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Extremisms, viral violence and pandemic: Fusion Extreme Right and future perspectives

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Abstract

Questo articolo è finalizzato a presentare i risultati delle attività di ricerca condotte nell'ambito del progetto Converge – COVID-19 Working Group – Itstime Working Group: COVID-19 and Viral Violence.

La ricerca si focalizza su alcune domande chiave con lo scopo di esplorare, comprendere e interpretare come l'attuale pandemia causata dal virus COVID-19 possa influenzare le attività di varie forme di estremismo.

In aggiunta, viene proposto un approfondimento dell'estrema destra e delle sue molte espressioni, data la sua peculiarità e l'importanza come minaccia globale.

Le attività di ricerca sono state condotte in accordo a un approccio metodologico misto, usando strumenti metodologici come una survey investigativa online e una etnografia digitale fondata su open source.

L'analisi di queste ricerche ha prodotto significativi risultati per meglio comprendere e interpretare la minaccia posta dall'estrema destra in varie parti del mondo e nel contesto dell'attuale pandemia.

Infine, nuove relazioni tra concetti portano alla definizione di fusione dell'estrema destra per identificare quei fenomeni collegati all'estrema destra e al tema della violenza simbolica.

This article aims to present the results of the research activities carried out in the framework of Converge – COVID-19 Working Group – Itstime Working Group: COVID-19 and Viral Violence.

The research focused on key questions aimed at exploring, understanding and interpreting how the current pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus can influence the activities of various forms of extremism.

In addition, a deepening of extreme right and its many expressions is proposed, given its peculiarity and importance as a global threat.

The research activities were conducted according to a mixed methodological approach, using as methodological tools, an online investigative survey and an open source-based digital ethnography.

The analysis of these researches has produced significant findings, to better understand and interpret the threat posed by the extreme right in various parts of the world and in the context of the current pandemic.

Finally, new relationships between concepts lead to the definition of fusion extreme right to generally identify the phenomena related to extreme right as well as the issue of symbolic violence.

Keywords

Extreme Right, extremisms; Fusion extreme right; Symbolic violence; Viral violence, pandemic

1. Introduction

The current paper is focusing on the research activities carried out within the framework of the project Converge – COVID-19 Working Group – Its-time Working Group: COVID-19 and Viral Violence. Specifically:

The COVID-19 and Viral Violence Working Group focuses on empirical considerations about the relations between the COVID-19 pandemic and various forms of violence, emerging during the crisis management. The focus area consists of multidisciplinary perspectives on political extremisms taking advantage from the pandemic; violent responses to violations of the quarantine; interpersonal violence; and civil unrest against crisis management measures.¹

The overall Itstime Working Group COVID-19 and Viral Violence presents a research agenda of topics to be explored that focus on some national and international social phenomena that have taken place and that have be-

¹ This article is part of empirical considerations that the author will use during the effort of the COVID-19 and Viral Violence Working Group (National Science Foundation funded Social Science Extreme Events Research-SSEER Network& CONVERGE/Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/covid-19/working-groups/issues-impacts-recovery/covid-19-and-viral-violence>). This COVID-19 Working Group effort has been supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE. <https://www.itstime.it/w/converge>; <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/covid-19/working-groups/issues-impacts-recovery/covid-19-and-viral-violence>.

come increasingly prominent with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This contribution will focus on some specific questions in the more general research agenda².

In particular, the points of interest and the research questions for which the research and the original findings was carried out are the following:

Political but not limited to, extremism narratives in both digital and offline domains are potentially trying to take advantage of the pandemic, promoting their missions and ideas.

- Research Question 1: Which extremist groups are potentially trying to take advantage from the pandemic crisis?
- Research Question 2: What are their main communicative dynamics?
- Research Question 3: What are their main sociological, ideological, and cultural features?

In order to achieve the purpose of this research a mixed methodological approach was considered, including the following methods and tools:

- an investigative survey, collecting six responses from academics, experts and practitioners. The use of the answers is done in complete anonymity;
- an online extremist ethnography aimed at collecting information and data from both direct and indirect sources such as reports, newspaper articles, web and dark web sources.

