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THEFUTUREOFEXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN

ACTIVITY: NETHERLANDS

COUNTRY PROFILE

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## INTRODUCTION

Restrictions brought in to slow the spread of COVID-19 across the Netherlands have fuelled anger and hostility amongst the Dutch public and led to an increase in polarisation and a threat of heightened extremist behaviour. This was the assessment of Pieter-Jaap Aalbersberg, one of the country's chief counter-terrorism officials, in a November 2020 interview with Bloomberg.<sup>1</sup> He added that "social media is the catalyst amplifying conspiracies across borders" with the common denominator being "anti-government sentiment." This was echoed in a more recent update in April 2021 from the Dutch national security service (AIVD) who warned of the threat from anti-government protests organised in opposition to COVID-19 measures, stating that the "intimidation, threats or violence" present in these groups have the potential to create a "breeding ground" for extremism.<sup>2</sup>

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, individuals and groups in the Netherlands have sought to capitalise on the pandemic to engage in violent attacks, produce and promote conspiracies and disinformation that targets the state, and intimidates those whose professions relate to managing or reporting on the coronavirus. In March 2020, as online conspiracy communities sought to link 5G masts to the spread of COVID-19, the Netherlands was among the first countries to experience arson and sabotage attacks that damaged cellular broadcasting towers.<sup>3</sup> Protests against the government's response to the coronavirus started in summer 2020, with frustrations fuelling the harassment and intimidation of media organisations like NOS, the public service broadcaster.<sup>4</sup> The country also has an active QAnon community, promoted by prominent public figures like rapper, QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracy theorist Lange Frans which has helped exacerbate this activity.<sup>5</sup>

Faced with rising COVID-19 cases in January 2021, the government brought in an evening curfew, the first enacted since World War II, but this was met with severe anger across the country resulting in three nights of rioting in cities including Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Around the same time, the Dutch government resigned over a racial profiling scandal in the tax service.<sup>6</sup> Weekly protests

were organised through Facebook, Telegram and other platforms, and demonstrations became a recurring sight nationwide in 2021. Clashes between protesters and police were a regular occurrence at these events. The pandemic has also been used by opposition politicians like Thierry Baudet and his party, the populist-right Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy), as a source for material with which to criticise the government and position themselves as an alternative voice for disaffected people.

Anti-government sentiment has been driven by various prominent 'corona sceptics' who have used the pandemic as an issue to campaign against and as a source of content to criticise the state's response to COVID-19 by way of conspiracies, alarmist language and mis- or disinformation, building up sizeable audiences online in the process. Such communities are operating as gateways for many into deeper conspiracy theories that feature more explicit and harmful claims. A number of journalists, activists and academics reporting on the rise of extremism in the Netherlands have also found themselves the subjects of articles and intimidation tactics by Vizier Op Links (Eyes on the Left), a far-right group.<sup>7</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-LOCKDOWN MOVEMENT

There is a vibrant constellation of communities and influencers in the Netherlands who have been active since the outset of the pandemic in protesting against the measures brought in to slow the spread of COVID-19.

### Willem Engel/Viruswaarheid

Arguably one of the most influential figures with the largest followings in this arena is Willem Engel, a dance teacher turned anti-lockdown activist, COVID-19 sceptic and conspiracy theorist. Engel founded the group Viruswaarheid (Virus Truth)<sup>8</sup> to protest the government's coronavirus policies and has repeatedly downplayed the severity of COVID-19, becoming a national figure.<sup>9</sup>

Engel positions himself as an anti-government critic and has frequently used conspiracy theories and exaggerated claims to critique perceived government overreach. At times Engel has claimed the Netherlands is now a "dictatorship",<sup>10</sup> that the requirement to wear masks is akin to forcing Jewish people to wear the Star of David in Nazi-occupied Europe,<sup>11</sup> and that COVID-19 restrictions amount to "genocide"<sup>12</sup> and are designed to reprogram the Dutch population and create a European super-state.<sup>13</sup> Engel and his supporters believe governments are using COVID-19 as part of a larger ploy to gain control of citizens' lives and indefinitely curtail people's civil liberties. Engel's aim appears to primarily be the removal of all COVID-era restrictions but he also has political aspirations too and unsuccessfully ran in the general election in March 2021.



Figure 1: Viruswaarheid Instagram post advertising a "protect the children" anti-vaccination demonstration in conjunction with other protest groups, including Nederland in Verzet.

