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The challenge of far-right ideology to democracy and human rights in Europe

Report[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
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Summary

In view of the increase in recent years of far-right violence, driven by xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, the report outlines the threats these actions pose to human rights, to the functioning of democratic institutions, and to diverse and inclusive societies.

To counter these challenges to the fundamental values that the Council of Europe aims to uphold, the report calls for strengthened adherence to these values. This includes fortifying legislation to counter far-right extremism, enhancing education and media literacy, and combating online radicalisation.

The draft resolution underlines that politicians and political parties should be at the forefront of responses to far-right extremism, both in the public defence of human rights and democratic principles, and in the unequivocal rejection of all forms of racism and intolerance, hate speech, incitement to racial hatred and harassment. It calls for a respectful and inclusive dialogue, and encourages political parties to sign the Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society.

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15337, Reference 4606 of 27 September 2021.

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A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Ideologies that seek to repudiate democracy, undermine human rights and ignore the rule of law are in direct opposition to the core values of the Council of Europe. The attacks of recent years by far-right extremists, both in Europe and globally, must serve as a signal of the danger posed by this ideology to human rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, and to diverse and inclusive societies.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls the commitments taken by Council of Europe member States to abide by the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and to uphold pluralism, tolerance and respect for diversity as fundamental values that underpin European societies. Extremist ideologies that threaten these principles and commitments warrant a coherent and responsible approach in order to preserve a free, secure, and democratic Europe.

3. Far-right violence, driven by xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, has increased sharply in recent years. Failed coup attempts from Germany to Brazil and attacks on elected representatives have further demonstrated the growing danger of far-right extremism, while a number of member States consider forms of far-right terrorism the fastest growing or most prominent domestic security threat they face.

4. The Assembly has repeatedly made clear its unequivocal condemnation of manifestations of far-right extremism. It has adopted a number of resolutions to tackle the challenge of extreme right-wing ideology, hate speech and intolerance. The evolving dynamics of modern far-right movements, the more sophisticated means of communication, the proliferation of online extremist material, the mainstreaming of the far-right ideology into the public domain, and the raised threat levels across a number of member States mean that it is necessary to continue to refine and adapt actions to protect against ideologies that are incompatible with human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

5. A continuing pattern of democratic backsliding in Europe provides a backdrop for the rise in actions that are against our core values and standards. The Assembly considers that the most effective way of preventing far-right extremism is to strengthen adherence to these core values.

6. The Fourth Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe has given renewed impetus to the Organisation as the cornerstone of European democratic security, to the protection of our democratic foundations, and to countering challenges to human rights. The Assembly welcomes the resolve of member States to stand firm against authoritarian tendencies by enhancing shared commitments.

7. Politicians and political parties should be at the forefront of responses to the phenomenon, both in the public defence of human rights and democratic principles and in the unequivocal rejection of all forms of racism and intolerance, hate speech, incitement to racial hatred and harassment.

8. Governments must ensure that there are counterweights to extremist discourse by publicly challenging the narratives of far-right extremism, and ensuring that measures are in place that strengthen the respect of human rights and promote a model of society that embraces diversity and respects human dignity.

9. Comprehensive approaches to tackle far-right extremist ideologies are needed that seek to engage all levels of society in preventing and countering violent extremism. The Assembly emphasises the need for national action plans against extremist ideologies that include whole-of-society approaches, involving civil society, the media, educational institutions, and political parties.

10. In light of reports of the elevated risk of youth radicalisation in recent years, the Assembly recalls the importance of education as a bulwark against the spread of far-right extremist ideologies, and the continued need to enhance societal resilience against extremist materials and recruitment in response to the extensive use of online platforms to promote extremist ideologies.

11. The Assembly recognises the vital role played in democracies by law enforcement personnel. While it is the case that the overwhelming majority of police officers reject extremism in all its forms, the exposure of far-right extremists in police forces in a number of member States in recent years is a cause for serious concern. Individuals who reject the democratic foundations of the State cannot serve it, and the Assembly emphasises the need to ensure effective mechanisms are implemented against extremists in the police.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 11 September 2023.

12. The Assembly considers that, in light of the transnational nature of the phenomenon, enhanced co-operation between member States is necessary to tackle the pan-European dimension of the threat, and urges member States to engage in international co-operation and information sharing to effectively counter cross-border activities of far-right extremist groups.

13. The Assembly attaches great importance to the work of the bodies of the Council of Europe, notably through the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, in the monitoring, standard setting, and co-operation activities for combating discrimination, racism and intolerance in our societies.

14. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:

14.1. review and, if necessary, enhance existing legislation to effectively counter far-right extremism as well as hate speech, incitement to violence, and discrimination propagated by far-right individuals and groups;

14.2. strengthen existing measures to protect groups in vulnerable and marginalised situations from discrimination, harassment, and violence stemming from far-right ideologies;

14.3. promote education and media literacy by integrating comprehensive education about human rights, diversity, and democracy into school curricula, and enhance media literacy programmes to empower citizens to critically analyse and resist extremist propaganda;

14.4. combat online radicalisation through collaboration with social media platforms and tech companies to identify and remove online content that promotes far-right ideologies, while safeguarding freedom of expression and avoiding undue censorship;

14.5. develop strategies to counter disinformation and propaganda propagated by far-right groups, ensuring that accurate and evidence-based information prevails;

14.6. continue to support civil society by providing adequate financial and moral support to civil society organisations and grassroots initiatives working to promote tolerance, intercultural understanding, social cohesion, and deradicalisation;

14.7. encourage political leaders to engage in respectful and inclusive public discourse, condemning hate speech and divisive rhetoric, and advocating for policies that uphold democratic values and human rights;

14.8. enhance the protection of elected officials from politically motivated crimes, intimidation and threats.

