



Mapping local threat perceptions and policy responses regarding right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarization, and anti-establishment sentiments

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Background

On the occasion of the ‘Transatlantic Mayoral Dialogue on Preventing Hate, Extremism, and Polarization, and Safeguarding Local Democracy’ taking place at the Peace Palace in The Hague on 15 and 16 November 2022, and as part of a project commissioned by the Embassy of the USA in the Netherlands, a quick scan on threat perceptions and local policy responses to right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarization and anti-establishment sentiment was conducted among local policy makers. The quick scan was shared with local policy makers of Dutch cities participating in the conference,¹ while a shortened version was also distributed among participants from cities abroad.² There was an 87% response rate among the participating Dutch cities. Of the foreign cities, the response rate was too low to include a full-fledged analysis.³ The focus in this analysis, therefore, is on Dutch perspectives. However, where relevant, some reflections on European policies and multi-stakeholder engagement are included.

* With the cooperation of Fulco van Deventer and Jeanne Abdulla of Human Security Collective.

¹ The Dutch cities participating are Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Delft, Gouda, and Bodegraven-Reeuwijk. In one case, more than one official filled out the quick scan

² This included 6 cities from Canada, 55 European cities (EU +UK) and 31 US cities.

³ Only four European cities returned the quick scan. No quick scans were returned by Canadian or US participants.

Key findings

Threat perceptions (Dutch respondents):

- Vertical, rather than horizontal (meaning rather between the political elite and population, than between groups in the population), polarization in society is perceived to be a rising problem.
- Respondents point to the links between mis/disinformation and anti-establishment sentiments and conspiracy theories.
- Anti-establishment sentiments are, in particular, perceived to be a medium to high threat, and scores the highest of the five threats assessed. Its increase over the last year is significant, and strongly related to Covid-19 restrictions.
- In relation to anti-establishment sentiments, respondents furthermore mentioned the fear of these forms of radicalization leading to violence.

Policies (Dutch and European respondents):

- One third of the Dutch respondents report to having no specific policy in place to deal with right-wing extremism. In contrast, all European respondents mention having a policy in place to deal with right-wing extremism.
- Regarding hate speech, two thirds of Dutch respondents mentioned that there was no specific policy in place, whereas of the European respondents, 75% mentioned that there was a specific policy in place.

Multi-stakeholder engagements (Dutch and European respondents):

- All Dutch cities use a multi-stakeholder approach in addressing right-wing extremism, polarization and anti-establishment sentiments.
- The private sector is the least involved in multi-stakeholder approaches.
- Although multiple stakeholders, including law enforcement actors, social workers and health care officers, are already in general involved in the development of prevention policies targeting right-wing extremism, polarization and anti-establishment sentiments, in several cities an even broader range of actors are involved in the implementation of policies, including, for instance, youth actors and local civil society organizations.
- Several respondents identified school and educational institutions as a missing link in their multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms.
- Among the challenges preventing multi-stakeholder engagement, the ones most identified included: a lack of mandate for cooperation, time constraints, the absence of a national framework for cooperation, a lack of training or knowledge, and a lack of political will amongst other partners to cooperate.

Quick scan results

In the quick scan, city representatives were asked to reflect on five potential threats: right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarization, and anti-establishment sentiments. They made an assessment of the threat level and whether any significant changes in the threat level were witnessed in the last year. Respondents furthermore provided information on the existence of one or more specific local policies dealing with these potential threats.

Finally, the city representatives were requested to zoom in on the various stakeholders with whom they cooperate for the *design* as well as the *implementation* of these policies.


Asked in general about the stakeholders with which Dutch municipalities cooperate regarding the *development of policies* dealing with right-wing extremism, polarization and anti-establishment sentiments, the responses included the police, the prosecutor’s office, the probation services, healthcare partners, social workers, city districts, libraries, social media partners and internet providers, the national government and academics.





When it concerns the *implementation of policies*, the group of stakeholders mentioned by Dutch municipalities is slightly broader. In addition to the stakeholders mentioned above, they also include, for instance, civil society actors and youth workers.

Dutch cities also expressed an intention to better include schools and educational institutions in the implementation of their policies.

Furthermore, respondents reflected on the effectiveness in their cooperation regarding right-wing extremism, polarization, and anti-establishment sentiments with different stakeholders, including national government, law enforcement actors, civil society organizations, the private sector, and the wider community.

