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From the Fringes to the Forefront

How far-right movements
across the globe have reacted
to **Covid-19**

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Contents

Introduction 3

Global Trends 4

Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation 4

Anti-Establishment Sentiment Amid the Lockdown 4

Regional Trends 5

North America 5

Western Europe 8

Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe 11

Australia and New Zealand 11

India 12

Impact 12

Short Term 12

Long Term 13

How far-right movements across the globe have reacted to Covid-19

Introduction

Far-right groups are leveraging the Covid-19 crisis to further their objectives. Alongside other actors, they are one of the main forces actively seeking to undermine the effectiveness of public-health responses, in this case to further their ideological objectives.

This is manifesting in the following ways: public harms through communications (disinformation, spread of conspiracy theories that have gone mainstream, anti-vaxx rhetoric); harms against minorities (online targeted harassment campaigns, a spike in hate speech and hate crime); and, in rare but high-profile instances, targeted attacks and terrorist plots on critical infrastructure, such as telecommunications masts and hospitals.

There are direct consequences for government and civil-society organisations working to support public-health communications efforts, counter-extremism and law enforcement, and those working in communities and social integration.

This paper will offer a comprehensive overview of global and regional developments concerning how far-right groups have responded to Covid-19. Some of the key takeaways are:

- Several far-right movements have engaged in different conspiracy theories, which have quickly entered the mainstream.
- Different far-right strands have rallied behind anti-lockdown protests in the US, Europe and Australia.
- There has been a spike in anti-Chinese, anti-Asian, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment, which poses a serious risk of hate crimes and attacks as the lockdown continues to ease.
- Far-right nationalist groups are using Covid-19 as an opportunity to promote anti-globalisation sentiment and protectionist measures like closing borders.

- The dissemination of far-right conspiracy theories has translated into attacks on 5G mobile phone masts, while hospitals in the US and abroad have become a target of online campaigns and violent plots.
- In the long term, the economic and social impact of Covid-19 risks alienating the key demographics that far-right groups target for recruitment.
- There is a credible risk that far-right movements could try to leverage the anti-vaccines movement for ideological advancement, which could pose a risk to health security.

Global Trends

Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation

The Covid-19 crisis has offered fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking, with theories and misinformation campaigns targeting different ethnic or minority groups. The target – and therefore “enemy” – depends on whom the different strands of the far right consider to be responsible for the outbreak. Covid-19-related conspiracy theories are very diverse and often contradictory, but there have been two trains of thought:

- Those who do not believe that the virus exists and is a hoax to impose a totalitarian state
- Those who believe that the virus exists but has been manufactured as a bioweapon targeting white people

The aim of conspiracy theories and misinformation campaigns is to blame the pandemic and its consequences on the traditional targets of the far right, ranging from ethnic minorities like Muslims and Jews, to newer targets like China. Conspiracy theories pose a serious challenge for tech companies, which are dealing with an unexpected influx of disinformation, but also for security forces, who must face their offline ramifications.

Many of the Covid-19-related conspiracy theories being circulated have engaged in perpetuating anti-Semitism.¹

This is unsurprising given that Jews remain one of the primary targets of far-right movements throughout the world. Even theories that are not inherently anti-Semitic, such as the conspiracy about 5G masts causing and spreading coronavirus, have incorporated anti-Semitic tropes such as Jews controlling the telecommunications industry.

Far-right movements have embraced anti-China rhetoric, some for racial reasons (stereotyping Chinese people and calling them “bat soup eaters”) and some for political reasons (opposing communism). Scapegoating China has been a tool for the far right to promote other aspects of their ideology, particularly their conception of globalisation as a totalitarian entity. This has significant geopolitical considerations as it can help shore up political will around a tough stance towards China and away from multilateral cooperation.

There has been a spike in anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents, with various groups in the far right engaging in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and propagating misinformation about Muslims breaching the lockdown measures introduced by governments. This poses a serious risk of offline hate crimes as lockdown continues to ease.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religious Belief has expressed concerns that anti-Semitism has increased alarmingly during the outbreak.²

On anti-Muslim sentiment, we are seeing this play out across different local contexts and manifesting itself in different guises, from the UK to Canada to India.