15. To this end, the Assembly calls on member States:

15.1. as regards legislation to counter far-right extremism and to enhance the protection of groups in vulnerable and marginalised situations, to:

15.1.1. ensure legislation that addresses the dissolution of political parties or prohibition of the formation of a political party complies with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the recommendations of the European Commission for Democracy through Law;

15.1.2. elaborate potential strategies to prosecute violent extremism conducive to terrorism;

15.1.3. sign and ratify, if they have not already done so, Protocol No. 12 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 177) and the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime, concerning the criminalisation of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems (ETS No. 189);

15.1.4. disseminate and fully implement Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech;

15.1.5. set up anti-hate crime units in police forces;

15.1.6. ensure effective mechanisms for taking action against law enforcement personnel engaged in far-right extremist activities;

15.2. as regards the promotion of education and media literacy, combating online radicalisation and countering disinformation, to:

15.2.1. counteract extremist narratives and various forms of incitement, in line with Assembly Resolution 2221 (2018) “Counter-narratives to terrorism”, through school programmes and awareness-raising campaigns, underlining the shared values of human dignity, peace, non-violence, tolerance and human rights, and involve the victims of extremist acts;

15.2.2. develop a co-ordinated national media literacy policy, in line with Assembly Resolution 2314 (2019) “Media education in the new media environment”;

15.2.3. support educational projects and teaching methods aimed at tackling anti-democratic ideologies;

15.2.4. supplement public messaging and awareness campaigns by taking active measures to address conspiracy theories and disinformation and enhance fact-checking capabilities as part of a package of measures to enhance societal resilience against far-right propaganda;

15.2.5. ensure that internet intermediaries take effective measures to fulfil their duties and responsibilities not to make accessible or disseminate hate speech that is prohibited under criminal, civil or administrative law;

15.3. as regards supporting civil society, to:

15.3.1. support prevention policies, including through engagement with entities that work directly with the youth, such as social workers and mental health workers;

15.3.2. deepen partnerships with civil society organisations that are engaged with deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and victim support;

15.4. as regards upholding a respectful and inclusive political discourse, to:

15.4.1. implement the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech by adopting relevant administrative, civil and, as a last resort, criminal law provisions;

15.4.2. ensure that no public funding is allocated to parties promoting hate speech and hate crime;

15.5. as regards enhancing the protection of elected officials, to elaborate, in co-ordination with them, specific measures to improve their protection.

16. The Assembly, in calling for a respectful and inclusive political dialogue, encourages its members to speak out against all forms of intolerance, and political parties to sign the Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society as endorsed in its Resolution 2443 (2022) “The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society”.

17. The Assembly invites international organisations which share the Council of Europe’s values, starting with the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to increase their co-operation with the Council of Europe in order to find common solutions to the shared problem of far-right extremism.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Samad Seyidov, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and origin

1. In its Resolution 1344 (2003) "Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe", drawing attention to the trend of political extremism in Europe, the Parliamenty Assembly encouraged Council of Europe member States to be more vigilant than ever and to assess the threats posed by extremism to the fundamental values that the Council of Europe aims to uphold. To counteract the harmful effects of extremism and to preserve the rule of law based on respect for democratic principles and human rights, the Assembly recommended that member States adopt a set of legislative and administrative measures, as well as measures in the field of political ethics and education. It also stressed that to be effective, such measures should benefit from the backing of public opinion and be supported by civil society.

2. Twenty years later, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy (the committee) set out to prepare a report on "The challenge of far-right ideology to democracy and human rights in Europe", with a view to elaborating recommendations aimed at hindering the spread of the ideology of intolerance throughout Europe and eradicating impunity for acts of intimidation and violence committed by representatives of far-right movements.[3] The truth is that over the past two decades the far-right ideology has risen and rapidly spread both in Europe, and globally. Recent illustrations of this include the arrest, in December 2022, of dozens associated with the far-right Reichsbürger movement (citizens of the Reich) on suspicion of plotting a coup against the German Government. In January 2023, in a grim echo of the US Capitol invasion by backers of former President Donald Trump in 2021, hundreds of right-wing extremist protesters, supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro, invaded and vandalised places of power in Brasília (Brazil).

3. The pillars of our democratic security – an efficient and independent judiciary; freedom of expression; freedom of assembly and association; the efficient functioning of democratic institutions; and the construction of an inclusive society and democratic citizenship – are all threatened by extremist ideology. Both the Assembly in its resolutions[4] and the member States of the Council of Europe have called this democratic security key for securing peace and prosperity in Europe, and have resultantly committed to countering actions that undermine human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This was notably reiterated in the Reykjavík Declaration of the Council of Europe Fourth Summit of the Heads of State and Government (Reykjavík Declaration).[5] Against this background, this report is timelier than ever.

1.2. Scope of the report

4. Following my appointment as rapporteur in September 2021, the committee held a first exchange of views on this issue on 16 March 2022. During this exchange, members noted that the far-right ideology was a serious threat not only to democracy, but also to international peace and stability. Stressing that violence or hatred in political discourse and activity should be fully rejected, members cautioned against the manipulation for political purposes of labels such as "extremist" or "far-right" for political parties, which should not be used lightly.

