmental administration (such as the Biden administration in the US context) ends, and anti-governmentalism begins.

From this point of view, it is similarly unclear if (and how) Jackson’s concept of issue-driven anti-government extremism relates to what is generally considered “single-issue extremism” in other

strands of the radicalisation literature. This concept commonly refers to those ideologies where one particular (usually political) topic inspires extremist attitudes and/or actions. G. Davidson Smith, who was among the first to provide a definition, described it as “extremist militancy on the part of groups or individuals protesting a perceived grievance or wrong usually attributed to government action or inaction”⁶² – which obviously bears strong similarities to the definition of issue-driven anti-government extremism that Jackson provides. Although the heterogeneous nature of single-issue extremism caused it to receive only limited scholarly attention over the decades,⁶³ the term itself is well-accepted and still commonly used in empirical studies on extremism today.⁶⁴ This could bring into question both the empirical validity and academic necessity of new concepts like “issue-driven anti-government extremism” – and makes us wonder if this phenomenon is not better captured with existing and commonly well-accepted frameworks such as single-issue extremism.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this research note, we have explored the conceptual value of “anti-government extremism”. Although over the past years, much has been written about this phenomenon already, its exact contribution to the field of radicalisation and P/CVE remains unclear, and many questions surrounding its relation to other concepts persist.⁶⁵ By breaking the concept down into its main components (those being “extremism” and “anti-governmentalism”) we illustrated how the notion of anti-government extremism suffers from at least two unresolved issues. First, we argued that although anti-government extremism indeed *can* be considered extremism in a generic sense, there are good reasons for not considering anti-government extremism as a specific extremist orientation itself. The reason for this is that although ideological anti-government extremism more or less is equivalent to violent extremism in a generic sense through the desire for comprehensive sociocultural/political change, anti-government “ideologies” or issues can, in many cases, be subsumed under other extremist orientations, such as right-wing, left-wing, nationalist or separatist extremism. Additionally, despite various scholarly attempts at bridging the two, the relation between right-wing extremism and anti-government extremism remains unclear, where the latter can be understood as either a *key characteristic*, a *variation* or a *risk factor* of the latter. Moreover, movements, ideologies, and/or issues or sentiments labelled as anti-government extremist do not necessarily contain a legitimisation of violence, which would be a defining feature of extremism.

Second, the degree to which anti-government extremism is indeed *anti-government* remains questionable. Based on previous studies, we discussed how various respective anti-government groups take a contradictory stance towards prevailing democratic institutions: rather than denouncing the entire legitimacy of government altogether, some seem to be able to find authority in conservative political figures such as Donald Trump. Moreover, the spread of “evil elite” conspiracy theories and misinformation has become generally well-embedded within the rhetoric of populist parties across the globe – especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic⁶⁶ – further putting the generic “anti-government” nature of these sentiments into question. Last, we pointed at the resemblance that so-called issue-driven anti-government extremism bears to the concept of single-issue extremism – and question whether the latter suffices in understanding the former.

Altogether, the considerations discussed in this research note might provide more questions than answers regarding the conceptual and analytical value of anti-government extremism in the field of radicalisation research and P/CVE. As suggested, it might be beneficial to abandon the notion of anti-government extremism altogether to avoid conceptual inflation within the radicalisation literature, and thereafter only speak of anti-government sentiments in relation to other forms of extremism—e.g. right-wing, as authors like Jackson propose. Alternatively,

one could simply view opposition to the government as a specific element within a broader extremist ideology—which then also would depend on the particular government in power. Another viable solution would be to move away from the “extremism” frame altogether, and opt for a different umbrella term instead. One such term could be “radicalism”, a concept that in an ever-polarising world has fallen somewhat out of fashion, but which might be a better fit to interpret the anti-governmental sentiments currently observed.