Anti-Establishment Sentiment Amid the Lockdown

Some far-right movements have opposed lockdown measures for seemingly impinging on their freedoms and fostering a “police state”, although there are degrees of disagreement across the far right. Some groups, such as the US conspiracy site Infowars (it is estimated that it has an audience of 3 million people³), have actively encouraged breaching the lockdown measures and engaging in street demonstrations. Others, like British far-right activist Tommy Robinson, who by our own metrics earned 2 million mentions on social media at his peak,⁴ have only condemned

specific parts of the state, such as the police, for seemingly overstepping their mandate. **This negative and hostile reaction to the lockdown is to be expected** given the far right’s consistent anti-establishment messaging, a core narrative of the far right globally (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 – Example of a Facebook post claiming that the government will take total control after Covid-19 by a supporter of the QAnon conspiracy theory, a loose far-right network that claims that the “deep state” is covering up a sex trafficking ring run by the Democrats in the US⁵

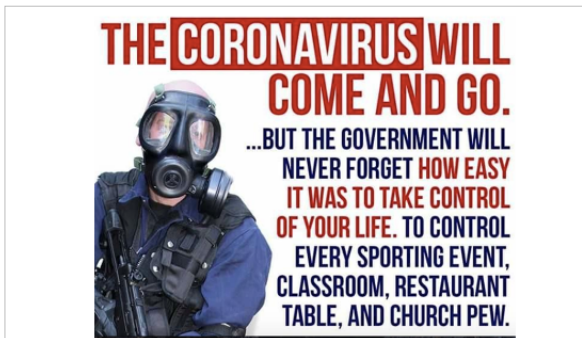


Figure 2 – Example of an anti-lockdown post on GAB, the far-right’s preferred social media platform, on a UK-focused discussion group named after European far-right group the Yellow Vests with almost 1,000 members



Regional Trends

NORTH AMERICA

Conspiracy Theories

As opposed to other extremist groups, far-right movements have responded to the Covid-19 crisis with conspiracy theories, some of which have entered mainstream debate and can even pose a security

challenge offline. Most of the conspiracy theories refer to US-specific developments, although they have been widely disseminated across far-right networks and channels around the world, such as encrypted messaging app Telegram and discussion forums 8kun and 4chan. There is not one conspiracy theory that dominates, although some have reached the mainstream. The following are some of the most widespread conspiracy theories, sorted by popularity and effect on the mainstream:

1) *Coronavirus is a plot to decimate the world population.*

The most popular iteration of this theory suggests that billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates is colluding with global elites to develop a vaccine that will depopulate the world. This conspiracy theory has gone viral on far-right channels, including encrypted messaging app Telegram and discussion forum 4chan. According to a recent study, this theory has now become the most shared Covid-19 conspiracy on mainstream media channels.⁶ Other theories, including the version being promoted by Canadian far-right group the Three Percenters (an anti-Muslim and anti-government militia)⁷, suggest that the UN and Jewish-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros have created the virus to eliminate as much as 90 per cent of the population.⁸ These conspiracies overlap strongly with the anti-vaccination movement and 5G conspiracy theories, but also tend to stray into anti-Semitic territory. This, combined with more mainstream movements, can pose a risk to future vaccination efforts to combat the virus.

2) *5G radiation is causing Covid-19.*

The 5G conspiracy, which has gone mainstream, claims that 5G telecommunications masts are the real cause of the spread of coronavirus. It originated partly from ideas promoted by the far-right American movement QAnon, a loose online network that believes that the deep state is set on destroying President Trump to cover up child abuse by Democrats.⁹ Iterations of this conspiracy are also blending with the anti-vaccination movement and the idea that there is a plot to reduce the world’s population.¹⁰ 5G masts all around the world have already been the target of attacks.

3) Covid-19 has been manufactured by China.

China has been one of the key targets of Covid-19-related conspiracies, with theories even claiming China is blackmailing countries to accept Chinese 5G infrastructure in exchange for vital medical supplies.¹¹ Conspiracy theories about China have entered the mainstream, although not all of them have originated in far-right circles, as more mainstream conservatives who are politically opposed to China have been quick to assign blame.

Figure 3 – Image shared on far-right social media platform GAB, mocking China’s president Xi Jinping¹³



4) Coronavirus has been manufactured by Israel.

Notorious American Holocaust denier and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke¹⁴ (audience: 52,000 on Twitter) is among those who have suggested that Jews or “Zionists” are behind the virus. Variations of this theory suggest that the virus was initially a bioweapon created by China but that Israel subsequently seized it.¹⁵ There are no indications that this theory has gone mainstream beyond far-right circles.