5. In a further exchange of views held by the committee on 27 April 2023, opinions were divided. While some members thought that I should focus the report on the far-right ideology, others drew my attention to far-left extremism and suggested that I expand the scope of the report to cover all forms of extreme ideologies.

6. I agree that left-wing extremism trends should continue to be followed: it is a phenomenon that continues to affect the continent, with Europol reports for the period 2006-2020 showing over 414 failed, foiled or completed attacks in European Union countries inspired by extreme left-wing and anarchist ideology.[6] A large part of these attacks resulted in vandalism and destruction of property, and several important instances have seen injuries and human casualties.[7] These ideologies have been recognised in the Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027) as an issue of concern for some countries, though the threat of violent far-left extremism across Europe has been considered low.[8]

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3. Doc. 15337.
4. See, for example, Resolution 2369 (2021) "The Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe".
5. "Reykjavík Declaration, United Around Our Values", Reykjavík Summit of the Council of Europe, 16-17 May 2023.
6. Europol, Terrorism Situation and Trend reports (TE-SAT) from 2007 to 2021.

7. Having attentively considered both views, I have decided to follow the scope laid down in the original motion. I have reached this conclusion not only because far-right ideology has a particular historical legacy in Europe but also because it is considered the fastest growing threat in many European countries, as highlighted by the Council of Europe's Committee on Counter Terrorism.[9] In the spirit of the motion for a resolution at its origin, this report will focus on the manifestations of far-right ideology that are in clear contradiction to the principles and values of the Council of Europe, which the motion notes as an expansion of intolerance, hate speech and discrimination which is often accompanied by acts of intimidation and violence. It is this extremist threat that the report will address.

8. During the preparation of the report, on 25 January 2023, the committee held a hearing with the participation of two experts: Dr Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Founding Director, Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, American University, Professor, School of Public Affairs and School of Education, Washington (USA), and Mr Nicholas Potter, journalist and researcher of the far-right at the Amadeu Antonio Foundation (Berlin). A second hearing was held on 20 June 2023 with the participation of Mr Nicos Alivizatos (Greece), member of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).

2. Defining the far-right extremist ideology

9. There is not a universally agreed definition of far-right extremism. As an umbrella term, it can encompass a heterogeneous set of ideologies, beliefs and narratives. For the purposes of this report, three defining characteristics are outlined, that are to all be present to fulfil classification as far-right extremism. First, a belief in some form of natural inequality or hierarchy between peoples or groups of people, which may include nationalism, nativism, racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and homophobia. Second, a belief in authoritarianism. Third, an implicit or explicit aim to destroy the democratic system.[10]

10. Within the far-right, scholars usually distinguish between the "radical" and the "extreme" right. Radical right groups and organisations, while operating within the democratic processes, accepting popular sovereignty and the minimal procedural rules of parliamentary democracy, are hostile to liberal democracy and criticise its crucial aspects, such as pluralism and minority rights, and publicly condemn the use of violence as an instrument of politics.

11. By contrast, a key feature of extreme far-right groups and organisations is the rejection of the underlying values of democracies and the rule of law.[11] The behavioural characteristic that therefore distinguishes the radical and the extreme right is the legitimisation of the use of violence by the latter to pursue their aims. This threat or use of harassment or violence have been stated to be important features of far-right extremism.[12] They include terrorist attacks, hate crime, spontaneous violence, hate speech, and incitement to violence or hatred.[13] Contemporary examples of extreme right actors include Golden Dawn in Greece, and the white supremacist groups in the United States.[14]

12. The report therefore uses this prism of ideology accompanied by the behavioural characteristic of the legitimisation of the use of violence to define the phenomenon.

13. In addition to being ideologically complex, the far-right is organisationally varied. Aside from political parties, there are a range of sub-party groupings with far-right sympathies, including relatively formal organisations such as think thanks, pressure groups, media organisations, as well as more ad hoc groups, including forums, street organisations, online and offline communities. Increasingly, the far-right space is defined by networks rather than formal organisations, with individuals maintaining multiple ties and avoiding formal membership. The far-right is also composed in large part of lone activists developing, following and promoting their own position from individual platforms.[15] The Council of Europe Committee on Counter-

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7. European Commission Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, "Contemporary Violent Left-wing and Anarchist Extremism in the EU: Analysing Threats and Potential for P/CVE", 2021.
8. Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, "Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe", 7 September 2022.
9. Idem.
10. European Parliament, "Right-wing extremism in the European Union", Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, May 2022.
11. Idem.
12. P. Wilkinson, "Violence and terror and the extreme right. Terrorism and Political Violence", 7(4), 82-93, 1995.
13. Idem.
14. P. Castelli Gattinara, E. Leidig, and J. Aasland Ravndal, "What characterizes the far-right scene in Europe and beyond?", Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), 7 September 2020.

Terrorism has described this as a growing trend of "post-organisational activity", where individuals and groups operate independently of each other and never report to a central headquarter or single leader for direction or instruction.[16]

14. The lack of an agreed definition of far-right ideology places some barriers to effectively countering and responding to the phenomenon, and for understanding and measuring the scale of the issue across different member States. The partial overlap between hate crime, violent far-right extremism and far-right terrorism complicates how certain actions are prosecuted, and resultantly how governments may assess the number of violent far-right attacks committed on their territory.