Finally, when asked about the challenges or obstacles to effective cooperation, the challenges listed (no local framework, no national framework, lack of mandate, time constraints, funding, lack of training and knowledge, lack of political will in terms of other stakeholders) were mentioned at least once by the respondents. The Dutch respondents scored the lack of mandate and time constraints the highest. The European respondents scored the lack of funding the highest.

Issue	Threat/changes in last year	Policy	Multi-stakeholder engagement mechanism
Right-wing extremism	 Medium; light increase	Dutch: one third reported no specific policy Europeans: all have specific policy	Dutch: in place overall with national actors, law enforcement, CSOs, and wider community, and working moderately in practice; best cooperation with law enforcement; one third reports no mechanism in place with private sector, and if in place working poorly to moderately. European: Cooperation with CSOs works best; hardly any cooperation with private sector

Mis/disinformation	 Medium; light increase	Dutch: half mention there are no specific policies in place Europeans: half mention no specific policy	Not applicable
Hate speech	 Between low and medium; stayed the same	Dutch: two thirds mention no specific policy Europeans: 75% mention a specific policy in place	Not applicable
Polarization	 Medium; light increase	Dutch: Half mention more than one specific policy in place; one third mention no specific policy in place Europeans: Half mention more than one policy in place	Dutch: in place with national actors, CSOs and wider community, and working moderately in practice; best cooperation with CSOs; almost all mention a cooperation mechanism in place with law enforcement, and working moderately in practice; regarding private sector, almost all mention cooperation mechanism is in place, but is working poorly in practice. Europeans: of the respondents, one or two mentioned a lack of a cooperation mechanism with national actors, law enforcement, CSOs private sector and the wider community. On average the effectiveness of the cooperation is scored poorly.
Anti-establishment	 Medium to high; increased since last year	Dutch: One third of the respondents report no specific policy in place; One third reports one policy in place; the rest reported more than one policy in place Europeans: half mention that a specific policy is in place	Dutch: all mention that cooperation mechanisms exist and work moderately with national actors, law enforcement and wider community; most mention mechanisms exist with CSOs, but effectiveness of

			<p>cooperation scores low; one third report no mechanisms with private sector, and if they do exist, they work poorly in practice.</p> <p>Europeans: of the respondents, one or two mentioned a lack of a cooperation mechanism with national actors, law enforcement, CSOSs private sector and the wider community. On average the effectiveness of the cooperation is scored poorly.</p>
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Table I: Summary of threat perceptions, policies in place, and effectiveness of multi-stakeholder engagement.

Right-wing extremism

Threat perception

For the purpose of the quick scan, the term *right-wing extremism* was explained as follows:

Although, the term ‘right wing extremism’ is used for the purpose of this survey, the phenomenon is by some also referred to as ‘racially and ethnically motivated extremism’ (REMVE), ‘white supremacy’ or ‘neo-Nazism’. The term refers to the extreme political views that in most situations oppose two main things: (1) a certain development in society, such as immigration or the positions of Muslims/immigrants or Jews in society; and (2) the position/policy of the government in dealing with these issues. Some supporters of these movements believe that the policies are part of ‘a great replacement strategy’, aimed at demographically and culturally replacing white European populations with non-white peoples, whereas what they mostly aim for a society that is cleared of these influences. Some supporters of these extreme views even call for or legitimize the use of non-conventional means (including violence) to generate change. A specific group also supports the accelerationist ideology, making use of the social unrest as a result of the pandemic. They advance numerous conspiracy theories, disinformation, and hateful propaganda accusing Jews and migrants of being responsible for the pandemic. They furthermore believe that the social unrest they promote is a necessary steppingstone to rebuilding society on the basis of white power.

Representatives of Dutch cities score the threat of right-wing extremism overall as medium but do notice a slight increase in the threat level over the last year. Respondents observe some to a strong correlation between the local and national threat levels, as well as between threat levels locally and internationally.

Municipalities are also aware of the annual reports produced by the Dutch Intelligence Service that have pointed to an increase in activities within the extreme right community, particularly warning about accelerationist movements. One city reports on the connection between the accelerationist movement and conspiracy theorists. Some cities mention the fact that certain right-wing organizations and individuals sporadically and visibly participate in protests and demonstrations. One city in particular mentioned that the right-wing extremist sentiments are related to the shelter offered by the city to refugees.