5) Covid-19 is a hoax and has been exaggerated by Jews and the media for financial gain.

Proponents of this theory include key American neo-Nazis like Andrew Anglin, who fronts the openly anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer¹⁶ (audience: 1 million¹⁷); and The Renegade Tribune (audience: 160,000¹⁸), the Florida-based neo-Nazi website founded by Kyle Hunt, a prominent American neo-Nazi who led a racist rally against diversity in 2014 called the “White’s Man March”.¹⁹ Likewise, the Canadian anti-Islam group Worldwide Coalition Against Islam (which has a limited following online but a localised presence in Calgary²⁰) also subscribes to

this theory.²¹ This theory is generally espoused by core neo-Nazi groups and has not entered the mainstream, although it has been embraced in Islamist circles too.

Figure 4 – Meme of the “happy merchant” (anti-Semitic drawing depicting a Jewish person rubbing his hands with greed) in the context of coronavirus that was widely shared on encrypted messaging app Telegram and discussion forum 4chan from January to March²²



Anti-Lockdown Protests

In the US, there have been several anti-lockdown protests nationwide that have brought together different far-right strands. Far-right groups have been the driving force behind many of these rallies and have actively tried to leverage anti-lockdown sentiment to enter the mainstream. For example:

- Prominent conspiracy theory platform Infowars, including its founder Alex Jones, fronted protests in Texas, to the point that tech companies had to take down Infowars-related accounts because they were heavily encouraging their followers to join the protests.²³ Infowars hosted a second rally in Texas at the end of April, during which protesters chanted “Arrest Bill Gates”²⁴ and has created a website that lists more marches in a number of states, including Wisconsin, Alabama, California and Oregon.
- In New Hampshire, far-right protesters dressed in armour gathered in front of the New Hampshire State House. Some of them were carrying flyers calling for the “boogaloo”, a slang term that refers to a future civil war (see Figure 5 below).²⁵ In Texas, a man describing himself as a “boogaloo boy” was arrested recently for livestreaming his intention of killing a police officer.²⁶

- Members of the Three Percenters, an anti-government militia movement with a presence across the United States, were identified at rallies in Idaho, Tennessee and Ohio. According to reporting by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)²⁷, Matt Marshall, one of the Three Percenters' leaders, encouraged participants at the Idaho rally to wear Hawaiian shirts, which is code for the "Big Luau" (another expression for the "boogaloo" or a future civil war). Attendees included Joey Gibson, the founder of the far-right Patriot Prayer group (audience: 31,000 on Facebook); and Oath Keepers (audience: 26,000 on Twitter), another anti-government militia group.²⁸ While many of these groups espouse similar anti-government ideologies, the coronavirus context has provided them with an opportunity to join forces.
- Members of far-right group Proud Boys, a misogynistic far-right group whose members have been convicted for violent crimes²⁹, attended the Michigan, Nevada, Colorado, Washington and Florida marches.³⁰ The ADL found that a prominent member of neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement participated in the Ohio march carrying an anti-Semitic sign that claimed that the real plague was the Jews (see Figure 6).³¹ A man linked to this group was arrested in March in Missouri for his attempt to bomb a hospital with coronavirus patients.³² Other militias, pro-gun movements, anti-vaccination activists and more diffuse far-right networks attended marches in Oregon, Idaho, Massachusetts and the state of Washington.^{33 34}

Figure 5 – Far-right protestors dressed in armour and holding a sign calling for "boogaloo" (term referring to an impending civil war) during an anti-lockdown protest in New Hampshire³⁵



Figure 6 – Member of neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement carrying anti-Semitic sign claiming that the Jews are the real plague during the anti-lockdown protest in Ohio³⁶



Other Regional Developments

Anti-Immigration

In the United States, an investigation by American civil rights organisation the Southern Poverty Law Center has shown that some strands of the far right have blamed mass migration for the spread of the pandemic³⁷ and have called for detaining immigrants in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities indefinitely.³⁸ While there is an understanding that global mobility has contributed to the rapid spread of the pandemic, these groups have hijacked concerns about identity and migration to push their rhetoric.