This methodological approach can be found in the broader theoretical and methodological framework initiated with another research project on political extremism and ethnography.³

The online investigative survey was useful to focus on which forms of extremism, such as groups, communication dynamics, tactics, strategies and socio-cultural features were most deserving to focus on in time of pandemic.

The results of these insights have therefore led to the decision to deepen the real and/or perceived threat of the extreme right in its different meanings and from an international perspective.

² Lucini, Barbara, Alvanou, Maria, Gugg, Giovanni, (2020). "COVID-19 and Viral Violence", CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research. Boulder, CO: Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado Boulder. <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/covid-19/working-groups/issues-impacts-recovery/covid-19-and-viral-violence>; <https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/covid-19/working-groups/research-agendas>.

³ <https://www.itstime.it/w/nuove-ricerche-etnografie-dellestremismo-politico-ethnographies-of-political-extremisms-by-barbara-lucini>.

2. Understanding extremist threats in time of pandemic: the rise of Mimetic Fusion Extremism

Every crisis and so the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus highlighted the vulnerability factors of the societies on which it has impacted: for example, the infrastructure criticality of health systems and the lack of resilience of some models and related socio-economic systems have become apparent, considering the lack of prior knowledge about the risk factor: a virus unknown in its behaviour that therefore poses difficulties in predicting and responding contingently.

From the outset, the pandemic context and vulnerability it has generated in the affected societies has highlighted the potential and opportunities that this situation could represent for the various forms of extremism and their fringes.

The attention of experts and the traditional media has focused in particular on the risk of potential attacks by ISIS especially in Europe or in Western countries: indeed there were attacks but not in Europe at least in the first moments of the pandemic.

Moreover, the primary effects of pandemic management and containment measures have led experts to better delineate the crisis scenario, within which possible radicalisation or polarisation could take place:

In June 2020, Norwegian police said they were concerned that the social and economic strains caused by the coronavirus pandemic could lead to more radicalisation and extremist violence. “It’s likely that an increased number of Norwegians will become vulnerable to radicalisation as a result of social and economic challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic,” the PST security police force said. (Karmon, 2020)

So if at a general level the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has highlighted divisions not only latent present especially in the European landscape (Sybilline Report, 2020) highlighting the lack of resilience of societies in facing a crisis generated by an unknown virus, but also by lack of communication and socio-cultural competences in the management of the crisis itself.

Moreover, there was a focus on the possibility that different forms of extremism – not always attributable to a clear but often misleading and nebulous ideological matrix (Soufan Centre, 2020) – can increasingly be represented by a characteristic of mimetic fusion features.

This reminds us that many overlaps and interconnections are present both between some fringes of extremism that are often considered opposite (i.e. ISIS and far-right) and in the mixtures between the three dimensions of the extreme right such as: far-right, radical right-wing and alt-right.

The current pandemic has been both context and facilitator or push factor of certain polarizing visions and dynamics, coming above all from the world of the extreme right.

These trends are, however, within an already polarized scenario as described by the Europol Te-Sat 2020 Report where right extremism has considered for the year 2019 both from its violent acts and non-violent dimensions.

Other reports are homogeneous in considering the phenomenon of the extreme right as a trend that is being systemized considering also the impact and effects that the pandemic has on this phenomenon, not only in quantitative terms and in the medium-long term.

For instance, CTED Report (2020) states:

Member States and researchers have warned that extreme right-wing terrorists are using COVID-19-related conspiracy theories and disinformation to radicalize, recruit and fundraise, as well as seeking to inspire plots and attacks.

The understanding of the threat of the extreme right is a very complex process due to the heterogeneity of currents and cultural representations that this phenomenon collects under it.

In addition to this characteristic, there is also the pervasiveness of these networks and organizations, the mimetic feature, which often adhere to local realities and policies more than there is awareness.

Nevertheless, there is still a perception that right-wing extremism is not really a real threat, as perceived or built. This attitude leads to an underestimation of the threat during the phase of threat and risk assessment, becoming also not sensitive to the weak signals that a type of threat like this has been launching for years.