Most cities mention the fact that activities in this regard have seen an increase online, and that this is hard to monitor due to the lack of legal mandates. They are aware though, that this increased online activity could create a fertile ground for further polarization and radicalization leading eventually to the risk of violence. The fact that extreme right-wing views are more and more mainstream in the public political discourse is considered to be another factor of concern. One city reported an increase of right-wing extremist as well as anti-Semitic and racist stickers, graffiti, and broader sentiments in the city.

Policies

Regarding the issue of right-wing extremism, one third of the Dutch cities report that no specific policies exist to address this issue. Another third does have one specific policy in place, and the rest has more than one policy in place.

All four European city representatives mention that a specific policy is in place to address right-wing extremism.

Of those cities reporting on the existence of specific policies, mention is made of tailor-made rehabilitation and disengagement programs for far-right extremist individuals. In terms of prevention programs, the training of professionals and the use of 'serious game tools'⁴ to instruct teachers are mentioned in addition to the use of the more generic multidisciplinary approaches to prevention and the dealing with radicalization, as well as the multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder response approaches facilitated by the 'safety and care houses'.⁵ Particularly related to the predominantly online activities of right-wing extremism, one city reports on the workshops they have set up to address topics such as fake news and disinformation, and how to deal with that.

Effectiveness of multi-stakeholder engagement

Overall, Dutch respondents report that cooperation mechanisms with regard to the issue of right-wing extremism exist with national actors, law enforcement, civil society organizations, and the wider community. The cooperation is mostly working moderately in terms of effectiveness, with the cooperation working best in practice with the law enforcement sector. Regarding the private sector, one third report that no cooperation mechanism exists, and the rest assess the existing mechanism to be working poorly to moderately well.

⁴ 'Serious game tools' are simulation games to help participants acquire insights in social dynamics.

⁵ In the Netherlands a system of 'safety and care houses' is used to offer a local level platform for information-exchange and cooperation for a wide variety of professionals dealing with multi-complex cases oftentimes related to issues of radicalization and extremism, in order to develop and implement tailor-made responses. Those involved often include criminal justice actors, probation services, mental health actors, housing services, educational institutes, child protection services, and employment services.

The European respondents mention that cooperation works best with civil society organizations. There is, furthermore, hardly any cooperation with the private sector.

Mis/disinformation

Threat perception

The threat related to the spread of mis/disinformation is perceived to be a bit higher than the threat perceived regarding right-wing extremism, but still fairly medium. Over the last year, the respondents also observed a slight increase in the undermining effect. Respondents further noted observe some to a strong correlation between the local and national threat levels as well as between the local and international levels.

Although they did not point out specific events that were instigated based on mis/disinformation, the increase, they explain, is likely related to the multiple crises the Netherlands is currently dealing with, which has spurred the spread of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories. Also explaining the increase is the decreased confidence in politics and the widespread feelings of fear and discomfort. Young people in particular tend to turn to alternative (social) media outlets to follow the news. The algorithms, and the echo chambers they form, oftentimes don't help in the prevention of the spread of disinformation. Respondents expressed their concern that the spread of mis/disinformation constitutes a long-term threat to democratic stability.

Policies

Half of the Dutch respondents mention there are no specific policies dealing with mis/disinformation. The other half has one or more policies in place.

The respondents from European cities show a similar pattern.

The existing policies in Dutch cities are mostly related to the training of professionals around addressing online activities related to mis/disinformation, and the training of local social workers on recognizing radicalization. Information campaigns in schools are also mentioned.

Hate speech

Threat perception

The threat level of hate speech is perceived to be between low and medium and has stayed the same over the last year. Respondents observe some to a strong correlation between this threat at local and national levels, as well as that between local and international levels.

Although one city reports on the increase in signs in the streets (stickers, graffiti), most refer to the increase in hate speech online, almost to the point where it has become normalized. Overall, people become victims of hate speech for a wide variety of reasons, but minorities, and members of the LGBTQI+ community are

especially mentioned. Also, the shelter offered to refugees tends to trigger hate speech. Hate speech is considered to be analogous to polarization.

Policies

Two thirds of the Dutch cities mention not having a specific policy in place to address hate speech, while the other third say they do.

The respondents from European cities sketch a different picture, with all, except one, mentioning the existence of a specific policy. The policies in place in one third of the Dutch cities are mostly related to right-wing extremism, and mis/disinformation and the special challenges of online activities.

