

## Violent extremism and conspiracy theories in the age of Corona: a multidisciplinary approach by the Dutch National Support Center for Extremism

Belief in conspiracy theories has always been a prominent component of extremism, but in recent months the spread of alternative ‘facts’ has become an increasing source of concern due to its seemingly wider reach. Since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, the Dutch National Support Center for Extremism (Dutch abbreviation: LSE) has seen a rise from professionals and family members in requests for consultation concerning paranoid beliefs of persons in combination with potential worrisome extremist behaviors. Anticipating on current events and trends is vital for developing strategies to counter potential processes of extremist radicalization. It is for this reason that LSE is available for advice and consultation for partner organizations, professionals and citizens who face difficulties regarding possible signs of extremism.

### **Utilization of Conspiracies by the Far Right**

Conspiratorial narratives may be at odds with epistemic authorities (such as the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment), they resonate with common grievances – both on a personal and political level. Together with the increasing stress and uncertainty of the global pandemic and its consequences, emerging conspiratorial narratives can be negative drivers for persons who are vulnerable due to mental health or social issues.

Among those taking advantage of the pandemic are (online) far-right activists that bring their main grievances under attention: conspiratorial thoughts regarding European governments and the dangers posed by the ‘open-border’-policy of the globalized ruling powers. Related to this view is the notion that nation-states with closed borders are much better equipped to defend themselves against what they see as ‘foreign diseases’, creating overlaps in far-right xenophobia and public anxiety for emerging diseases such as the current Corona virus. Current online narratives fuel the idea that protest and resistance against government policies are justified as they undermine the (Dutch) nation-state. By doing so, radical rightwing organizations and activists instigate intergroup polarization by demonizing the “non-native” and/or “elite” as the external threat, often portrayed as causes for the pandemic, and fueling antagonism and

virulence towards institutions and society protecting or working together with these perceived threats.

### **A health care approach to extremism and intervention**

The uncertainty and global impact of the Coronavirus pandemic provides the perfect storm in which “alternative” explanations to those provided by official authorities can thrive. Conspiracy theorists, in the Netherlands as well as in the rest of the world, popularize the notion that mainstream media and governments can no longer be trusted and may serve as multiplier for extremist radicalization. These constructs provide a master narrative that explains various complex developments and thereby provide them with meaning. This means that conspiracy constructions are inherently linked to meaning and significance. The notion that life is mostly accidental and uncontrolled is rejected and can therewith reduce feelings of helplessness.

These processes largely overlap with the individual stories of clients of LSE’s Exit facility Forsa and the Family Support Center. Forsa supports through voluntary social-and healthcare programs people, from young adolescents to adults, who harbor extremist convictions or who are or have been involved in extremist networks to leave behind their extremist lives or pasts. The Family Support Center provides support to the family members of radicalizing and radicalized individuals through among other things family therapy and psychoeducation. Forsa and the Family Support Center both use [an evidence-based methodology](#) which takes into account the crucial role ‘alternative’ explanations and conspiracy thinking plays in the process of radicalization.

In order to help people renounce extremist views and/or to distance themselves from extremist networks LSE reinforces protective factors to cultivate critical reflection on a voluntary basis. A non-judgmental attitude, transparency and flexibility are key in the health care approach to disengagement and deradicalization. LSE applies an holistic approach – covering psychological, ideological and practical aspects – whereby interventions are formulated out by the multi-and interdisciplinary team, which include (forensic) psychologists, social workers, family therapists, spiritual care workers, and researchers specialized in religious studies, anthropology, and political and conflict studies. The positioning of the caseworker and the way the caseworker corresponds to the clients’ needs and expectations is vital in the effectiveness of the counselling process in relation to deradicalization, especially concerning grievances which resonate with conspiracy theories, and his characterized by an intensive person-centered approach.

It is because of this active role, the LSE can provide support to clients as well as information and consultation for both general public and professionals.

## **Mainstreaming conspiratorial narratives**

It is common that extremist groups such as the far-right exploits times of uncertainty and anxiety to advance their agenda. As these apocalyptic theories are getting more mainstream, and find their way into our public discourse, this may lead to an increase of individuals that take matters into their own hands. A discourse in which the far right gets more airplay to magnify their extreme discourse underlines the importance to boost the resilience of vulnerable groups. Supporting self-reliance, resilience and identity of these citizens and the people close to them will therefore remain of crucial importance in the work of LSE.