SPECIAL REPORT

ASPI–KAS

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on extremism dynamics: Towards national resilience

Insights from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's annual Europe–Australia Counter-Terrorism dialogues (2019 and 2020)

Katja Theodorakis
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ASPI
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICY CENTRE

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

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About the authors

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About Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Vision and Worldwide Work

The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation of Germany, with the vision to promote international dialogue, sustainable development, good governance, capacity building, regional integration and enhance understanding of the key drivers of global developments. It is named after the first Chancellor (Prime Minister) of the Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer whose name represents the democratic rebuilding of Germany, the anchoring of German foreign policy in a trans-Atlantic community of values, the vision of European unity, and Germany's orientation towards a social market economy. Currently KAS is present in around 120 countries, with over 100 offices on six continents. Through its worldwide networks and long-term partner structures, KAS seeks to contribute to knowledge exchange and policy development in line with its foundational values and goals.

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As current global developments - such as a volatile security environment – underscore the common interests of Europe and Australia, KAS' Regional Programme for Australia and the Pacific seeks to foster durable collaboration through dialogue among parliamentarians, representatives of government departments and leading academic/think tank experts, as well as political analysis and consultancy. For the European Union in general and Germany in particular, dialogues with Australia and New Zealand are of special relevance due to our history of strong bilateral and regional relations. Given our shared values and common interests in shaping the rules-based order, there are manifold opportunities for this partnership. Our programmes are dedicated to collaboration and knowledge-sharing, with the ultimate aim of strengthening our collective resilience and ability to find solutions to the pressing problems of our time.

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The Australian Strategic Policy Institute was formed in 2001 as an independent, non-partisan think tank. Its core aim is to provide the Australian Government with fresh ideas on Australia's defence, security and strategic policy choices. ASPI is responsible for informing the public on a range of strategic issues, generating new thinking for government and harnessing strategic thinking internationally. ASPI's sources of funding are identified in our Annual Report, online at www.aspi.org.au and in the acknowledgements section of individual publications. ASPI remains independent in the content of the research and in all editorial judgements. It is incorporated as a company, and is governed by a Council with broad membership. ASPI's core values are collegiality, originality & innovation, quality & excellence and independence.

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INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE ANNUAL DIALOGUE

Katja Theodorakis

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's (KAS) Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific held their annual Australia–Europe Counter Terrorism Dialogue in virtual form in August and September this year through two separate discussion events. A keynote speaker was live-streamed from Europe for a presentation and debate with a selected group of Australian experts and representatives of the European diplomatic corps.

The overall topic was building national resilience, as the Covid-19 crisis is affecting the dynamics of (violent) extremism and terrorism, which thrive on crisis narratives. While the first session focused on the ideological dynamics, the second session was dedicated to developments in the operational environment. The overarching theme of 'Towards national resilience' provided the opportunity for all participants to consider the policy and leadership challenges in enacting suitable anti-terrorism legislation that goes hand in hand with building community strength and resilience. This Special Report highlights key points and insights from the discussions (which were held under the Chatham House rule), placing them in their wider context and drawing out their significance.

The annual ASPI–KAS Counter-Terrorism Dialogue, now in its sixth iteration, seeks to foster knowledge exchange on continuing and emerging forms of terrorism and violent extremism across the ideological spectrum, exploring how to proactively deal with an ever-evolving threat landscape. A tried and proven format, it brings together policymakers, representatives from relevant government institutions, academic experts and practitioners from Australia, Germany and other European countries for frank discussions through roundtables, in-depth seminars and bilateral meetings at various relevant institutions and ministries, as well as the respective federal, state and EU parliaments.

This dialogue was initiated in October 2015 by Dr Beatrice Gorawantschy, the Director of the Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific at KAS and Mr Peter Jennings, the Executive Director of ASPI. Dr Gorawantschy and Mr Jennings had recognised that Australia and Europe shared many similar challenges in countering violent extremism (CVE) and terrorism, but that no Track 1.5 forum yet existed for those involved in combating these issues to share their views, develop better understandings and explore how cooperation could be strengthened.

This proved to be a winning formula, and the dialogue has since been held interchangeably in either Australia or Germany/Europe to allow for an ongoing exchange between experts and practitioners from both regions. As the German Parliamentary State Secretary at the Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, Professor Dr Guenter Krings, highlighted at a previous dialogue, 'international terrorism does not stop at national borders and cooperation, coordination and intensified measures must therefore not be limited to Europe' but can only be achieved together. Equally, on the occasion of the fourth dialogue in 2018, then Assistant Home Affairs Minister Linda Reynolds noted in her opening speech, 'the fact this is the fourth dialogue of its kind is testimony to two things: the enduring success of this event; and its value as a forum in bringing together people with a shared determination to manage a great evil of our times.'