Polarization

Threat perception

For the purpose of the quick scan, the term *polarization* was explained as follows:

Polarization describes the phenomenon in society where the population/society is clustered around a small number of extreme poles/opinions regarding certain topics in society. This could in general relate to political positions, but also concern specific topics varying from pro-life versus the right to abortion, support for refugees versus an anti-immigration stance, for a multi-cultural society versus against one, pro Covid restrictions versus anti Covid restrictions, etc. The polarization in society could deepen the 'us versus them' paradigm, where the middle ground no longer plays a role, and rational arguments are no longer effective to overcome differences.

Respondents consider the threat level related to polarization to be medium, but slightly increased since last year. Respondents observe a strong connection between this threat at local level and that at the national level, and some to a strong correlation between the threat at local and international levels.

One respondent pointed to the shift from horizontal polarization (between groups) to vertical polarization between the (political) elite and the population. Respondents also observed that the increase in demonstrations was the result of an increase in polarization, although they also underlined that demonstrations were the symbols of a thriving democracy. Yet the themes, topics and modus operandi have seemed to harden, and even though polarization can be a useful and instrumental tool for change, when the distance between the opposing groups becomes too big, dialogue no longer seems possible, and building bridges also seems futile.

Policies

Regarding polarization, half of the respondents from Dutch cities mentioned that they had more than one policy in place. This corresponds with the responses from the European cities. One third of Dutch cities report that they have no specific policy in place.

Policies to mitigate polarization focus particularly on the training of professionals to understand the complexity and the dynamics of the phenomenon. An important issue during these training sessions is dedicated to the awareness of the impact the government and other professionals have on the dynamics of polarization when interacting with individuals in addressing the problem.

Multi-stakeholder engagement

Regarding cooperation on the issue of polarization, Dutch cities report that cooperation mechanisms are in place with national actors, civil society actors and the wider community, and that these mechanisms are moderately effective. The cooperation with civil society organizations is scored the highest. Almost all respondents mention the existence of a cooperation mechanism with law enforcement actors regarding issues of polarization, assessing also that this cooperation works moderately in practice. Regarding the cooperation with the private sector, again while almost all respondents mention that a mechanism exists, this cooperation was scored the lowest and is considered to work poorly in practice.

Of the European respondents, one or two mention there is no cooperation mechanism regarding the stakeholders listed. Furthermore, they score the effectiveness of the cooperation on average as poor, in contrast to the average Dutch score of moderate cooperation in practice.

Anti-establishment sentiments

Threat perception

For the purpose of the quick scan, the term *anti-establishment sentiments* was explained as follows:

Anti-establishment sentiments refer to the phenomenon in society where a segment of society no longer accepts the authority of (local) government officials, the authority and independence of scientists or professionals, or the independence and reliability of media. Particularly in relation to the latter, the information distributed by the media is labelled as 'fake news'. In all cases these sentiments are the consequence of a serious trust deficit between the elites/establishment in society and a certain part of society. Sentiments might be fueled by specific conspiracy thinkers.

Related to the responses on polarization, the perceived threat level regarding anti-establishment sentiments is slightly higher and considered to be between medium and high, and slightly increased since last year. Respondents observe a strong connection between this threat at a local and national levels, and some to a strong correlation between the threat at local and international levels.

Particularly important to point out is the fear that radicalization based on anti-government/anti-establishment sentiments will turn to violence. Several individuals have already been arrested in relation to threats or violence used against government representatives, police officers, and politicians.

The Covid-19 restrictive measures have functioned as an accelerator to these sentiments and has not abated since. Rather, the number of topics of discontent leading to anti-establishment sentiments has increased, heavily influenced in a regular manner by conspiracy theories.

Policies

One third of Dutch city respondents reported having no specific policy in place to deal with anti-establishment sentiments. Another third had one policy in place with, finally, the last group having more than one policy in place. Half of the respondents of European cities report that a specific policy exists to deal with the issue.

The policies in Dutch cities on anti-establishment sentiments align with the policies dealing with polarization and the local response mechanisms in place to deal with radicalization. Specific attention in training is dedicated to the link with conspiracy theories.

Multi-stakeholder engagement

Dutch respondents reported that cooperation mechanisms on how to deal with anti-establishment sentiments exists with national actors, law enforcement actors and the wider community. Most mention that these mechanisms also exist with civil society actors, but that particular cooperation was given the lowest score in terms of effectiveness. Effectiveness of cooperation with other actors was considered to be moderate, with cooperation with national actors and law enforcement actors scoring the highest. One third of the respondents reported that no mechanisms exist regarding cooperation with the private sector, and if they did exist, they worked poorly to moderately well.