Three groups have been driving this debate: the Center for Immigration Studies, known as the go-to think-tank for anti-immigration rhetoric; the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a lobby group that has testified in Congress but is linked to several racist hate groups; and VDARE, an anti-immigration website founded in Virginia.³⁹ In the past, these actors have also tried to stoke anti-immigrant fears in connection to other diseases, particularly with Ebola and swine flu, claiming that they would contribute to a "white genocide" in the US, a popular far-right conspiracy theory that claims that immigrants are replacing the native white population.⁴⁰

Accelerationism

One of the more extreme manifestations of the far-right movement in the US is the accelerationists, who want to fast-track the dismantling of society through acts of violence.

Accelerationism is more of a tactic than an ideological movement and encompasses elements of the far right but also from other ideological doctrines. The main aims of accelerationism are to create chaos and confusion because they will lead to rebuilding society – or, for those in the far right, a white supremacist society. Accelerationists are a disperse movement with no clear leadership, but they are active online and in encrypted chat networks like Telegram. Two of the key groups that are associated with accelerationism are Atomwaffen and The Base, whose members were the subject of several raids earlier this year for plotting terrorist attacks.⁴¹ Accelerationists have been celebrating the impact of Covid-19 because they believe the pandemic and the failure of the government in containing it validates their theory that we are heading towards a civilisational collapse.⁴² Some accelerationists in Telegram chats have suggested that now is the perfect time to strike.⁴³ A man killed in a shootout with the FBI in March 2020 as they foiled a plot to bomb a hospital in Missouri (see section below) subscribed to accelerationism but also was linked to neo-Nazi groups in the US.⁴⁴

Hate Crimes and Violent Plots

The police foiled a bomb plot in Missouri directly connected to the outbreak, in which a man changed his plans and decided to target a hospital that was treating coronavirus patients.⁴⁵ The man was already under investigation for holding anti-government and racist views, but his change of plans led the FBI to intervene immediately, resulting in the death of the suspect in a shootout. He was part of two neo-Nazi groups, National Socialist Movement and Vorherrschaft Division, and was active on their Telegram private accounts.

Moreover, according to US federal investigators, white supremacist chats on Telegram have discussed using Covid-19 as a bioweapon, encouraging members to go out and try to infect Jews and non-white people with saliva-filled spray bottles.⁴⁶

On hate crime, the ADL has registered 44 incidents of threats and harassment against Asian-Americans since January 2020, including insults, being blamed for bringing the virus into the US or even physical attacks. Civil rights organisation Asian Americans Advancing

Justice estimates the total number of crimes is around 2,000.⁴⁷ It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which these hate crimes are directly driven by far-right ideology, as anti-Asian prejudice extends beyond the far right. However, one of the incidents registered by the ADL included a message against Chinese people including the numbers 14 and 88 (popular white supremacy numbers referring to Hitler),⁴⁸ which is a prime example of how far-right activity around Covid-19 can manifest in hate crimes.

WESTERN EUROPE

Conspiracy Theories

Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have also been widely circulated in Europe. Below are some examples:

- In **France**, the head of a party list for far-right party National Rally (previously the National Front – headed by Marine Le Pen, who lost to French President Emmanuel Macron in the 2017 election) shared a video claiming that Jews were behind the pandemic and that they were trying to “assert their supremacy”.^{49 50} Leading MEPs of the party have subscribed to the far-right conspiracy theory that immigrants are “replacing” the native population in France.⁵¹ Several members of the National Rally are also members of far-right group Generation Identity.⁵²
- In **Belgium**, the State Security published an official document on its website warning of how Belgian far-right groups have been trying to capitalise on the coronavirus pandemic to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation. For example, far-right group The Knights of Flanders, a breakaway of pan-European far-right group Knights Templar, has claimed that Covid-19 comes from the flu vaccine. Far-right party Nation has falsely claimed that Muslims in the country had issued a fatwa to spread the virus on non-believers.⁵³
- In **Switzerland**, the far-right Swiss Nationalist Party (currently with no representation at federal level) has tweeted that Jews are behind the pandemic and are profiting from the outbreak.⁵⁴

- Members of the Swiss National Party, including its long-time chairman, have been accused of harbouring Nazi sympathies and of posing a security threat.⁵⁵ Ivo Sasek, a prominent Swiss Holocaust denier, claimed on his website that Jewish billionaire philanthropist George Soros – who is frequently a target of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories – funded a laboratory in Wuhan that manufactured the Covid-19 virus.⁵⁶ The Community Security Trust (CST) has produced a report looking at the variety of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that have flourished in the **UK** since the pandemic. While some conspiracy theories, like the theory that coronavirus is caused by 5G radiation, were not originally anti-Semitic, they have descended into employing anti-Semitic tropes. For example, one post registered by CST-UK on Facebook suggested that it was suspicious that there are no 5G masts in Jewish areas in the UK.⁵⁷ According to anti-fascist group Hope Not Hate, posts in the UK have also echoed the conspiracy theory about Bill Gates engineering a vaccine to decimate the population as part of a Zionist conspiracy.