Seeking to continue with this vision, the 2020 ASPI–KAS Australia–Europe Counter-Terrorism Dialogue built on insights gathered at the fifth dialogue, which took place in Berlin and Brussels in October 2019.

PART 1: THE 2019 DIALOGUE

Katja Theodorakis

Connection to insights from the 2019 dialogue: 'Terrorism realities old and new: assessing continuing and evolving challenges'

Focusing on jihadist as well as right-wing extremism, the 2019 dialogue revealed the increasing political complexity of terrorism threats in an era of global interconnectedness. In that regard, it heralded the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation for tackling what is increasingly being recognised as a growing phenomenon with transnational dimensions.

Since 9/11, coverage of terrorist activity has largely centred on Islamist-based or -inspired militancy, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives across the globe. The landscape of violent *jihadi* extremism consists of many groups with different dynamics, localities and affiliations. This includes the ongoing activities of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia, elements of al-Qaeda and ISIS in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa. Additionally, local insurgencies remain active across the Sahel, Maghreb and the Horn of Africa. Also, struggles have played out not only in conflict zones or hotspots in the Middle East, Africa and Asia but also in Western centres and suburban crisis areas, such as France's *banlieues* and Belgium's Molenbeek area. The ongoing challenge posed by foreign fighters seeking to return to their countries of origin presents political and rule-of-law quandaries in addition to national security implications.[1]

At the same time, the Christchurch attack tragically highlighted the urgency of recognising the increasing threat of right-wing terrorism through its transnational networks and the commonality of ideological master motifs among its adherents, such as ethno-supremacism, 'white decline' (great replacement theory) and eco-fascism—linked by undercurrents of politicised misogyny.[2]

The keynote speeches at the opening session of the 2019 dialogue in Berlin by German MP Professor Dr Patrick Sensburg and Australian former NSW Deputy Police Commissioner Nick Kaldas emphasised the urgency of this task. That includes tackling terrorists' and extremists' exploitation of social media for sharing manifestos and live coverage of their attacks to gain traction. The challenges for the tech sector and policymakers in seeking to regulate this phenomenon are enormous and much has been achieved. Yet, while immensely important, the tech sector's efforts, in themselves are not sufficient. The issues remain an area for the development of policy and operational approaches for the wider CT community.

Investigations into the killing of German politician Walter Lübcke had revealed larger networks and widespread far right propaganda, pointing to an extensive history of hate speech and right-wing ideology allowed to be perpetuated both offline and online. And on 9 October 2019 (shortly before the dialogue), a terrorist motivated by the Christchurch attack killed two people in an attempt to carry out a live-streamed mass shooting at a synagogue in the German town of Halle in retribution for what he called the 'decay of the white race at the hands of the German Zionist Occupation Government'.[3] These cases shone a spotlight on digital networks and the need to examine the extent to which the internet still constitutes a space not sufficiently governed by the rule of law, allowing such

activities to persist. This was made even more painfully clear when, in February 2020, another right-wing terrorist killed 10 Germans in two shisha bars in Hanau, in an act he declared to be a stand against the 'poisoning of humanity and its civilisational advance through racially inferior populations'. This attack came days after German police had raided locations across the country and arrested members of a far right/prepper group who had planned synchronized, nation-wide massacres against Muslims, asylum seekers and politicians in an attempt to 'plunge Germany into a civil-war-like state'.[4]

These cases revealed powerful ideological currents that combine strong anti-immigration sentiments with far-right notions of racial purity and conspiracy-thinking. Of particular note is the prominence of 'accelerationist' themes— an ideology capitalising on tensions within liberal-democratic societies through a prism of decay. It posits that the liberal order is an inherently morally corrupt system the inevitable demise of which must be set in motion by fomenting social division and violence to stop the alleged inevitable decline of the white race.[5] Against these horrific acts, the 2019 dialogue illustrated that, while existing (international) regulations and institutional frameworks provide a substantial set of tools to challenge violent extremism, they are not enough.