Similar to the assessment of the effectiveness of cooperation on polarization, one or two of the European respondents mentioned there was no cooperation mechanism with the stakeholders listed. Furthermore, they scored the effectiveness of the cooperation on average as poor, in contrast to the average Dutch score of moderate cooperation in practice.

Background Context in the Netherlands:

Some recent events that shape the perceptions and the discussion in the Netherlands:

- The city of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk became the focus of a conspiracy theory in the summer of 2020. Supporters of the conspiracy theory spread rumors that the city was the site of crimes committed by a satanic-pedophile network who committed ritual killings of children in the 1980s. Supporters of the conspiracy theory visited the small town of 35,000 citizens to lay flowers and write messages on the graves of dead children at the local graveyard. The three main instigators behind the rumors were convicted and are currently in jail for crimes of incitement and dead threats against the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, and the Minister of Health Affairs at the time, Hugo de Jonge. The city lost the case against Twitter, in which they claimed Twitter needed to take down related and unfounded tweets on the topic. The District Court in The Hague, however, ruled that Twitter did not need to take down all messages on all accounts related to Bodegraven-Reeuwijk, but that Twitter had to respond immediately to specific removal requests by the town.
- For the occasion of a demonstration planned in the city of Amsterdam, David Icke, a British conspiracy theorist who has in the past also made anti-Semitic statements, and is a holocaust denier, was invited to speak by an organization called 'Samen voor Nederland'. This organization brings together a plethora of organizations, like the political party 'Forum voor Democratie', the organization of yellow jerseys, 'Nederland in Verzet' (The Netherlands in resistance), Foundation Vaccin-free, #Freehugs, and an anti-Covid movement, as part of an opportunistic alliance. According to one of the theories of Icke, the world is ruled by evil reptiles. This theory was recently embraced by Thierry Baudet the political leader of 'Forum voor Democratie'. The city of Amsterdam was considering the option of prohibiting his contribution to the event, before the Immigration and Naturalization Services communicated in a letter to David Icke that based on concerns for national security, he had been denied access to the Schengen area for a period of two years.
- During the Covid pandemic, protests and demonstrations were organized on a regular basis by a variety of groups in several Dutch cities. Some were merely protesting against the lockdown and restriction measures; others were anti-Vaxxers and yet a third group believed that the government had abused the pandemic to control the population, and therefore supported conspiracy theories that were spreading these rumors. During several occasions, the protesters would not follow instructions from the police to respect social distancing or to return home when the total numbers of demonstrators grew above the number for which a permit had been issued. In such cases, the protests quickly turned into riots, spurred on by a particular group that the police sometimes calls professional rioters.
- The Covid pandemic furthermore resulted in dead threats against several of the key figureheads that played an important role in shaping the policies and explaining the medical implications of the virus.
- In November 2021 two young men were convicted by the District Court of Rotterdam for membership of an extreme right-wing terrorist organization The Base, for racially motivated and anti-Semitic incitement, and threats against the Dutch Prime Minister, as well as for postings on the Telegram channel on the white supremacist movement, European Brotherhood. According to the Dutch National Coordinator on Security and Counterterrorism the men belonged to accelerationist movements.
- Recently, farmers have been protesting against the reform proposals of the agriculture sector. These massive protests have seriously disrupted traffic, and also resulted in arson, destructions, and public intimidation and threats against politicians. Throughout the country, people show their sympathy by hanging the Dutch flag upside down.

About: THE GLOCAL CONNECTION - Platform for Shared Security has been established by Bibi van Ginkel. The Glocal Connection builds on the idea that effective, legitimate and sustainable solutions for wicked security challenges are best served by solutions that have been designed and are implemented in a multi-stakeholder setting, based on the principles of rule of law and human security concepts, in order to create ownership.

The Glocal Connection thereto aims to connect the global policy thinking to the local policy implementation, as well as to share the local experiences with the global policy platforms to better inform policy design. It contributes to this goal through research, policy advise, training, moderation and monitoring & evaluation of policies.

About: HUMAN SECURITY COLLECTIVE (HSC) - is a foundation based in The Hague working on issues of development, security and the involvement of citizens in their communities and societies. HSC believes that the idea of Human Security with its focus on people, relationships and human rights provides an organizing frame for action.

Based on the elements of trust-creation, local ownership, empowerment and collective action, HSC is able to facilitate conversation between civil society, policy shapers and other actors to promote alternative approaches to current security practice.