Anti-Lockdown Protests

In a similar fashion to the anti-lockdown protests in the US, Europe has seen far-right activists joining the demonstrations or, in some cases, leading the organisation of the rallies. For example:

- Authorities and ministers in **Germany** have warned about how the far right has been infiltrating the protests, in particular in the city of Dortmund.⁵⁸ Far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the far-right Identitarian movement have urged their supporters to join the protests, or in the case of the former, they have organised their own.⁵⁹
- In **Spain**, far-right populist party Vox has urged its supporters to join the anti-lockdown protests against President Pedro Sanchez, with the party leadership fronting the rally and asking for the president to step down.⁶⁰
- In **Italy**, a new movement called the Orange Vests, modelled after far-right protest group the Yellow Vests in France, has emerged in the context of the pandemic. The group – which includes a range of people, from those feeling disenfranchised to Eurosceptics to conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists – claims that the coronavirus pandemic is a hoax.⁶¹ The leader of the Orange Vests has also claimed that the risk comes from electromagnetic radiation, in an apparent nod to the popular conspiracy theory that 5G masts cause coronavirus.⁶²
- In the **UK**, an investigation by the *Independent* warned that while no logos of far-right groups were displayed in protests in London, at least one man had previously participated in protests with the UK far-right group the Yellow Vests.⁶³

Other Regional Developments

Coronavirus as a Publicity and Recruitment Opportunity

In Europe, far-right groups have been trying to use the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to promote themselves. Oftentimes, this has involved being outspoken about their efforts to help local communities, in an attempt to strike an emotional chord with followers and supporters. According to journalist Michael Colborne, this public display is part of their broader strategy of gaining support for their ideas by appearing embedded in communities.⁶⁴

Most of the groups in this category are “street movements”, which are modelled upon protest groups rather than political parties. Actions like this can, in some cases, contribute to expanding their network of supporters, as they tend to have a very localised presence and often recruit through word of mouth. For example:

- In **Italy**, far-right group CasaPound⁶⁵ has shared pictures of its members delivering groceries (in bags with the group’s logo) to the elderly and to orphanages.⁶⁶
- In **Germany**, members of local neo-Nazi groups (Die Rechte, The Third Way) have been delivering food supplies to low-income houses along with notes describing them as the “backbone” of the country.⁶⁷ This is significant as this is a key demographic for far-right recruitment.

- In **Spain**, neo-Nazi group Hogar Social has been sharing pictures on Twitter of members delivering groceries across Madrid and claiming that they have volunteers active in every borough of the city (see Figure 7 below). This appears to be an attempt to make the public believe that they have an outsized influence in the capital.
- In the **UK**, far-right anti-Islam groups Britain First and For Britain have shared videos of their activists feeding the homeless and volunteering for the NHS (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 7 – Twitter posts showing neo-Nazi Spanish group Hogar Social delivering groceries in several neighbourhoods in Madrid



Figure 8 – Far-right group Britain First shared a YouTube video showing its “chief of staff” cooking to feed the homeless in Manchester and publicised it to its followers via its daily newsletter



Nationalist and Populist Parties

As Europe became the epicentre of the pandemic, far-right political parties used the Covid-19 crisis to double down on some of their key narratives, such as blaming the government (which are mostly centre-left or left-wing) for failing to contain the pandemic, portraying themselves as the “real patriots” who are telling the “truth” about the pandemic, and promoting anti-EU

sentiment. This does not mean, however, that these groups are seeing an upsurge of support in the polls, as some recent data from Germany, Italy and Spain indicates.^{68 69 70} Some developments include:

- In **Germany**, far-right party Alternative for Germany has called for a referendum to get Germany out of the European Union, claiming that the financial burden to support European states amid the pandemic is too high.⁷¹
- In **France**, Marine Le Pen, the leader of far-right party National Rally (formerly National Front) has claimed that the EU’s reluctance to shut down the borders and to restrict movement shows the “weakness of their ideology”.⁷²
- In **Spain**, the leadership of far-right party Vox has called for an alternative government to replace the current Sanchez presidency⁷³ and has claimed that emergency measures will be used to suppress freedoms and civil liberties.⁷⁴

Hate Crimes

- Available data from the UK suggests that there has been a spike in anti-minority sentiment and even hate crimes linked to Covid-19. Anti-fascist campaign group Hope Not Hate has tracked how some far-right groups, such as The Hundred Handers (a far-right group with a strong presence online that has plastered racist stickers across the country), have recently incorporated anti-Chinese rhetoric into their messaging.⁷⁵
- Monitoring groups like Tell Mama, which measures anti-Muslim hate in the UK, has identified a spike in online and offline hate incidents against Muslims connected to far-right misinformation campaigns, which has led police to open investigations into far-right groups.⁷⁶ High-profile far-right activists, such as Katie Hopkins, have been active in blaming Muslims for the pandemic. In a tweet, Katie Hopkins promoted the widely popular far-right narrative that minorities get preferential treatment by suggesting that the government had timed the lockdown to coincide with Easter and planned to open up in time for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Furthermore, a report commissioned by members of the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group warns that offline physical attacks could increase when lockdown measures are lifted as a result of the spike in hate speech.⁷⁷

WESTERN BALKANS AND CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Regional Developments

Several far-right groups and parties in this region have blamed Covid-19 on immigration, with some groups singling out specific minorities like Muslims or the Roma community. Some of the developments include:

- In **Poland**, BasedPoland, a far-right group with more than 120,000 followers on Twitter, accused Muslims and the Roma community of not following social distancing rules.⁷⁸
- In **Ukraine**, members of far-right group Azov have claimed on encrypted messaging app Telegram that ethnic minorities in Italy are to blame for spreading coronavirus.⁷⁹
- In **Hungary**, Prime Minister Victor Orbán has blamed immigration for the spread of the pandemic, claiming that it was brought to the country by foreigners and was mainly spreading among foreigners.^{80 81}

Anti-Lockdown Protests

- In a move resembling the anti-lockdown protests in the US, several far-right protesters have been charged for breaching coronavirus restrictions in Croatia in support of a priest who was holding Easter prayers despite the lockdown. Protesters rallied in front of a church dressed in black masks and holding a sign with the slogan “Ready for the Homeland”, which is a popular saying among far-right groups in Croatia.⁸²
- Anti-immigrant sentiment seems to be spiking in Croatia, with recent reports revealing that police have spray-painted the heads of immigrants (the

majority of whom are Muslim) attempting to cross the border from Bosnia with the purpose of identifying them.⁸³

Figure 9 – Far-right activists gather in front of church in Split, Croatia



AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Anti-Lockdown Protests

- Chants of “arrest Bill Gates” have been heard in anti-lockdown protests in Melbourne, Australia, echoing the popular conspiracy theory that Bill Gates is behind a sinister vaccine against coronavirus.⁸⁴ One of the Facebook groups that has been actively involved in the protest is “99% Unite Main Group It’s Us or Them”, which is composed of a wide array of ideological currents that include 5G conspiracists, QAnon supporters, anti-vaxxers and members of the sovereign movement.⁸⁵

Regional Developments

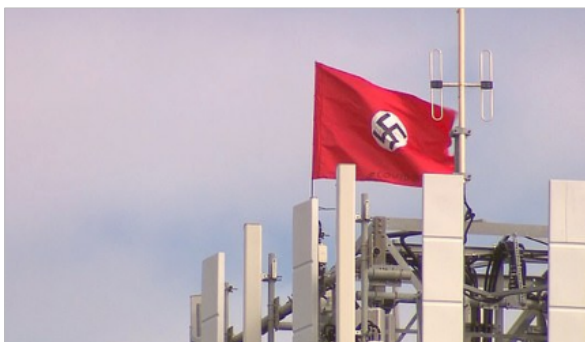
In Australia and New Zealand, the far right has a strong anti-Chinese and anti-Asian bias, owing in part to its geographical proximity to Asia. Far-right groups such as Action Zealanda,⁸⁶ which is linked to a recently foiled attack on the anniversary of the Christchurch shooting, have traditionally seen China as drawing New Zealand closer to globalisation by exporting cheap labour and trying to destroy European Kiwi identity. This reads as a version of the popular far-right conspiracy theory The Great Replacement, which claims that elites are encouraging mass immigration to replace the white population.