### Nederland in Verzet (Netherlands in Resistance)

Nederland in Verzet is an anti-government group run by Michel Reijnga that has organised a series of demonstrations since the start of 2021.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> These demonstrations were described by organisers as 'coffee drinking' (koffiedrinken) events for like-minded people in an attempt to avoid the protests being shut down.<sup>16</sup> The first major protest linked to this group took place in Amsterdam on 17 January.<sup>17</sup> While the protest was deemed illegal by authorities beforehand and Reijnga cancelled the event, between 1,500 and 2,000 people attended, resulting in clashes between protesters and police.<sup>18</sup>

The group's protests throughout early 2021 were aimed at Prime Minister Mark Rutte and his government, particularly in the run up to March's general election. Following this, the group pivoted to campaigning against COVID-19 vaccinations under the guise of protecting children. The group engages in the repeated promotion of conspiracies about vaccinations, and has shared content on Facebook that claims the vaccines are killing people.<sup>19</sup> During a demonstration in June 2021, Reijnga asked for a moment of silence for Jürgen Conings, a Belgian soldier and far-right extremist,<sup>20</sup> now deceased, who posted angry messages online and threatened to kill prominent Belgian virologist Marc Van Ranst.<sup>21</sup>

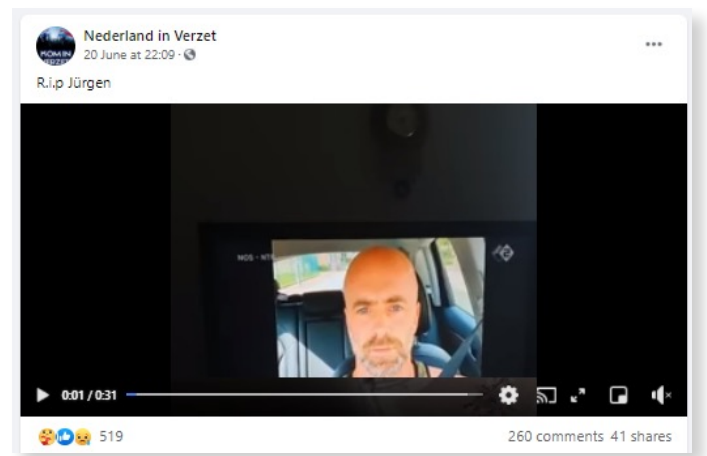


Figure 2: Facebook post from Netherlands in Resistance about the death of Belgian far-right extremist Jürgen Conings

Much like Viruswaarheid, Nederland in Verzet is an anti-government protest movement that uses conspiracies and alarmist language to support their cause. The movement features populist calls for unity and resistance, framing their protests against COVID-19 restrictions as a civil liberties struggle. The ultimate aim of this group appears to centre around ending the dominance of the major political parties in the Netherlands.

## Extreme right-wing communities

The COVID-19 restrictions protest movement has also provided older groups with new opportunities to demonstrate. The Dutch branch of the anti-Muslim movement Pegida<sup>22</sup> are reported to have participated in anti-lockdown protests<sup>23</sup> and used the movement as a vehicle to criticise the perceived double-standards in policing against anti-lockdown protesters versus Muslim communities celebrating Ramadan, and separately claimed that Muslims were responsible for the biggest COVID-19 outbreaks in the Netherlands.

Other groups active before COVID-19 have also shared their support for the anti-government movement online. Identitair Verzet (the Dutch faction of pan-European ethnonationalist movement Generation Identity) and Voorpost (an ethnonationalist movement active in the Netherlands and Belgium) have both used Telegram to take aim against the government's COVID-19 restrictions, while Proud Boys Netherlands were reportedly present at protests in 2020 too.<sup>24</sup> Erkenbrand, a far-right student association, has published substantial content on its site that supports the protest movement, criticises the government for eroding the freedoms of the people, and describes vaccines as “experimental drugs”.

This framing that posits that the vaccines are experimental, unregulated and therefore dangerous has been utilised among far-right groups and individuals in the US<sup>25</sup> and Canada,<sup>26</sup> amongst other contexts, demonstrating the transnational nature of these narratives. In the Netherlands, politician Thierry Baudet has also promoted this argument.<sup>27</sup>

Evaluating the extent to which these groups may interact or collaborate is not straightforward. There is certainly much overlap especially regarding shared anti-government sentiments and mis- or disinformation or conspiracies used to support these views, but this movement is also a big tent, taking in groups with wide-ranging views. There are some clear partnerships, such as the July 15 protest poster seen in Fig 1 above, which advertised the event as a joint demonstration between Viruswaarheid, Nederland in Verzet and other groups. There are also more obscure or informal relationships. According to Willem Wagenaar, a right-wing extremism researcher at the Anne Frank House, Viruswaarheid events have been attended by prominent groups including Pegida, Proud Boys and Erkenbrand.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 3: Telegram posts from Pegida in which (L) they claim Muslim people were responsible for large COVID-19 outbreaks, and (R) urge people to protest since “love peace and happiness” won’t change government policy



## HARMFUL ACTIVITY

Threats and intimidation of the media, harassment and slurs aimed at politicians and public health officials, and support for extremists' actions have all been documented within the COVID protest movement within the Netherlands. Protests have led to clashes with the police and anger at government measures has fuelled rioting.