3. Key drivers and trends of far-right extremism

15. Right-wing extremism is a recurring phenomenon that has grown in recent decades. Its appearance and operation do not exist in a vacuum, but are a response to interlinking socio-economic and cultural factors, building on real or perceived changes in society.[17] In the last twenty years, the world has faced a succession of crises – in global finance, migration, the Covid-19 pandemic and the return of a large-scale war of aggression on the European continent – with grave social, economic and political consequences, leading to frustration, fear and anger. Experts have argued that this is key to understanding the rising support for far-right extremism, including its violent manifestations.

16. Indeed, relying on social discontent, extremism proposes simplistic and stereotyped solutions in response to the anxieties and uncertainties affecting our societies. It shifts responsibility for these difficulties to the inability of democracy to meet the challenges of today's world, and the incapacity of elected representatives and institutions to address citizens' expectations. Alternatively, discrimination is incited against specific groups by blaming them for insecurity and socio-economic problems, or suggesting they are a potential threat to the state.[18]

17. The economic insecurity perspective has also been paired with further currents of support to far-right extremism emanating as a reaction against perceived or real cultural changes that threaten the worldview of previously predominant sectors of the population.[19] Interactive processes between the socio-economic and cultural factors combine to lead parts of society challenge the legitimacy of democracies.

18. Intelligence services have noted the evolving features of the far-right milieu in recent years, with traditional forms of the far-right such as neo-Nazism and skinhead culture being overtaken in certain States by anti-Islam and anti-migrant activism as the most prevalent topics of far-right extremism.[20] The evolving trends have also seen a more radically anti-establishment shift, with far-right extremists increasingly targeting institutions, with an acceleration of this trend following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

19. Further risks factors associated to the emergence of manifestations of right-wing extremism have been identified as unresolved identity-related issues, systemic poor governance, and administrative dysfunction. This can be compounded by low trust in mainstream media, low media literacy, and a lack of critical and independent journalism which, combined, can amplify vulnerability to disinformation.[21]

20. In 2021, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), voiced its alarm of the use of inflammatory rhetoric and the dissemination of hateful and dehumanising content, and recalled that the failure to prevent and combat ultra-nationalistic and racist hate speech can lead to grave violations of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and a descent into violence.[22]

21. It is a matter of deep common concern when ideologies advocate for the use of violence or other unlawful activity to promote particular beliefs. The use of ideological language that may vilify or discriminate against others is one manifestation of this.

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15. "Understanding the far-right landscape", Centre for research and evidence on security threats (CREST), 14 July 2017.
16. Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, "Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe", op. cit.
17. "Right-wing extremism in the European Union", op. cit.
18. Resolution 1344 (2003) "Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe".
19. P. Norris, R. Inglehart, "Cultural Backlash", 2019.
20. Comité R, "Enquête de contrôle sur la manière dont les services de renseignement assurent actuellement le suivi de la menace posée par l'extrême droite en Belgique, ainsi que le rapport aux autorités", 19 January 2021, p. 23.
21. European Commission, Expert Opinion, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans", July 2022.
22. ECRI, "Statement on preventing and combating ultra-nationalistic and racist hate speech and violence in relation to confrontations and unresolved conflicts in Europe", March 2021.

3.1. Violent far-right extremism: a growing threat that is increasingly transnational

22. The far-right landscape stretches to all corners of the world. While its salience in Europe has grown considerably throughout the 2000s, it has both a historical and contemporary presence in Latin America, India and Indonesia, as well as in North America and Oceania.[23]

23. The violent manifestations of far-right ideology are also global. Today, political violence associated with the far-right is widely seen as a growing threat across the globe.[24] The Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe, prepared under the auspices of the Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT), confirms it for Europe, stressing that far-right terrorism is a growing threat across a number of member States.[25]

24. In recent years, in addition to mass shootings (Utøya, Norway, 2011; Charlottesville, USA, 2017; Christchurch, New Zealand, 2019), far-right extremists carried out acts of political assassination (British member of Parliament Jo Cox, 2016; German politician Walter Lübcke, 2019) and insurrection, including armed insurrection (US Capitol Invasion, 2021; and most recently the insurrection in Brazil) or plotted to do so (Germany, 2022). The continued extremist threat has also been manifested in the attacks on mosques, synagogues, and asylum reception centres witnessed in Europe in the past years.

25. The growing transnational character of violent far-right extremism is also due to increased co-operation between extremist groups and networks sharing motives, inspirations, and goals online and offline, across different countries.[26] Conclusions of the International Conference on "Transnational Terrorist Threats from Emerging and Re-emerging Violent Extremist Movements" confirm that online platforms are extensively used for recruitment and spreading extremist ideologies as well as instructional material. This allows groups and individuals to learn and take inspiration from each other.[27] Loosely organised, online networks are increasingly a means by which violent far-right actors engage with other individuals and groups internationally, with lone actors inspired by these networks or groups being the main tactic for carrying out violent attacks. Motivated by violent extremist propaganda, these self-activating actors pose significant challenges for timely detection and interception.[28]

26. In 2011, the terrorist attack perpetrated by a far-right extremist in Oslo and on the island of Utøya, in Norway, which left 77 people dead, shocked the world. A few years later, another far-right extremist, drawing on the extreme ideas and action of the perpetrator of Utøya attacks, would kill 51 people Muslim worshippers at the other end of the world, in Christchurch, New Zealand. Months later, another far-right extremist "inspired" by the Christchurch gunman killed two people in Halle, Germany. These "copycat" manifestations of far-right extremism show the danger of what social psychologists have referred to as behavioural contagion, and the global reach of far-right extremist violence.[29]