Prominent Australian alt media personalities, like far-right vlogger Avi Yemini⁸⁷ (audience: 370,000 on YouTube), are portraying Chinese people living in Australia as “criminals” who are “stealing” supermarket resources like baby formula from “Australian moms” by buying them in bulk and sending them back to mainland China.

Hate Crimes and Violent Plots

- It should be noted that hate crimes against Asian people have spiked since the outbreak started, according to the Asian Australian Alliance,⁸⁸ although it is hard to ascertain whether these crimes are being driven by far-right sentiment. Yet, in a similar fashion to some hate crimes in the US, some of the crimes are very clearly interwoven with white supremacy. For example, Chinese and swastika flags scribbled with the words Covid-19 have been flown from a communications mast in Melbourne, perhaps in a nod to the popular conspiracy theory about 5G causing coronavirus (see Figure 10 below).

Figure 10 – Swastika flag with the words Covid-19 on a telecommunications mast in Melbourne⁸⁹



INDIA

Misinformation

In India, the far-right often takes the form of a blend of anti-Muslim sentiment and Hindu nationalism.

In the context of Covid-19, there have been targeted anti-Muslim campaigns online using the hashtag **#Coronajihad**, which started after the distribution of a fake video showing a man – who belongs to a missionary Muslim group – spitting at police officers.

Estimates show that 300,000 people engaged with the hashtag **#Coronajihad**, reaching 135 million people on Twitter.⁹⁰ Users shared fake news and disinformation showing Muslims licking fruit or coughing at people.

According to Eviane Leidig, an expert on the Indian far right, misinformation seems to be originating on newer platforms like TikTok⁹¹, which started becoming popular with the far right as they have been taken off mainstream media platforms.⁹²

The Hindu newspaper, an English-language publication in India, went as far as to publish a cartoon depicting coronavirus in visibly Muslim attire.⁹³

Figure 11 – Cartoon published by newspaper *The Hindu* depicting coronavirus as a Muslim dressed in a Pathani suit (common Muslim dressing in India) with an assault rifle pointed at the Earth⁹⁴



This has similarities with how far-right actors in the UK have portrayed Muslims as deliberately spreading the disease. In the UK, Tommy Robinson has also resorted to the use of hashtags **#CoronaCriminals** and **#GermJihad** in the context of claiming that a man who had reportedly attacked elderly people on the street was a Muslim immigrant who should be deported.

Hate Crimes and Offline Incidents

- Offline, this rise in anti-Muslim hatred has translated into some hospitals and pharmacies across the country refusing entry to Muslims, asking them to submit proof that they do not have Covid-19, which is not currently being asked of other ethnic groups in the country.⁹⁵ Furthermore, there have already been reports of physical attacks against Muslims connected to Covid-19 conspiracies.⁹⁶

Impact

SHORT TERM

Conspiracy Theories Are Entering the Mainstream

Conspiracy theories and misinformation have spread at an accelerated rate. Monitoring groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center have reported how misinformation has rapidly spread across key mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, while condemning slow action by tech companies to curtail its reach.⁹⁷

A recent investigation found that in the last three months groups discussing the “boogaloo” (slang term for civil war) and actively plotting violence have soared on Facebook (125 groups with more than 73,000 members), parallel to the offline protests taking place in the US.⁹⁸

Social media companies have taken some action in this regard: YouTube has banned all content containing 5G conspiracy theories⁹⁹ while Facebook will start notifying users if they have engaged with misinformation.¹⁰⁰ These companies have claimed that further action has not been possible because the precedent had not been set offline (i.e states in the US have not made protesting against lockdowns an illegal activity).¹⁰¹

As with extremist content, the blurred lines between what’s illegal and legal continue to pose a challenge for tech companies when it comes to tackling the massive spread of conspiracy theories, which is taking on an urgent note in the context of Covid-19.

Lockdown Means Far-Right Extremists Are Pushed Online

The lockdown will have clear knock-on effects on far-right activism, as offline activities are restricted. Preliminary studies looking at engagement with white supremacist content online in the US show that there seems to be a positive correlation between the beginning of stay-at-home orders and an increase in searches about white supremacy.¹⁰² With far-right groups scaling down their offline presence, we can expect them to develop a more aggressive online

recruitment strategy, tapping into the strong online presence that they have already built.