Such international regulations and institutional frameworks include various UN Security Council resolutions, such as the UN's International Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives, alongside its Counterterrorism Committee and Executive Directorate, which have implemented comprehensive measures against Islamic State, al-Qaeda, foreign terrorist fighters and terrorism financing. The Global Counterterrorism Forum, Tech Against Terrorism and the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime and Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism are further examples of ongoing initiatives. The coalition to fight ISIS is continuing its efforts, and CT is also an ongoing priority in forums such as the G7, NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, where, alongside strategic efforts, the sharing of operational details and knowledge of specific threats is a particular focus. In regard to preventing violent extremism among youth, among the many initiatives are the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and UNESCO's guide for policymakers on Preventing Violent Extremism through Education, both of which underscore the importance of good-quality education.[6]

But the challenge, as it presented itself in late 2019, went beyond those efforts and mechanisms. Aside from the regulatory hurdles in preventing and prosecuting radicalization online, what makes jihadists' and right-wing extremists' violence such a complex challenge to the liberal order is their opposition to the West as a normative project.

An integral theme in the 2019 dialogue was that governments—beyond expressing rhetorical condemnation of terrorism and showing political resolve—must work closely with civil society and the research community in order to be able to implement responsive measures. This can only come about through a nuanced focus on wider trends and key drivers as well as more case-specific solutions and applied approaches. It requires careful balancing between the need for security and the centrality of democratic values when countering violent extremism, necessitating a healthy discussion among different stakeholders to make sure that the balance between public safety and democratic values is maintained. And these insights of the 2019 dialogue are even more pertinent in 2020 as we are faced with a more complex problem set of global proportions.

Reflections on the 2019 dialogue from Michael Shoebridge, Deputy Director, ASPI

The 2019 dialogue anticipated some of the new pressures and developments seen in 2020, including the power of social media as an echo chamber that drives division, reinforces narratives on the dangers of others, and enables different extremist groups to become more cohesive through identifying common enemies. A prominent example of this identified during the dialogue was that both far-right, anti-immigrant extremism and Islamic extremism gain from reacting to each other. These self-replicating and reinforcing extremist narratives are common challenges to Australian, German and wider EU counterterrorism (CT) efforts and create opportunities for close policy and operational cooperation between our CT 'communities of practice' as a result.

The 2019 dialogue also discussed emerging efforts to remove extremist content from social media platforms, particularly in the light of the horrific Christchurch attack and the failed but disturbing Halle attack. The discussion noted that such interventions to rapidly remove violent content, while useful, could only be a partial approach. Similarly, simple rebuttal of false extremist narratives is insufficient and risks reinforcing those narratives by repeating them, if only through the rebuttal. There may be lessons for CT approaches to social media use by extremists in how division on social media is beginning to be managed in other realms of ideas, including in political debate. Efforts to counter disinformation from foreign state actors is one example.

The dialogue recognised that the democratic values that are central to German and Australian societies and political systems are a key strength in countering extremism and violence, not a hindrance to such work, so advancing and protecting such societal values must remain a core principle for CT policymakers and for national governments dealing with the threat of extremist violence. Beyond very direct operational thinking, there is no true 'trade-off' to be had between public safety and democratic principles. Instead, public safety is best advanced through such principles, because they create the foundation for open and cohesive societies, which are the primary means for achieving public safety. So, democratic values must be used to test and measure proposed new legal powers and interventions relevant to CT.

It's interesting to reflect on this point in the light of 2020 and the discussion at this year's dialogue. One encouraging observation is that the successful management of the Covid-19 pandemic depends as much on social cohesion and cooperation with each other and with government and public health authorities as it does on government direction and control. In Australia, for example, there has been an open and spirited public debate on the social distancing measures and restrictions in place to manage Covid. Government and public health communication has engaged with the different views quite effectively. The result, with some exceptions, has been to drive social cohesion and limit the appeal of more extremist notions that might drive violence, while also re-establishing a level of public trust in public institutions. Nevertheless, a closer focus on extremist groups shows attempts to exploit the pandemic and use it to drive extremist violence where possible, as the 2020 dialogue analysed.

Enter the pandemic: context for the 2020 dialogue

As the pandemic has revealed the inherent vulnerabilities of a hyperconnected world, governments and multilateral bodies are forced to find ways to minimise not only the danger from the virus but also the damage resulting from the sudden halt to the free movement of people and goods on which our long-term prosperity and well-being depend.