In addition to discussions on which conceptual approaches are best suited for understanding movements and sentiments currently labelled as anti-government extremist, it is our contention that future studies on the topic also should contemplate what trends and tendencies the conceptual rise of “anti-government extremism” might reflect. Critical terrorism scholars might be of the opinion that labelling attitudes and actions as anti-government extremist does not do much else besides securitising government distrust and dissatisfaction. In our opinion, it should be pivotal to address this question in conjunction with examining the empirical validity of this term. Taking a securitisation approach requires, on the one hand, a critical look at the role security actors and institutions have played in the (re)emergence of this concept, and how it relates to their security agendas. For example, the fact that in recent years, the Dutch intelligence services shifted their focus from “anti-government activism” to “anti-institutional extremism” following criticism of their perceived criminalisation of (lawful) protests and demonstrations,⁶⁷ is an interesting observation that could help us better understand authorities’ approach to this concept and the role that processes of securitisation may play. On the other hand, answering this question requires a self-critical attitude on behalf of government authorities – as well as a willingness to understand the legitimate sentiments that may lie at the root of individuals’ distrust and dissatisfaction. This relates back to a point previously raised in this research note regarding the possibility of approaching anti-government attitudes as a risk factor for extremist radicalisation, rather than a form of extremism in itself. Such an approach might do more justice to the experiences and perceptions of those involved. Moreover, in the long run, it might prove a more effective strategy, too, as governments “labelling” distrusting individuals and groups as “extremist” can create a self-fulfilling prophecy as it indirectly confirms and thus amplifies those sentiments.⁶⁸

Another road to explore is the extent to which the concept of anti-government extremism has reemerged due to a possibly increased hybridisation of radicalisation processes; i.e. a tendency for the demarcation lines between traditional distinct extremist orientations to become increasingly blurred.⁶⁹ While the exact scope of such hybridisation (or what others refer to as salad-bar extremism, a mixed ideology, ideological convergence, or other terms)⁷⁰ is still unknown, scholars and intelligence services have placed particular emphasis on cases of lone-actor grievance-fuelled violence which seem to be motivated by extremist ideologies that are mixed together to form novel violent narratives. A recent example of this is the case of the Allen, Texas, shooting in 2022 where the perpetrator, Mauricio Garcia, appeared to be motivated by a “fuzzy” and “bizarre” mix of far-right extremism and misogynous incel ideology.⁷¹ Moreover, intelligence services highlight how there seems to be a high level of ideological convergence between particularly right-wing ideology, conspiracy theory beliefs, and anti-government sentiments.⁷² In this regard, we argue that it is worthwhile to pursue whether the conceptual resurgence of anti-government extremism might reflect an attempt to obtain an analytical grasp of an observed tendency for extremist ideologies to break their (at least presumed) traditional boundaries. On the one hand, we can see why an ideological category that appears to put greater emphasis on the generic rather than specific aspects of violent extremism can seem like an intuitive way of understanding such hybrid extremism. However, since anti-government extremism, as we have illustrated, often is treated as an extremist orientation in its own right, we remain sceptical as to whether this is the best way forward.

While we acknowledge that a global trend in governmental distrust and dissatisfaction can be observed, and even though the hybridisation of extremist ideologies and groups is a worrying phenomenon in itself,⁷³ in this note, we raised various concerns about “anti-government extremism” as a “new” conceptual and analytical tool. In our opinion, the field of P/CVE would benefit from further examination before adopting this concept as a given – particularly because of its murky relations to pre-existing phenomena such as right-wing extremism and single-issue extremism. In future studies, the empirical validity of anti-government extremism will, therefore, need to be examined more rigorously. Because in the end, while Jackson argues that a lack of universal agreement on the demarcations of anti-government extremism does not hamper the value of the concept per se, we maintain that the importance of definitional clarity is not to be underestimated. In a field where contested terminology can have significant real-life implications (in legislation, policymaking or elsewhere), conceptual consensus should indeed, at the very least, be strived for.

Christopher Kehlet Ebbrecht, PhD, is a postdoc at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, and a previous visiting scholar at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University.

Layla van Wieringen is a PhD candidate and researcher at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University.