In this regard, the Sibylline report (2020) argues that this threat is a “*persistent threat.*”

Specifically:

Terror tactics are unlikely to shift, with lone actors and the right wing presenting a persistent threat. 2020 has seen a continuation of isolated low-level incidents. Transnational terror groups such as IS and AQ will maintain their activities in traditional areas of operation such as Iraq, Syria, the Sahel and Libya; these groups are leveraging the Western failures over COVID to continue to inspire proxies. 2020 has also seen right-wing extremists carry out attacks, such as February’s shooting in Hanau Germany and May’s Boogaloo-affiliated killings in Oakland CA, with high-profile events such as November’s US presidential election likely to serve as a flashpoint for further far-right activity.

This underlines the need to support and promote active pathways of monitoring this threat, focusing on the communicative aspects, recruitment and radicalisation dynamics. Perception of the threat therefore becomes an impor-

tant factor in determining how various signals from polarised environments and hotspots can indicate future negative developments: *For many far right influencers and organisations the pandemic represents an environment that is conducive to their longed-for demise of democratic society* (Karmon, 2020).

Few studies so far have focused on the perception of experts and analysts of the phenomenon, underestimating the value that their own interpretations and cultural biases can have.

An important step for this point is to be able to enhance the knowledge and awareness of those who still do not consider extreme right as a real or otherwise evolving threat:

Scott Atran, known researcher of terrorism at the University of Michigan, considers that “the greatest threat, by far, comes from far-right networks and white supremacist groups... [which] are extremely active, inciting attacks against Asians – who [they accuse of having] carried the disease to the White Race; immigrants from all countries but especially darker people.” (Karmon, 2020)

Furthermore, it is also important to recognize the characteristic of transnationality that more and more over the years, the extreme right is developing, interweaving relationships and networks in much of the world:

With the increasing use of live streaming, English-language manifestos, and social media platforms and messaging applications as the main facilitator of personal networks, right-wing extremism is shifting more from a local toward a global stage. (Karmon, 2020)

In light of this, what becomes essential is to deepen the knowledge of this specific threat, in a changed context, such as the new international scenario produced by the pandemic, not placing cultural or political limits in the interpretation of the specific culture, signs and symbols through which it manifests itself both in the online and offline domain.

3. Online investigative survey: exploring extremism during pandemic

An online investigative survey was conducted on July 2020 in order to better understand the guidelines and perspectives related to the various forms of extremism during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 virus.

Specifically, six academic and other experts coming from public and private institutions were involved, granting them full anonymity.

The online investigative survey is divided into two parts: the first that addresses the understanding of the various forms of extremism in the times of the current pandemic; the second part in view of the open source analysis

conducted focuses on the threat of the extreme right in relation to the potential opportunities produced by the pandemic caused by COVID-19 virus.

Starting by analysing the first part and the questions related to it, results and insights emerge that will help guide the second part of the research conducted according to the approach and principles of digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2019).

The first question of the first part focuses on: “Do you think that the societies that are experiencing COVID-19 pandemic are increasingly polarizing towards different forms of extremism? (i.e. civil unrest against crisis management measures; far-right movement ...).”

The variety of experts and their vision varies from a pole of a continuum with a yes and no answer, to a more cautious answer as it is too early to know and then specify that:

Every kind of crisis is polarizing for democratic societies. Considered as turning points, crises bear the potential for rapid change and bring along interferences in democratic freedoms. The executive receives excessive power to cope with crises situations. Hence, it is natural that oppositional actor politicize decisions and try to create opportunities to implement an alternative crisis management.

This statement is interesting because it opens up to the prospect of interpretation what is proposed by the various sources of extremism as a kind of *alternative crisis management*, as the government and legitimized to the management of the crisis has shown limitations and inadequacies in almost all the countries affected by the epidemic.