And, as expected, extremists of all sorts opportunistically seek to exploit the crisis as a validation and reinforcement of their message and leverage it for operational and strategic aims. Violent extremism and terrorism, in their different variants, thrive on crisis narratives. This way, disasters and national emergencies can directly benefit extremist groups as they try to capitalise on the personal and societal disruption and ensuing uncertainty. For instance, a key feature of Islamic State's strategy has been the exploitation of governance voids and global crises, which can be seen in its media as well as its on-the-ground strategy. A resurgence underway (at the time of writing) in Syria and Iraq demonstrates once more how the group is able to leverage disorder by taking advantage of the distraction of Covid-19 to launch more aggressive attacks. On the right-wing side of the extremism spectrum, the pandemic is equally offering opportunity for political exploitation and manipulation; citizen dissent against legitimate government measures to contain the pandemic (such as lockdowns, social distancing measures or mandatory mask-wearing) has proven to be easily galvanized into more extremist, anti-democratic beliefs and action – especially in conjunction with powerful conspiracy myths.[7]

During exceptional crises such as pandemics, it is a common sociological dynamic for societies and groups to gravitate towards claims of exclusivity and purity by 'othering' and demonising certain groups: blaming minorities and foreigners and putting up walls, real or figurative ones. And, especially in the case of extremist identities, these dynamics are mutually enforcing; disorder, fear and mistrust drive a process of increasing polarisation and identity-based violence in which a group blames its ideological enemy as the source of the crisis.[8] This symbiotic component of 'othering' was for instance highlighted by EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove in an assessment presented to EU member nations in May this year:

> 'Infidels' or 'apostates' serve as scapegoats for jihadists, members of ethnic and religious minority groups for right-wing extremists, and 'class enemies' and 'capitalists' for left-wing extremists.[9]

Coupled with an increasing resonance of conspiracy theories and other anti-democracy discourses, this results in a cross-fertilisation of ideologies and agendas in which fringe groups unite with more established right-wing movements under a common cause in rallies against government measures. The agendas of so-called 'sovereign citizen' groups and QAnon adherents are of notable concern, in combination with the international ripples caused by the Black Lives Matter protests.[10] These developments also occur against the background of what can be considered a normalisation of racism and xenophobia globally. This includes trends towards the mainstreaming of populist or right-wing discourses in Western democracies: Germany, various other EU nations, the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.[11] Also, considering that Australia has had to brace for the impact of the Covid-19 crisis so soon after the devastating 2019–2020 bushfire season (which had already prompted conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns),[12] an acceleration of certain trends in the extremist ecosystem is to be expected.

Accordingly, the global pandemic has brought into even sharper focus the need to assess what resilience, particularly social and societal resilience, means, and—as crises manifest at the global as well as the national level—how it can be strengthened. Against these developments, the line of inquiry for the 2020 dialogue became clear: to examine the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on existing fault lines and extremism trends, assessing exactly which dynamics are coming to the fore (and which trends might be weakening) in response to the pandemic. To that end, the comparative perspective of the dialogue between Germany/Europe and Australia was intended to enable forward-looking discussions about what national and international resilience in the face of these challenges can look like.

Towards national resilience: key questions and insights

Key questions

- Hybridity of protests with interlinking ideological currents that transcend a unified political agenda: right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism, anti-vacciners and conspiracy theorists (here Germany makes for an especially interesting comparison)
- Offline/online dynamics: a changed field of operations?
- Lessons from counter-terrorism: appropriate legislation/policy measures. How to avoid exacerbating existing divisions?

The 2020 dialogue made clear once more that the binding theme across all these Covid-induced developments is the challenge to the continued functioning of liberal democracy. The Covid-19 crisis came at a time when Western democracies were already challenged by populist narratives and vulnerable to divisive internal as well as external influences. Violent extremist messaging in this new climate not only aims to polarise and antagonise identity differences in democratic populations but works actively to expose the alleged failings and claimed inherent decay of democratic systems as a justification for violence to overturn them.

The emerging picture is one of fluidity or fusion of extremist currents. This requires ongoing fine-grained analysis that avoids jumping to quick and predictable conclusions about an inevitable rise in extremism triggered by the Covid crisis. 'Anti-establishmentism' is emerging as a central radicalising force and a key feature of the latest iterations of extremism. It manifests in 'action-ready' mistrust in government and political leaders based on a galvanising of the notion of 'the people' as a counter-power to state authority. Here, it is important to assess over time whether the ideological convergences that have seemingly united diverse extremist groups and individuals, act as surface glue only, or whether their connections go deeper and are able to generate a broader agenda for change beyond calls to pull down what exists.

The societal fault lines becoming visible during 2020, such as through the US election campaign and #BlackLivesMatter protests or the anti-government 'hygiene demonstrations' in Germany, highlight the crucial task of investing in social cohesion and democratic integrity. Being attuned to the divisions and fractures that can develop and be exploited by state actors and extremists alike is especially crucial in the area of CT. Beyond easy-to-grab headlines and simplistic pieces that follow well-trodden lines of reasoning, there is an established body of empirical research and scholarship on the underlying dynamics and drivers of extremism that can be drawn on.