Endnotes

- 1 Bertjan Doosje, Fathali M. Moghaddam, Arie W. Kruglanski, Arjan de Wolf, Lisbeth Mann, and Allard R. Feddes, "Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (2016): 79-84. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.06.008>.
- 2 Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA), "Assessment of the Terrorist Threat to Denmark." *Danish Security and Intelligence Services* (2024). <https://pet.dk/en/-/media/mediefiler/pet/dokumenter/analyser-og-vurderinger/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark/vurdering-af-terrortruslen-mod-danmark-2024-eng.pdf>. Europol, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2023." *European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.2813/302117>. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), "Conclusion paper: How to prevent and mitigate anti-government extremism at the local level?" (2022). https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/baedd672-7e59-44fb-9819-a9d6664654db_en?filename=ran_local_how_prevent_mitigate_anti-government_extremism_at_local_level_06-10032023_en.pdf.
- 3 Tore Bjørge and Kurt Braddock, "Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 2-8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185087>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Tore Bjørge, "Introduction to the Special Section on Anti-Government Extremism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 67-72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209218>.
- 6 Sam Jackson, "What is Anti-Government Extremism?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 9-18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185088>.
- 7 Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler, "Uncharted Territory: Towards an Evidence-Based Criminology of Sovereign Citizens Through a Systematic Literature Review." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 34-48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185090>; Agata Kalabunowska, "Politically Motivated Extreme-Right Attacks Against Elected Representatives in Contemporary Germany." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 87-99. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185093>; Lydia Khalil and Joshua Roose, "Anti-Government Extremism in Australia: Understanding the Australian Anti-Lockdown Freedom Movement as a Complex Anti-Government Social Movement." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 144-169. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209223>; Jan Rathje, "Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification Among "Reichsbürger" and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 49-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185091>; Ari Weil, "Strategies of Narrative Coherence: How Militias Justify Embracing State Power." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 19-33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185089>.
- 8 Julia Ebner, Christopher Kavanagh, and Harvey Whitehouse, "The QAnon Security Threat: A Linguistic Fusion-Based Violence Risk Assessment." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 62-86. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185092>.
- 9 Kaitlyn Robinson, Iris Malone, and Martha Crenshaw, "Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 73-87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27209219>.
- 10 Bjørge and Braddock, 2022, p. 7.
- 11 Ibid., p. 2-6.
- 12 Jackson, 2022, p. 10.
- 13 David Webber and Arie W. Kruglanski, "Psychological factors in radicalization: A "3N" approach." in Garye LaFree and Joshua Freilich (eds.), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), pp. 33-46.
- 14 Bjørge and Braddock, 2022.
- 15 Ibid; Also see Garth Davies and Vanja Zdjelar, "The Evolution of Left-Wing Extremism in the West." in José Pedro Zúquete (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Left-Wing Extremism, Volume 1* (2023): 23-54.
- 16 Bjørge and Braddock, 2022, p. 3.
- 17 Ibid., p. 14.
- 18 See reports from Europol, 2023; CTA, 2024; RAN, 2022.
- 19 Jackson 2022, p. 13.
- 20 Fiebig & Koehler 2022; Kalabunowska 2022; Khalil & Roose 2023; Rathje 2022; Weil 2022.