27. There are also continuing concerns about the infiltration of far-right ideology in the military, armed forces and law enforcement, and the circulation of far-right extremist materials in these groups. In this context, it is worth noting that amongst those arrested in the framework of the plot against the German Government, there was a judge and former members of the military, including from the special forces. Cases against law enforcement and security agents for both the preparation of terrorist attacks directed against politicians and public figures, and for affiliation with proscribed groups have taken place in recent years. Similarly, it is argued that the insurrection in Brazil was possible because of collusion with parts of the military police hierarchy. It goes without saying that there is a particular threat when those who are in charge of safeguarding and protecting citizens are influenced by extremist ideologies.

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23. UNODC, "Manual on Prevention of and Responses to Terrorist Attacks on the Basis of Xenophobia, Racism and Other Forms of Intolerance or in the Name of Religion or Belief", 2022, p. 3.
24. According to a report from Freedom House, far-right groups supporting violence or the threat thereof are also growing in prominence and sophistication across Eurasia, with serious implications for democratic development in the region.
25. Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism, "Report on Emerging Terrorist Threats in Europe", op. cit.
26. UNDP, "From pilots towards policies: utilizing online data for preventing violent extremism and addressing hate speech", 13 May 2022.
27. See Executive summary of the Conference organised by the CDCT, in collaboration with the German Federal Foreign Office, 3-4 November 2022, Strasbourg.
28. Idem.
29. Geneva Centre for Security Policy, "Strategic Security Analysis", July 2020.

3.2. The online extremist environment

28. Since the Assembly last visited this subject in Resolution 1344 (2003), technological advances have further facilitated the international networking efforts of far-right extremists. Social media and online gaming platforms, as well as wider internet subcultures, are largely used to spread an extreme right-wing ideology and to target individuals for recruitment.[30] The sharp increase in online material promoting far-right ideologies has amplified radicalisation processes and removed the need for "real-life" contact.

29. The online environment has seen the proliferation of content including performative propaganda, "manifestos", memes, videos popularising far-right extremism by influencers, and online ideological literature. Challenges exist in both the moderation of online spaces, with extremists able to migrate to a range of platforms with differing regulatory structures, and the use of coded messaging between groups, which has been described as pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression to its fullest extent, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to intervene using existing tools.[31]

30. The way people spend time online can have important effects. The risk of online radicalisation is increased by echo chambers where extreme content is self-reinforcing across platforms. Algorithmic radicalisation, where algorithms on social media sites drive users towards progressively more extreme content, can lead to so-called "rabbit holes" of disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda consumption.

31. The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the amplification of far-right narratives online, with manifestations of this being the marked global rise in anti-Asian and antisemitic conspiracy theories. The pandemic also contributed to the emergence of new ideologies and cross-pollination between disparate ideological groups and demographics. Multiple grievances related to pandemic responses, generalised sentiments of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, as well as increased isolation have provided an environment for exploitation by far-right movements looking to transfer fears and frustrations onto targeted "other" individuals and groups. This was accompanied in an uplift in the amount of time online that provided conditions for the circulation of propaganda and disinformation, and the consequent elevated risk of online radicalisation.

3.3. Far-right ideology mainstreamed

32. It is crucial to position extremism as a threat to democracy itself. It is both a direct threat because it jeopardises the democratic constitutional order and freedoms, and an indirect threat because it can distort political life. In 2003, the Assembly warned against traditional political parties being potentially tempted to adopt the stance and the demagogic discourse specific to extremist parties in order to counter the increasing electoral popularity of the latter. Also in 2010, the Assembly expressed concern about the non-negligible risk that mainstream political parties tend to rely on racist discourse in order to avoid losing part of their electorate.[32] These are signals that our democracies are not immune to far-right politics. Most recently, the Assembly noted that hate speech and intolerance had become part of political discourse, where they are used not only by populist and extremist groups but increasingly by representatives of movements and parties across the political spectrum.[33] This is a worrying trend that must be stopped.

33. The Assembly has noted the important role of political parties in contributing to the fight against racism and intolerance, and to foster an inclusive society. The Revised Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society commits signatories to defend basic human rights and democratic principles and reject all forms of racism and intolerance, hate speech, incitement to racial hatred and harassment.[34] I encourage all political parties to sign the Revised Charter, as a sign of their commitment to Council of Europe values.

34. Sensitive balances exist for the media. Newsrooms are confronted by the question of how to fulfil their democratic role of informing the public while avoiding giving disproportionate weight to extremists or key far-right personalities. Inadvertently providing an outsized platform to marginal extremist views risks legitimising and advancing these ideas and their aims.

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30. United Nations, "Report of the Secretary General", A/77/266, 3 August 2022.
31. "Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027)", 8 February 2023.
32. Resolution 1754 (2010) "Fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures".
33. Resolution 2275 (2019) "The role and responsibilities of political leaders in combating hate speech and intolerance".
34. Resolution 2443 (2022) "The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society".

4. The challenge of far-right ideology to our common values

4.1. Undermining democratic norms

35. The spread of extreme ideas, both offline and online and their increased acceptance pose a grave threat to the democratic legal order.