Key insights

Accurate definitions and tailored approaches are key. This includes a comprehensive understanding of the societal dynamics and fissures on which the appeal of extremist groups is built. For this, nuanced, clearly articulated conceptualisations of the various ideologies and ideological currents (and their interplay) are crucial.

A sharp distinction between online and offline spaces is not helpful when addressing radicalisation. Measures need to take into consideration that the common search for connections, community and authenticity spans those two life-worlds, which should not be seen as separate realms.

Transparency, empathy and credibility are therefore essential for governments to maintain democratic legitimacy, especially in an overloaded information/disinformation environment. This includes trustworthy and emotionally connected communications and appropriate service provision.

PART 2: THE 2020 DIALOGUE

Leanne Close

Covid-19 altered the way many organisations operated in 2020. The joint annual ASPI–KAS dialogue was likewise affected, and an alternative delivery mode was employed.

On 18 August and 1 September, ASPI and KAS jointly hosted the sixth dialogue series using a hybrid delivery method in which some Australia-based representatives attended the offices of ASPI in Canberra while others in Europe and Australia joined online.

This successful hybrid approach allowed a range of keynote speakers to address the invitation-only select group and provide insights into the global picture of terrorism affecting Europe and Australia. This format operates under the Chatham House rule for non-attribution of personal comments and views. This Special Report brings together the key issues and themes discussed, including suggested policy and operational areas of focus for CT efforts.

The theme of this year's Track 1.5 dialogue was 'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on extremism dynamics: Towards national resilience'.

The Australian keynote speakers were Heather Cook (Deputy Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) and Ian McCartney (Deputy Commissioner Investigations of the Australian Federal Police). From Europe, we were joined by Wil van Gemert (Deputy Executive Director of Europol, Operations Directorate) and Dr Daniel H Heinke (Chief of Bureau of Operations at Bremen State Police and adjunct professor at the Institute for Police and Security Research, University of Bremen, and the George C Marshall European Center for Security Studies).

Current global and political environment

The dialogue opening focused on the current global political and social landscape. Key issues highlighted included the following:

- Millions across the world, and increasing numbers in Australia and Europe, are facing poverty and uncertain futures—the 'new poor'.
- Displaced people around the world are overwhelming refugee systems, many of which are unable to cope with this increase as well as Covid-19 implications.
- There have been manifest failures of governments to deal with the pandemic, along with some notable successes, and we are witnessing violence spreading into the streets where failures and pressures are high.
- Social isolation, unemployment and access to online media continue to increase the risk, potential appeal and threat of terrorist radicalisation in our communities.
- Threats from misinformation and disinformation campaigns, promulgated broadly and easily through online platforms, have increased exponentially as extremist narratives percolate in this broader environment of disinformation.

- There has also been a normalisation of racism and xenophobia, including the mainstreaming of populist right-wing and extreme far-right discourses in Western democracies.[13] Coupled with an increasing prevalence of conspiracy theories and counter-government narratives, this can unite fringe groups with more established right-wing movements under a common cause in rallies against government measures. Despite a level of superficiality to this unity, it can still be powerful enough to produce ideas for combined action, including protests, which bring the potential for violence.

It is vitally important that leaders, politicians, academics and CT practitioners continue to discuss lessons learned in countering terrorism and share policy approaches in order to continue to improve prevention and investigation methods. Emerging practice in countering disinformation beyond the CT world, whether by state or non-state actors, may be helpful.

Islamic extremism

Post-caliphate, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is in disarray but is nonetheless rebuilding a level of coherence. As it consolidates, the conditions for a potential rise of ISIL continue to exist. The group's reach and strength of narrative remain strong, and an estimated 18,000–20,000 foreign fighters are active in the region. Australian and European authorities have worked with international coalition partners to seize evidential material and compile briefs of evidence for prosecutions of foreign fighters, should they return to their homelands.

The conditions that led to ISIL's original rise are still present today, including sectarian divisions, ungoverned spaces in the region, and strong jihadist reach, leadership and narratives.

For children and non-combatants in the region, there remain significant concerns about what they have been, and continue to be, exposed to. This requires effective diplomatic, policy and humanitarian assistance to prevent or reduce their potential for radicalisation.

Al-Qaeda, which is still a concern in Afghanistan and the Middle East, remains organised and provides a coherent narrative for its adherents. It is expected that al-Qaeda will also benefit from the drawdown of Western forces in the Middle East.