Wanting to deepen the potential of the extreme right to become a social actor other than present, it emerges that in reality the practical application of the threat is ambivalent and not fully realized:

The far-right has been at the forefront to transform anxieties and uncertainties into anti-establishment resentments – yet not always as successful. In some cases it couldn't prove to have viable alternatives, in others it has merged with conspiracy ideologies which delegated its positions to the fringes of societies. As the migration issue lost salience in public debates, the central issue of far-right movements went astray and could not be replaced by a really mobilizing substitute.

The emergence in the pandemic scenario of conspiracy theories and their narratives at the public level has led to a part of right-wing extremism becoming increasingly a fringe of this phenomenon, although powerful in terms of communicative and building a different public image of the pandemic.

The second question was aimed at exploring the perception of the threat by experts: “The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has brought out a multitude of different (mixed) forms and organizations, tending to extremism or extremists. What do you think are the most threatening?”

The answers were as follows:

1. The most threatening trend is the rise of conspiracy ideologues who have risen meteorically and sow the seeds for violence. Especially the QAnon conspiracy myths have a high potential to drag people into extremist mind-sets and to create violent fantasies;
2. Right-wing extremists and conspiracy theory extremists (these two groups overlap somewhat, but can be distinguished along some lines);
3. Terrorism, conspiracism and deaths caused by the pandemic itself;
4. Far Right Libertarian movements in the USA

What transpires from these statements is the concern, expressed in terms of threat, of the spread of conspiracy theories and narratives related to the vision of the pandemic and that affect the individual perception of people.

One element in particular seems to assimilate the possibilities of radicalization on the part of the extreme right, with the jihadist extremist: personal rage, (Ebner, 2017) anger and frustration, coming from a personal experience that lead to the sharing of alternative interpretations of reality or an aspect of it. In reference to this, there is a first limitation in the overall management of this pandemic, namely the lack of knowledge about previous situations of hardship in some contexts and how these have been transformed with the impact of pandemic management measures.

The third question wants to delve even further into what kind of threat in the new international context defined by the pandemic is most recognized: “Islamic extremism was the first extremist actor to be considered a threat from the very first moments of the pandemic. Do you agree? If yes, how do you think Islamic extremism is exploiting the current pandemic?”

Interestingly, the majority of responses regard the answer as negative, as there are other realities that seem to pose more concrete threats such as that of extreme right extremism: *No, at least not in the United States. The biggest threat comes from violent right-wing extremists and their spread of weaponized disinformation.* Furthermore, the context sensitive nature of the threat is something that is considered here:

It depends on the region. Extremists always instrumentalize crises and thereby those actors who act firstly and firmly are probably those with the most resources. In European countries, Islamist organizations have been largely invisible as crisis actors which says a lot about their lack of mobilization resources and ideas how to exploit the COVID crisis. In fact, there have been militant groups who communicated to withdraw during COVID times.

This is interesting to note, since the survey was conducted in July 2020 and at the end of September an Islamic-inspired knife attack⁴ was conducted near the former headquarters of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo.

Once again, the attack shows the low organizational level of some attacks as well as the responsiveness with respect to some communications that the same satirical newspaper had promoted in relation to the publication of the cartoons that published the image and the mockery of Muhammad.

Focusing on the most methodological and technical ways of spreading extremist vision, it is useful to ask whether the effects of pandemic containment measures, such as lockdown in many countries, have produced what can be defined as an online extremism displacement, promoting and encouraging even more typical online activities such as processes of radicalisation and recruitment.

In fact, some public sources have often emphasized this strong impulse and the fact that the closures determined by the lockdown allowed a displacement and an increase in activities typical of the various forms of extremism from which the question: “Do you think that the various (mixed) forms of extremism have benefited from more online activities? If yes, how and for what types of extremism?”

Many experts agree that such an effect will be possible in the coming years, in the long term:

Not yet. The following years might show that the distribution processes of the coming economic crisis will bear much more potential to traditional dichotomies of us and them – especially for far-right extremists to transform social into ethnic conflicts.

In particular, it is stressed that the secondary effects of the pandemic, on the economy and social stability of the affected countries will only be understood in some time and only then will we be able to understand how they have contributed to the change in societies and the new forms they have taken on.