36. Events such as the storming of the US Capitol in 2021 demonstrate the continuing and active threat far-right ideologies has globally. The activities of a militant fringe were instrumental in provoking the mobilisation of thousands of people who attempted to overturn the result of a legitimate election.

37. Attacks on the constitutional order, such as those directed against the judiciary or electoral processes, as well as actions that aim to degrade or subvert our democratic culture are a rising concern. Both implicit and explicit attempts to weaken the checks and balances of public institutions are a threat to democracy, and the Council of Europe has repeatedly warned of this threat of democratic backsliding. In the commitment to the Reykjavik Principles at the Fourth Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in May 2023, member States agreed to protect and promote the principles of democracy, rule of law and human rights, to stand firm against authoritarian tendencies, and prevent and resist democratic backsliding in Europe.

38. Violent manifestations of extremism are fundamentally repudiations in themselves of our shared democratic values of tolerance, respect, inclusion and diversity. The functioning of the democratic order is impaired via manifestations of extremism such as systematic hate speech, fearmongering, spreading disinformation, demonisation, and intimidation.[35]

39. Efforts to exert influence became particularly pronounced in demonstrations against Covid-19 measures, with public demonstrations seeing the appearance of non-affiliated groups of far-right ideologues attacking the legitimacy of government action, democratic institutions, and amplifying conspiracy theories. The use of violence at a number of these events and the abuse of the right to protest are not acceptable.

40. Incidents of harassment of elected officials and threats posed to them have been co-ordinated by far-right groups. This intimidation cannot be tolerated in our democratic culture.

4.2. Undermining human rights

41. Human rights are based on the premise of the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings and so promoting one set of rights while undermining or violating the rights of others is antithetical to human rights principles.

42. Far-right ideologies encompass and promote xenophobic, racist, nativist visions, including other forms of intolerance or in the name of religion or belief. The “othering” of people considered to be in an out-group sees such groups the target of hatred, and denies their human rights. So-called “grievance narratives” put certain individuals and communities at particular risk. This includes ethnic and religious groups, the LGBTQ community, as well as politicians and other public figures.[36] Hate speech, calls for restrictive policies that infringe the human rights of minority groups, and the spread of an ideology of intolerance must be addressed.

5. Tackling the threat

43. The presence and threat of non-democratic groups mean that steps need to be taken to reinforce democracies. The internationalisation of far-right ideology, the outsized role of online extremist content, and the mainstreaming of far-right extremism put an accent on the need to address disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. The risk of key democratic tenets being undermined is too great to not act.

44. This should be done, *inter alia*, by strengthening democratic values and practices within the mainstream, and taking action via both legal, political and educational strategies. The concept of “defensive democracy” (also referred to as “militant democracy”) can be instructive for these actions, being defined as “all activities, be these formal provisions or political strategies, which are explicitly and directly aimed at protecting the democratic system from the threat of its internal opponents”.[37]

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35. European Commission, Radicalisation Awareness Network “Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors”, 2021.
36. United Kingdom, House of Commons, “Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism”, 13 July 2022.
37. G. Capoccia, “Defending democracy: Reactions to political extremism in inter-war Europe”, 2001.

45. These “defensive democracy” measures take a number of forms. First, through legislation that curbs threats to the democratic order and its key principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Second, through cultural-societal responses, that is to say educational and social strategies that build resilience against susceptibility to propaganda, disinformation and persuasive extremist techniques including scapegoating. This includes strategies to give people the tools to build their own counterarguments, recognise and reject misinformation, as well as supporting the important role played by civil society in these efforts.[38]

5.1. Legal responses

46. In efforts to combat the threat of extremism effectively, member States have developed a number of legislative measures to address both far-right extremism and activities linked to it. As well as codifying criminal activity with extremist aspects, member States have also developed legislation to address threats to the democratic or constitutional order.

5.1.1. Hate speech

47. Where organisations have been found to engage in acts such as hate speech, discrimination, and violence, member States have taken steps to disband these organisations, such as action taken by the French government in 2021 against the organisation Génération Identitaire; the decree of the Supreme Court of Finland of 22 September 2020 that the Nordic Resistance Movement and Pohjoinen Perinne ry (Northern Tradition) were to be disbanded; the proscription of National Action in the United Kingdom in 2016; and the recognition of the organisation Golden Dawn as a criminal organisation in Greece in October 2020.

48. The legislation related to the disbanding of far-right extremist organisations can take a number of forms, such as laws on association and hate-crime offences, and with regards to proscription where organisations are believed to be concerned in terrorism. With similar challenges being faced across Europe, and in light of the transnational aspects of the threat, there is a continued need for co-operation and work towards common legal approaches. Increasing support to national authorities to co-ordinate cross-border investigations, and knowledge sharing by relevant investigatory bodies on best practice of how to conduct investigations and prosecutions of far-right extremism would be helpful measures to enhance this co-operation.

49. In relation to online extremist content, greater government intervention has been noted in recent years with a growing number of governments proposing and enacting laws to counter the proliferation of terrorist and extremist content online.[39] Online content-sharing services tend to prohibit themselves the use of their technologies to engage in violent extremist activities, and further co-operation with these services could help support the co-ordination of approaches to the definitions of violent extreme contents to bring further clarity to these efforts.