Likewise, the threat to Australians and Australian interests remains strong in Southeast Asia. So far, in 2020, the Indonesian National Police has arrested and charged approximately 100 people with terrorism offences. Collaboration between Australia and Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, has proved a successful CT strategy in the region.

Since 2014, when Australia's threat level was raised to 'probable', the country has experienced seven terrorist attacks and 18 disruptions, including two plots by alleged right-wing extremists. Around 250 Australians travelled to join IS, and more than 100 of them died for their cause. In Australia, a further 250 people had their passports cancelled and were stopped from travelling to the Middle East. Australia's experience of and scale of interest in the Islamic terrorist cause in the community has remained surprisingly high. Jihadist terrorists have also used the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst for their messages and propaganda to perpetrate violence.

In Europe, the most successful acts have been perpetrated by lone actors, often inspired by and seeking validation from others through online forums, and the picture has become more complex. In the 2000s, most threats came from organisations, but that is not the case any more. The picture is now populated by a range of different types of people, radicalised communities living in close proximity, networks built on family ties, and behaviours that increasingly depend on individual dispositions or small groups. Right-wing extremism (RWE) has been an area of focus for quite some time but has received heightened attention since around 2016. Before the pandemic, the overall number of terrorist attacks within the EU had been decreasing, although in 2019 European nations experienced a total of 17 attacks and averted a further 14. Law enforcement and intelligence activities remain strong, but the threat persists.

Right-wing extremism

Although Islamic extremism remains a high threat, RWE is also a serious rising global threat. Covid-19 has been a factor in that rise, as it has allowed extreme right-wing ideologies to flourish widely through the internet, especially among young white males. The pandemic is also offering opportunities for political exploitation, as legitimate government measures to deal with the pandemic, such as enforced quarantines, self-isolation and border closures, assist them in propagating their anti-government sentiment and views about ethnic segregation and extreme immigration restrictions.

The organisation of right-wing groups, predominantly through social media platforms, gives rise to concern because of their more spontaneous intentions, which can quickly translate into real-world action. This new reality is inspired by terrorist narratives not dissimilar to jihadist narratives, but which are quite unpredictable.

The speakers at the dialogue emphasised that radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violence. We can safely assume that the Covid-19 containment measures and travel restrictions make things harder for terrorists. They have fewer training opportunities and a reduced ability to scope out new targets. Most concerningly, however, threats have become more complex and difficult for intelligence and law enforcement to discern and act upon, especially because of widespread internet access and exposure.

The Christchurch terrorist event in March 2019 accelerated the spread of RWE rhetoric. Since the attack, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation estimates that there has been an increase of over 30% in RWE investigations in Australia.[14] Europe has also witnessed a major rise in neo-Nazism, anti-globalisation and identarian movements and race-war rhetoric, particularly since the Breivik terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011.[15]

Covid-19 presents new opportunities for people to reinforce existing racist and xenophobic narratives, and anti-government ideologies are increasing, despite indicators of wider trust in public institutions and authorities in Australia owing to the successful pandemic management demonstrated to date. Many protest groups are focused on anti-globalisation and feel, or perhaps want to feel, that democracy is failing because that justifies their world views. While Australian groups, such as The Lads Society and Antipodean Resistance, have stopped short of promoting violence, they have also faced great scrutiny from authorities, which may have driven them to be more circumspect or covert. Some RWE groups in Australia have splintered due to infighting among members and moved their activities underground, making them more difficult to monitor. This splintering is not a new phenomenon among RWE groups, which have struggled to present a coherent and cohesive agenda that is not as much a product of individual personalities as it is of an intellectual or political platform.

> 'We're just seeing the tip of the iceberg (with RWE) … We're getting a sense of what the challenges are.'

There are fears that the potential for an international economic crisis leading to higher unemployment might emphasise perceptions of a social divide, potentially fuelling radicalisation and certainly causing greater propensity for civil unrest and violent protests. This represents a communication challenge, particularly for governments that need to regain trust.

The speakers at the dialogue believed that the situation would not be fundamentally different should a Covid-19 vaccine be developed, as political systems around the world are becoming more polarised and nationalist language and rhetoric are creating a dialogue of 'us versus them', dividing communities rather than coalescing societies.

The impact of social media

All speakers agreed that the influence of the online environment is having a significant effect on the enormous spread of terrorist propaganda. The experience of intelligence and law enforcement agencies is that terrorist ideology now attracts larger, more diverse sections of our societies because terrorists' propaganda and online rhetoric are increasingly sophisticated, using quickly spreading viral messages of misinformation and disinformation that become impossible to contain. That, coupled with encryption technologies, can hamper investigations.