- 21 Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept." *Race & Class* 54, no. 12 (2012): 3-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396812454984>; Stefan Malthaner, "Radicalization: The Evolution of an Analytical Paradigm." *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie* 58, no. 3 (2017): 369-401. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975617000182>; Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2020): 479-494. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009>.
- 22 Doosje et al., 2016; For a thorough overview, also see Andrew Silke (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (2019). Routledge.
- 23 Webber and Kruglanski, 2017.
- 24 Preben Bertelsen, "Violent Radicalization and Extremism: A review of risk factors and a theoretical model of radicalization" in Jens H. Lund (ed.), *Tværprofessionelt samarbejde om udsathed blandt børn og unge – en studieborg* (2016): 129-178; Preben Bertelsen, "Mentoring in Anti-Radicalisation. LGT: A Systematic Intervention, Assessment, and Supervision Tool in Mentoring." in Gwynyth Overland, Arnfinn J. Andersen, Kristin Engh Førde, Kjertil Grørdum and Joseph Salomonsen (eds.), *Violent Extremism in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* (2018): 312-352.
- 25 Simon Ozer and Preben Bertelsen, "Capturing Violent Radicalization: Developing and validating scales measuring central aspects of radicalization." *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 59, no. 6 (2018): 653-660. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12484> (p. 654).
- 26 See e.g. Sophia Moskalenko and Clarke McCauley, "Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction Between Activism and Radicalism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550902765508>; Astrid Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (2017): 73-77; Ayhan Kaya, *Extremism and Radicalization: What Makes the Difference* (2020). Istanbul Bilgi University: ERC AdG Prime Youth Project; Layla Van Wieringen, Daan Weggemans, Katharina Krüsselmann, and Marieke Liem, *Van Ouder op Kind* (2021). The Hague: Leiden University; Wahlström, Mattias, Anton Törnberg, and Hans Ekbrand, "Dynamics of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric in far-right social media." *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (2021): p. 3290-3311.
- 27 See reports from Europol, 2023; CTA, 2024; RAN, 2022.
- 28; See Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; and Bötticher, 2017.
- 29 Webber and Kruglanski, 2017.
- 30 Jackson, 2022, p. 10.
- 31 Nicholas Johnston and Srinjoy Bose, "Violence, power and meaning: the moral logic of terrorism." *Global Policy*, 11, no. 3 (2020): 315-325.
- 32 Muhammad Feyyaz, "Terrorism can and should be defined. But how?" *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 4 (2019): 310-327; Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious terrorism as performance violence." in Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael K. Jerryson (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (2013): 280-292.
- 33 Following Bötticher, 2017.
- 34 Bjørgo and Braddock, 2022; Mauro Lubrano, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Insurrectionary Anarchism in the Anti-Government Extremism Landscape." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 18, no. 1 (2024): 37-61.
- 35 Bjørgo and Braddock, 2022; Jackson, 2022.
- 36 Davies and Zdjelar, 2023.
- 37 Bjørgo and Braddock, 2022.
- 38 E.g. Pete Simi, Bryan F. Bubolz, and Ann Hardman, "Military experience, identity discrepancies, and far right terrorism: An exploratory analysis." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 654-671; Daryl Johnson, *Right Wing Resurgence: How a domestic terrorist threat is being ignored* (2012); Richard Parent and James O. Ellis. *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada* (2014). TSAS, Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society; Sara Doering, Garth Davies, and Raymond Corrado, "Reconceptualizing ideology and extremism: toward an empirically-based typology." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 6 (2023): 1009-1033; Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *White Supremacist Extremism and the Far Right in the US* (2021). Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Primary Sources/Cengage.
- 39 Johnson, 2012, p. 49.
- 40 Jeff Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Josuha D. Freilich, "Far-right lone wolf homicides in the United States." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 12 (2013): p. 1012.