50. In response to a persistent and worrying increase in hate speech, especially online, and documented by the monitoring bodies of the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers has adopted recommendations on combating the phenomenon, including calls to establish comprehensive and effective legal frameworks that consist of appropriately calibrated provisions of civil, administrative and criminal law. The Committee of Ministers recommends that criminal law provisions in relation to hate speech should only be applied as a last resort and for the most serious expressions of hatred.[40]

5.1.2. Restrictions on political parties

51. Developed in reaction to concerns that anti-democratic and extremist elements may attempt to enter the democratic institutions of a country in order to abuse and subvert the democratic order, a range of mechanisms monitor, contain and prosecute extremist rhetoric and activity. Relevant instruments include measures that constrain directly or indirectly the presence of extremist and anti-democratic groups within democratic institutions.

52. Recommendations from the ECRI have included the withdrawal of all financial and other forms of support by public bodies from political parties and other organisations that use hate speech or fail to sanction its use by members. Member States should also provide, while respecting the right to freedom of association,

38. C. Miller-Idriss, “Strengthening democracy is the key to preventing far-right extremism”, Institute for Global Change, 30 April 2021.
39. OECD, “Transparency Reporting on Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online”, No. 334, 2022.
40. Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech, 20 May 2022.

for the possibility of prohibiting or dissolving such organisations where the use of hate speech is intended or can be expected to incite acts of violence, intimidation, hostility or discrimination against those targeted by it.[41]

53. The Assembly has stated that "restrictions on or dissolution of political parties should be regarded as exceptional measures to be applied only in cases where the party concerned uses violence or threatens civil peace and the democratic constitutional order of the country", and that "as far as possible, less radical measures than dissolution should be used".[42] This has been echoed by the Venice Commission who recommended that "the competence of state authorities to dissolve a political party or prohibit one from being formed should concern exceptional circumstances, must be narrowly tailored and should be applied only in extreme cases. Such a high level of protection is appropriate, given the fundamental role of political parties in the democratic process that also requires a stricter level of scrutiny in comparison with other associations than political parties".[43]

54. Measures restricting or dissolving political parties have been imposed by a number of European countries. In February 2023, the Greek Parliament took legislative steps to disqualify parties led by politicians convicted of serious offences and are deemed a potential threat to democracy from standing for election. These measures were upheld by a ruling of 2 May 2023 by the Supreme Court of Greece. In this, the Supreme Court decided to disqualify the Hellenes National Party due to the incitation of violence, disrespect to democracy, the promotion of totalitarian ideologies, the dissemination of racist and intolerant ideas and hatred that threatened the peaceful coexistence of social groups in the country.[44]

55. Further examples of adjudication by constitutional courts on the issue of the prohibition of a party include the 2017 decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court that ruled against banning the National Democratic Party of Germany.[45] The National Democratic Party advocates for the abolition of the existing free democratic basic order and for replacing it with an authoritarian national State that adheres to the idea of an ethnically defined community. The reasoning of the Constitutional Court included assessing whether there were specific and weighty indicators that a party could achieve its anti-democratic goals, and with a lack of evidence that the party in question could do so, the prohibition was not necessary for the protection of democracy.[46]

56. Democratic defence actions in themselves may raise questions about their compliance with human rights standards. While human rights instruments acknowledge the existence of valid reasons for restrictions on freedom of association, such as the need to counter violent extremism, the measures have to be least intrusive means to achieve the respective objective. Any action taken to achieve a legitimate aim must be necessary in a democratic society, and not applied for any other purpose than those for which it has been prescribed.[47]

57. The European Court of Human Rights has consistently ruled that, due to their important role in the functioning of democracy, limitations on the formation of political parties should be used with restraint and only when necessary in a democracy.[48]

5.2. Cultural-societal responses

58. Combating far-right extremism requires a multi-faceted approach that combines both law-enforcement and adequate security measures, with non-legal responses that put an accent on prevention, education, and addressing root causes.

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41. ECRI, General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on combating hate speech, 2015.
42. Resolution 1308 (2002), "Restrictions on political parties in the Council of Europe member states", 18 November 2002, para. 11.
43. European Commission for Democracy through Law & OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Guidelines on Political Party Regulation", Second Edition, 2020, 50.
44. V. Tsagkroni, Registered, Banned and Excluded: Thoughts on Mobilisation and Exclusion of Far-Right Parties, GPSG Pamphlet No 7: First Thoughts on the 21 May 2023 Election in Greece, May 2023.
45. Bundersverfassungsgericht [Federal Constitutional Court of Germany], 2 BvB 1/13 (17 January 2017).
46. J. Hogan, Analyzing the Risk Thresholds For Banning Political Parties After NPD II, German Law Journal (2022), 23, pp. 97-116.
47. Guidelines on Political Party Regulation, op. cit.
48. European Court of Human Rights: *Gorzelik and Others v. Poland* [GC], Application No. 44158/98, judgment of 17 February 2004, paragraph 95; *Sidiropulos and Others v. Greece*, Application No. 26695/95, judgment of 10 July 1998, paragraph 40; *Tebieti Mühafize Cemiyyeti and Israfilov v. Azerbaijan*, Application No. 37083/03, judgment of 8 October 2009, paragraph 78.

59. In view of the transnational nature of far-right extremism, it is important to increase international co-operation as a key tool to exchange on challenges and good practices, as well as to create synergies between States, international organisations, and specialised entities. Co-ordinated multi-stakeholder efforts to map and analyse political, societal, and other drivers behind the growth of adherents to far-right ideologies are welcome measures to proactively assess and react to developments. Common definitions and practices can help enhance data collection on the scale of the threat, as well as bringing greater conceptual clarity to how to approach the phenomenon.