Conspiracy theorists abound on the internet, and many have used the Covid-19 pandemic, 5G cell towers and the Black Lives Matter protests as catalysts for violent protest or terrorist actions, including several attacks in the EU. Black Lives Matter protests have been used opportunistically to feed into extremist narratives that the 'race wars' are coming. It is feared that the spread of this propaganda online has the potential to lead lone actors to commit terrorist acts, of which several examples have occurred in the US.[16]

CT experts find that the *modus operandi* of Islamic extremists and right-wing extremists are similar in design and appeal. While online environments have allowed the acceleration and growth of extremist rhetoric, Covid-19 has likewise allowed extremist rhetoric to flourish.

Extremist and fringe groups online are gaining more prominence and credence in the real world and are extremely difficult to counter. Social media companies have been actively engaged and are positively supporting intelligence and law enforcement agencies to try to reduce the exposure and reach of extremist groups. Dealing with the volume of material and limited legal options mean that stemming the flow of extremist propaganda is like trying to divert the torrent of water at Niagara Falls. However, countering online propaganda and violence will continue to improve with focus, time, experience and new technological developments.

Post-conviction concerns

The life cycle of a terrorist doesn't stop after prosecution and conviction. In Australia, eight terrorists have been released this year, and a further 12 are to be released over the next year. Concerns about the continued or enhanced radicalisation of some of those offenders highlights the need to constantly focus on rehabilitation strategies. While prison deradicalisation programs are generally strong and effective, no system is foolproof; at London Bridge and Streatham in the UK, two people committed violent terrorist offences shortly after their release from prison in 2019 and early 2020, respectively.[17]

While legislation has been enacted in Australia to keep people in jail (under continuing detention orders[18]) should they pose an ongoing threat, the legal thresholds for doing so are high and place a significant burden on authorities to reach the necessary burden of proof.

Community programs for rehabilitation, preventing and countering violent extremism remain critically important in the fight against terrorism, even if results are patchy and partial. Education and mental health support programs also have continuing value.

Strengthening national resilience and social cohesion

The theme of the 2020 dialogue—'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on extremism dynamics: Towards national resilience'—provided the opportunity for all participants to consider the global policy and leadership challenges in building community strength and resilience in the continuing fight against terrorism.

The dialogue identified the need to target preventive and counter-responses to the type of activity being investigated, whether it is Islamic or far-right extremism or countering general conspiracy theories. The interactions and strategies may need to be varied, depending on the ideology of individuals and the broader societal debates and environment that the ideology is operating in. There's currently a lot of work being undertaken jointly with the academic community to determine what strategies might work for different groups and individuals to deter them from radicalisation.

Intelligence and law enforcement agencies in Australia have benefited from strong legislation allowing them to act more effectively and deal with the changing threat and nature of terrorism over the past two decades. This legislative focus continues, as numbers of convicted offenders being released from prison demonstrates: new problems and legal questions arise when it's clear that some offenders show no remorse and are a continuing threat to society if operating freely outside prison. This has led to suggested new powers allowing the extended supervision of offenders in the community after their release.

As well as identifying legislative issues, intelligence and law enforcement agencies agree that it's critical that authorities continue to partner and build more capabilities because the threat environment continues to evolve. This includes building and enhancing international collaboration and technological capabilities, as well as strengthening community engagement and partnerships.

For a long-term security and foreign policy dimension, international collaboration is critical, as terrorist groups adapt to circumstances. The nexus between terrorists, hate speech and misinformation is clear and can only be countered by strong CT strategies, community support and resilience.

In dealing with the increase in online sharing of information and terrorist content, broader industry and community discussion and consultation about the efficacy of taking down content is required. Even the most successful action on content removal will need to be complemented by other approaches to dealing with online content; for example, CT approaches may both inform and be informed by broader efforts to counter disinformation and destructive narratives. Further attention is also imperative to enhance community engagement and address how vulnerable people are exploited and radicalised online; again, terrorism and radicalisation aren't the only form of radicalisation, as there are parallels and lessons available in other fields.

All agencies are engaging positively with social media companies and receiving stronger recognition that companies acknowledge their responsibilities for discouraging and removing terrorist content. There's also a need for ongoing dialogue between law enforcement authorities and social media companies to openly inform each other about potential risks and collaborate to find a balance between content moderation and the protection of freedom of speech.