Willem Engel and Michel Reijnga have not directly issued threats or encouraged violence, though the COVID-sceptic protest movement they have helped to foster does accommodate and support more dangerous elements. Across the border in Belgium, when soldier Jürgen Conings threatened to kill virologist Marc van Ranst, he found support among Dutch COVID-sceptic communities.<sup>29</sup> Engel commented on threats made by others against Van Ranst on Twitter and said the virologist's role in supporting COVID-19 restrictions caused the situation to develop "to the point where he is now extremely hated". Van Ranst responded, describing the influence of figures like Engel on potential extremists by saying they "create a climate in the Netherlands that is quite remarkable and in the long run also dangerous."<sup>30</sup>

Protests against restrictions and evening curfews generated widespread anger and violence across the country, resulting in three nights of rioting at the end of January,<sup>31</sup> as well as a small explosion and arson attacks on vaccination centres in January<sup>32</sup> and March.<sup>33</sup> The riots were not attributed to any one group but planned and promoted openly on social media platforms, as seen in the screenshots below.

Threats and intimidation of the media have been at the core of the protests since the outbreak of the pandemic. In October 2020, NOS, the Dutch public service broadcaster, announced they were removing their logos from their vehicles in response to increased threats from protest movements.<sup>34</sup> After the 17 January demonstration, an anti-government activist issued a threat to media who reported on the event and advised journalists they were now on "a black list" and they should "flee from the Netherlands."<sup>35</sup>



Figure 4: (L-R) Screenshots of posters shared across social media and messaging apps like Facebook, Telegram and Snapchat in promoting demonstrations in January 2021.

Politicians have also been subjected to threats. There have been regular reports in the Dutch press about politicians being harassed and shouted at on their way into the parliament building in The Hague. During one such incident in October 2020, Peter Omtzigt, then an MP with the CDA party in government, was surrounded and threatened outside the parliament by protesters who followed him shouting “Satanists” and “Deep State.”<sup>36</sup>

The same trend has been observed online. ISD research from May 2021<sup>37</sup> highlighted how Sigrid Kaag, leader of the D66 party, was targeted with anti-Muslim slurs after she expressed support for the use of vaccination certificates in the country.<sup>38</sup> Earlier research from ISD in February 2021 found antisemitic disinformation targeting GroenLinks (Green Left) party leader Jesse Klaver, highlighting how COVID-era conspiracies have been used as a vehicle for wider, more entrenched forms of extremist hate.<sup>39</sup>

As part of the wider anti-government sentiment evident in the COVID protest movement of the Netherlands, the police have also been the subject of threats. Videos of police officers are regularly shared online following demonstrations with users encouraged to identify officers, particularly Romeos, the name given to plainclothes officers who attend protests.<sup>40</sup> Telegram groups that discuss and encourage people to take action and attack officers also exist.

## CONCLUSION

Opposition to COVID-19 restrictions or denial of the coronavirus outright, fuelled by conspiracies and disinformation, has given rise to an amorphous movement in the Netherlands. Here, the groups and leaders at the forefront of the movement, like Viruswaarheid and Nederland in Verzet, do not directly advocate violence or call for civil war. In short, they still support democracy and largely accept the rule of law. Yet these groups and others such as Pegida have sought to capitalise on people's frustrations, frame COVID-19 restrictions as a gross violation of civil liberties and support these arguments with misleading and alarmist claims.

The common denominator tying all of these groups together is mistrust and hostility towards the state - the government, police, public health officials and the vaccination program - and those who are perceived to support the state, like the media. Action against these entities likely represents the greatest risk of violence and unrest in the country. Protests, though small, will likely continue. Online, the movement continues to grow: ISD research tracked how, between November 2020 - April 2021, Dutch COVID-19 misinformation communities on Facebook grew in membership by 63%.<sup>41</sup>

This protest movement has the potential to radicalise people towards action. It's clear such attitudes have emboldened some to use threats and intimidation against politicians, police or others they view as supportive of COVID-19 restrictions. This risk also falls in line with the warning from the AIVD, the Dutch security service, that anti-government protests and the movement behind them have created a "breeding ground" for extremism. All things considered, the temperature is rising in the country.

Online extremist culture can be highly influential in motivating individuals towards dangerous activity. The potential risk to the Netherlands from similar actors is significant.



## ENDNOTES

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