60. Both research and practical experience have shown the importance of engaging all levels of society in preventing and countering violent extremism.[49] The whole-of-society approach, including the involvement of public, private and non-governmental actors in tackling different aspects of radicalisation, disengagement, and social reintegration is an encouraging strategy for countering extremist narratives that pose a threat to democracy and human rights.

61. Increased investment in educational and preventative approaches to address vulnerabilities to extremist propaganda in the mainstream can be a further important measure taken by governments. The German example of the "Demokratie leben!" (Live Democracy!) government-funded intervention places extremism in a broader framework to strengthen and protect an inclusive, diverse democracy, and work against radicalisation and polarisation in society.[50] Proactive democratic education is an important building block for enhancing democratic resilience against the phenomena of far-right ideologies and hate speech in our societies.

62. Steps to increase societal capacity to reject all forms of extremism through formal and informal education, youth activities and the training of key players (such as the media, politicians and social actors) have been repeatedly outlined by the Council of Europe as having a crucial role in this respect.[51] Developing skills in critical thinking and media literacy can enhance resilience against disinformation, online materials that incite extremism, and recruitment efforts of far-right extremist groups.

63. Youth-targeted activities are of particular importance due to the elevated risk of youth radicalisation that has been noted in recent years. Intelligence services in some member States have observed a shift in demographic of those associated with far-right extremist activities to individuals with no criminal background, who are technically sophisticated, and increasingly under the age of 18.[52] The Reykjavík Declaration has noted the priority to be given to the participation of young persons in democratic life, including in education about human rights and core democratic values such as pluralism, inclusion and non-discrimination.[53]

64. Community groups and civil society organisations play an important role in outreach work, education, and responding to deradicalisation efforts. Co-operation and relationships between government and these groups are of continued importance for ensuring a whole-of-society approach in addressing conditions that are conducive to far-right extremism, and in efforts to prevent intolerance and violent extremism from establishing itself in communities. This includes the role of civil society organisations educating in democratic values, conducting community activity intended to strengthen democratic foundations, and helping the victims of extremist activities. It also includes the provision of support to individuals wishing to leave a violent extremist group, or to reintegrate in communities following their association with extremist groups.

65. Concern over the misuse of online space in relation to far-right extremism is both of great importance and significant complexity. A continued focus on far-right messaging, hate speech, propaganda and recruitment remains critical. At the same time, the use of coded messaging, memes, a plethora of different platforms, and encrypted communication make tracking and detection difficult. In addition, much far-right extremist content is situated among content that does not reach criminal thresholds. Further co-operation between governments and communication service providers in efforts to proactively detect and remove harmful content should be encouraged.

66. In its Resolution 2443 (2022) "The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society", the Assembly has reiterated that government representatives and politicians in general should lead efforts to eliminate racism, hatred and intolerance with resolve and set an example by publicly challenging, rejecting and condemning expressions of hatred, from whatever quarters they come. This has a vital role in promoting a model of society that embraces diversity and respects human dignity, and has a role in influencing the tone of public discourse.

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49. Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2023-2027), op. cit.
50. "Strengthening democracy is the key to preventing far-right extremism", op. cit.
51. Committee of Ministers, CM(2015)74-addfinal, 125th Session of the Committee of Ministers, Brussels, 19 May 2015.
52. "Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism", op. cit.
53. Council of Europe, Reykjavík Declaration, "Reykjavík Principles for Democracy", May 2023.

67. Equally, the Assembly, in the same resolution, has called on all democratic political parties to sign and enforce the revised Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society, which includes adherence to defending basic human rights and democratic principles and rejecting all forms of racism and intolerance, hate speech, incitement to racial hatred and harassment.

6. Conclusions

68. The Fourth Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe has given renewed impetus to the Organisation as the cornerstone of European democratic security, to the protection of our democratic foundations, and to countering challenges to human rights.

69. The rise and rapid spread of far-right ideology in Europe has been marked by a rise of intolerance, hate speech and discrimination – a trend that has been identified in a number of European countries as their greatest threat to democracy. We cannot accept acts of intimidation and violence that pose a risk to our democratic systems, and put human rights and fundamental freedoms in jeopardy.

70. The attacks of recent years by far-right extremists, both in Europe and globally, must equally serve as a signal that we cannot underestimate the danger posed by far-right extremism. Activities that seek to undermine democratic society, our values and our principles require a firm and robust response both at the national and international levels in order to preserve a free, secure, and democratic Europe. The challenges faced by our societies, such as economic uncertainty, societal polarisation and geopolitical instability have widened further the opportunity for far-right extremists to advertise supremacist solutions and reach disaffected audiences.

71. International co-operation and the effective implementation of coherent and responsible policies are needed to address the increasingly transnational trends, the proliferation of online extremist material, and the mainstreaming of far-right ideology into the public domain. Preventative policies need to be adapted, refined, and expanded to modern manifestations and tactics of far-right extremism.

72. Governments must ensure that there are counterweights to extremist discourse by publicly challenging them, and ensuring that education is in place that strengthens the respect of human rights and promotes understanding and tolerance.

73. Politicians should be at the forefront of this response, taking their responsibility to defend human rights and democratic principles and unequivocally reject all forms of racism and intolerance, hate speech, incitement to racial hatred and harassment.