Further ideas to strengthen national resilience raised during the dialogues included:

- delivering civics and ethics education in schools and universities to improve critical thinking skills and judgement
- involving reformed extremists to engage appropriately with young people in CVE programs
- reconsidering the language and terminology used in the media and by government representatives
- considering offensive campaigns to counter disinformation
- recognising and anticipating new or emerging terrorist threats, such as threats to health security and the potential for terrorists to deliberately spread viruses or pathogens
- being mindful of risks to fragile states, particularly considering the economic impact of Covid-19
- continuing to invest in disengagement and CVE strategies
- building strong social cohesion initiatives and messaging for communities.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Security in our countries relies on peace, civility and collaboration beyond our own borders. The propagation of hate speech and disinformation is being creatively used by terrorists and conspiracy theorists, as is the current pandemic. By creating divisions of 'us versus them', or 'hijacking' existing divisions and pressures within our societies for their own purposes, extremists are seeking ways to recruit others to their views and looking at new ways to commit terrorist atrocities.

There are several antidotes to this phenomenon, including:

- continuing to invest in CT strategies and maintaining prevention programs, while also understanding that there are significant competing budgetary pressures
- working closely with social media companies to counter misinformation and prevent terrorist groups from propagating their message of hate and division
- looking for parallels, lessons, exchanges of practice and shared approaches that CT agencies can take with partners working in similar areas of practice to counter disinformation, such as by countering political disinformation and interference (including by state actors)
- recognising that dealing with Covid-19, terrorism and economic crises can't be done independently by individual states—there's great strength in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, sharing of ideas and collaboration, which need to be further supported and enhanced.

6th ASPI-KAS Australia-Europe Counter-Terrorism Dialogue in Canberra, August/September 2020.
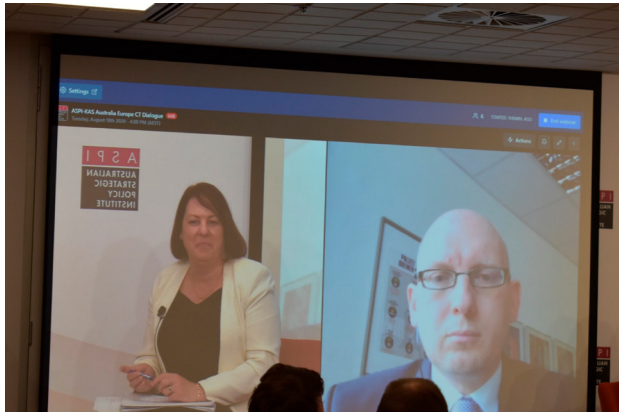

Keynote speaker from Germany, Dr Daniel Heinke Chief of Bureau of Operations, Bremen State Police and Adjunct Professor at the Institute for Police & Security Research, University of Bremen and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, with Leanne Close at the first seminar of the dialogue.

Heather Cook, Deputy Director ASIO (2nd from right), Australian keynote speaker at the first seminar with the German Ambassador Dr Thomas Fitschen (top right) and the ASPI and KAS team.

The Australian keynote speaker at the 2nd seminar, Ian McCartney, Deputy Commissioner Investigations of the Australian Federal Police.
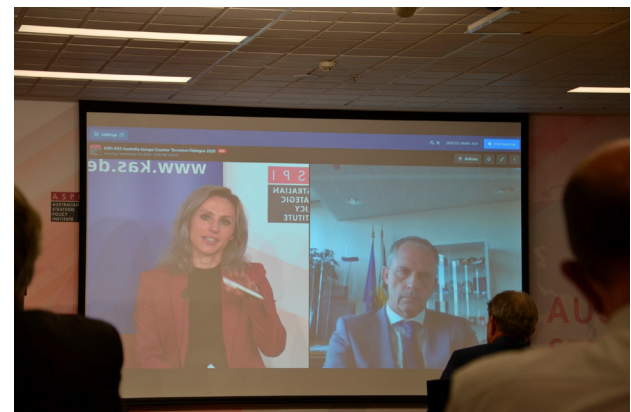
European keynote speaker Wil van Gemert Deputy Executive Director EUROPOL Operations Directorate, with Katja Theodorakis at the second seminar.

Ian McCartney, Deputy Commissioner Investigations of the Australian Federal Police (centre), with the EU Ambassador Dr Michael Pulch (top left).

Leanne Close from ASPI and Katja Theodorakis from KAS moderating the discussion.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASPI   Australian Strategic Policy Institute

CT   counterterrorism

CVE   countering violent extremism

EU   European Union

ISIL   Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS   Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KAS   Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

RWE   right-wing extremism

Some previous ASPI publications

ASPI–KAS

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on extremism dynamics: Towards national resilience

Insights from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's annual Europe–Australia Counter-Terrorism dialogues (2019 and 2020)