While we do not have any evidence to ascertain whether online radicalisation will increase (or even how online radicalisation works for the far right), security services have already sounded the alarm on the difficulty of identifying people at risk of radicalisation because of isolation measures.¹⁰³

There is a legitimate risk that a prolonged lockdown situation might decrease the capabilities of programmes like Prevent in the UK to safeguard individuals who might be on the brink of extremism, and who now have more time on their hands to engage with content and contacts online.

There Is Evidence of Hate Crimes Against Minorities Linked to Covid-19

While not every hate crime against minority groups is driven by far-right sentiment, available evidence from the relatively small pool of hate crimes linked to Covid-19 already shows some overlap with clear white supremacy ideology.

This is a worrying development that shows that far-right ideology can manifest in acts of violence other than terrorism. In these times, it will be particularly challenging to identify when a hate crime is being driven by random prejudice or by a specific targeted ideology.

While lockdown continues to ease, we can expect proliferation of anti-China and anti-minority sentiment, leading to physical attacks and hate crimes.

LONG TERM

Increase in Offline Activism After a Period of Intense Online Activity

We are already seeing indications of renewed levels of far-right activism, which we can expect to continue after the pandemic. Many on the far right have capitalised on the crisis very quickly to promote conspiracy theories and misinformation, some of which have gone mainstream, creating a ripple effect that tech companies have struggled to manage.

In a relatively short time since the pandemic started, there have already been violent plots and hate crimes inspired by far-right ideology.

In the short term, hospitals could become a target of far-right groups, as seen by recent violent plots and online hate campaigns in the US and also in France and Italy.

Places of worship (mosques and synagogues, and also care homes or schools associated with Muslims or Jews) are also at an increased risk. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that offline restrictions of movement have limited the scope of mass attacks.

Pool of Recruitment Widens After Unemployment Soars

Several experts have suggested that far-right parties benefit from a situation of mass unemployment.¹⁰⁴ While the latest polls in some countries, like Italy¹⁰⁵ and Germany¹⁰⁶ suggest that the far right's electoral support has decreased, the spike in unemployment in these particular circumstances (disease expanding globally, with the far right framing it as a side effect of globalisation) might appeal to those "left behind" and affected by this crisis.

Apart from unemployment, the crisis will have an unavoidable socio-economic impact, perhaps even personal loss or tragedy, mental health issues, domestic violence and others. There are several potential push factors that risk being exacerbated because of the Covid-19 crisis. Future scenarios might see these factors worsening and potentially contributing to extremism.

Proliferation of Nationalist and Protectionist Measures

Far-right populist parties might use coronavirus as an opportunity to promote nationalist and protectionist measures, including enforcing a stricter control of borders and implementing anti-immigration policies. We have already seen far-right politicians like Prime Minister Victor Orbán in Hungary using coronavirus to pass decrees that cement his grip on power¹⁰⁷ using the pandemic to crack down on immigration.¹⁰⁸

While some of the far-right populist parties in Europe are in the opposition, we can expect them to double down on their anti-globalisation rhetoric in connection to the handling of the virus and its aftermath.

New Opportunities to Rally Beyond Elections

There is a question as to what opportunities the far right will have to profit from the Covid-19 crisis after the pandemic is over. Yet all indications point to the pandemic severely altering our way of life for the foreseeable future. We have already seen how several far-right groups have coalesced in protests in the US opposing the lockdown. This seems like it will continue to be a unifying force for the far right and might allow it to deploy a supersized influence as a result of blending with mainstream conservative activism.

While elections seem to be a big rallying opportunity for the far right, there is a chance that the efforts to prevent a second wave of infections might alter how electoral campaigns are conducted (i.e. no mass congregations or rallies) or even result in the postponement of elections in some countries. We will probably see a spike in misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding election dates, but also during other events like religious festivals. For now, far-right movements will take a reactive approach, where they respond immediately to developments in the Covid-19 crisis.

However, the biggest rallying moment for far-right groups may come when countries announce the rollout of a vaccination programme, which several groups will likely oppose because they consider the move to be part of a wider global conspiracy. If influential strands of the far right can manage to blend with more mainstream anti-vaxxers, they could pose a magnified threat to health security.¹⁰⁹

Endnotes

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