- 41 Stephen E. Atkins, *Encyclopedia of Right-Wing Extremism in Modern American History* (2011). Bloomsbury Publishing USA; Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Anti-Government Group* (2020). Columbia University Press. Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism* (2019). Columbia University Press.
- 42 Perliger, 2019.
- 43 Jackson, 2022.
- 44 Matthew Costello, James Hawdon, Thomas Ratliff, and Tyler Grantham, "Who views online extremism? Individual attributes leading to exposure." *Computers in Human Behavior* 63 (2016): 311-320; Michael Wolfowicz, Yael Litmanovitz, David Weisburd, and Badi Hasisi, "Cognitive and behavioral radicalization: A systematic review of the putative risk and protective factors." *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 17, no. 3 (2021): 1-90. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1174>.
- 45 Christopher Kehlet Ebbrecjt, "Konspirationsteorier og voldelig radikaliserings", *Økonomi & Politik* 97, no. 2 (2024):
- 46 See Lubrano, 2024.
- 47 Jackson, 2022; Munira Mustafa, *When Opposition is Extremism: The Dangers of Oversecuritisation and Online Vigilantism* (2023). The Hague: International Center for Counterterrorism.
- 48 Jackson, 2022.
- 49 Jazmine D. Contreras, "Holocaust Analogies, Conspiracy Theories, and Far-Right Victimhood: Forum for Democracy and the Future of Holocaust Memory in the Netherlands." *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, no. 2 (2024): 107-119.
- 50 Agnieszka M. Dixon, "The Role of Early Trauma in the Formation of Belief in Reptilian Conspiracy Theories: A Psychoanalytic Perspective." *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 39, no. 4 (2023): 663-681.
- 51 Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Robert A. Huber, and Esther Gruessing, "From populism to the "plandemic": Why populists believe in COVID-19 conspiracies." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31 (2021). 272-284; Till Eckert, "Biowaffe aus den USA? Wolfgang Gedeon verbreitet irreführende Theorie zu Coronavirus in Landtag" *Correctiv* (2020).
- 52 Osman Sahin, and Bogdan Ianosev, "UK: Between managed moderation and far-right conspiracy theories." In Guilliano Bobba and Nicolas Hube (eds.). *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* (2021): 17-30; Walker, Peter, "Farage criticised for using antisemitic themes to criticise Soros." *The Guardian* (2019).
- 53 Isabelle Frens, Jelle van Buuren, and Edwin Bakker, "Rallying Around Empty Signifiers." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 2 (2023): 60-73; Eberl, Huber and Gruessing, 2021; Robert A. Huber, Esther Gruessing, and Jakob-Moritz Eberl, "From populism to climate scepticism: the role of institutional trust and attitudes towards science." *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 7 (2022): 1115-1138.
- 54 Fabienne Baidier, "The Dynamic Model of Meaning Approach: Analyzing the Interculturality of Conspiracy Theory in Far-Right Populist Discourses." In Istvan Kecskes (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Pragmatics* (2022): 711-738). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Eberl, Huber and Gruessing, 2021; John H. Evans and Eszter Hargitta, "Who doesn't trust Fauci? The public's belief in the expertise and shared values of scientists in the COVID-19 pandemic." *Socius* 6 (2020).
- 55 Baidier, 2022.
- 56 Following Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (2005). New York: Verso.
- 57 Frens et al., 2023, p. 62.
- 58 CTA, 2024.
- 59 Frens et al., 2023.
- 60 Jackson, 2022.
- 61 Ibid., p. 10.
- 62 Gary Ackerman and Anastasia Kouloganes, "Single-issue terrorism." In Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas, and Stathis N. Kalyvas (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (2019): 316-330. Oxford University Press.
- 63 Ibid.

64 E.g. Tamara Marie LaMontagne, *Psychosocial Differences in Far Right, Far Left, Islamic, and Single Issue Lone Extremists* (Doctoral dissertation) (2019). Walden University; Sarah Pritchett and Kim Moeller, "Can social bonds and social learning theories help explain radical violent extremism?" *Nordic Journal of Criminology* 23, no. 1 (2022): 83-101.

65 Bjørgo and Braddock, 2022.

66 Eberl, Huber and Gruessing, 2021; Eckert, 2020.

67 See Bart Collard, "AIVD is niet transparant genoeg in zijn jaarverslag" *EW Magazine* (2021)

68 Drawing on Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (1963). Simon and Schuster.

69 See CTA, 2024;

70 See e.g. Tess Hemmilla and Arie Perliger, "Hybridization or Salad Bar Ideology? Testing Ideological Convergence Within the American Violent Far Right". *Crime & Delinquency* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1-30

71 Ashley A. Mattheis, Amarnath Amarasingam, Graham Macklin, and Marc-André Argentino, "The Allen, Texas, Attack: Ideological Fuzziness and the Contemporary Nature of Far-Right Violence", *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 6 (2023): 16-22

72 E.g. CTA, 2024

73 See Sophia Moskalenko, "The Evolution of Hybrid Radicalization: From Small Group to Mass Phenomenon." in Nicolas Stockhammer (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Terrorism* (2023): 132-142. Routledge.