Keeping always the reference to the side effects, another expert argues that: *Yes [they can benefit], but indirectly*. This *indirectly* means that the impact of increased use of online platforms (including dark and deep web) will be felt on recruitment activities and even more than radicalisation.

This is a trend already partially evident in its early phase, especially with regard to the younger ones: the displacement of the means of communication and dissemination of the various visions allows to reach a target with different socio-demographic characteristics, especially younger.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54302337>.

The latest response again focuses on the predominance of the far right in the even more fundamental online activities of the lockdown period and the pandemic.

At the end of this first exploratory part, a question is asked about the phenomenon of fake news, which we know to be a phenomenon not new or innovative, but that the change of communication tools has made it different from the past: “Do you think fake news is a specific strategy for current forms of extremism? If yes, what dynamics are most relevant and for what forms or extremist groups?”

The majority of responses confirm that the communication and narrative dynamics of fake news can be identified as a strategy of current forms of extremism, which therefore take advantage of the opportunities produced by the digital environment and the effects that they produce in real life:

Fake news are one of many tactics in a kind of information warfare – especially online. Fake news are often integrated into larger narratives and mixed with true facts. It is oftentimes not the problem of wrong content but of bigoted framing. Most importantly, it is up to social media companies to constrain the spread of extremist messaging. They provide infrastructures and facilitated effective networking globally for the spread of extremist ideas.

Two aspects emerge as essential in understanding the role that fake news plays in the broader scenario of widespread information warfare:

1. the importance of the frame provided by both technical aspects typical of the chosen IT infrastructure and socio-cultural aspects that support and allow the dissemination of certain news and communications;
2. the ability of these infrastructures to create networks that can be connected and become interdependent internationally

Another element that is emphasized is how in reality fake news is often considered not only a communicative strategy, but an alternative to the mainstreaming context of information: *Yes they are, as extremist groups tend to see fake news as a way of bypassing mainstream news and media.*

In relation to this topic there have also been negative responses, thus proving that fake news remains one of the many communications and relational strategies chosen by the various forms of extremism.

Given the importance that right-wing extremism seems to have as a threat in this new pandemic scenario, the second part of the online survey focused on the possibilities of development of this phenomenon, its peculiarities and the potential impact of COVID-19 pandemic on its activities.

The first question focuses on what specific threat can come from the far right given the current pandemic context: “Right wing extremism seems to be at the height of its renewed development. According to you, what threats come from this form of extremism in the scenario of the current pandemic? (Please, in case of, differentiate about far-right; right-wing, alt-right...)”

Responses are articulated in a number of specific threat aspects, as follows: *As a whole, the radical right has different threats: terrorism and political violence; community cohesion and hate crimes; and of course electoral and legal (especially to the vulnerable). Most at risk are usually ethnic and religious minorities.* Furthermore,

it depends on the specific spectrum. Militant fractions like accelerationists may see the crisis situation as specific opportunities to cause mayhem that they see as imperative to build a new society from scratch. More institutionalized actors need to reshape their profile. Yet, the overarching theme is missing without the salience of migration. Movements like the Alt-Right lose further traction. Conspiracists are gaining ground and they are very difficult to control. Rejection of (ethno-cultural, religious) pluralism in representative democracies.

No matter how as mentioned above, there are those who point out that *but most is not (yet) violent – the alt right is the one to watch*, emphasizing how often the non-violent but destabilizing dimension is present in one or more components of right extremism.

Moving more specifically, it was interesting to ask about the potential relationship between right-wing extremism and the social conflicts that emerged during the lockdown and the management of the pandemic: “What do you think is the relationship between right-wing extremism and the current social conflicts in many countries, in time of pandemic?”

The responses highlighted three key aspects

- the impossibility of short-term prediction due not only to the time dimension of development of the phenomenon, but also to the socio-cultural differences present in different contexts: *It is not clear yet and I i’s difficult to say, as this is different from country-to-country;*
- the connection between far-right and social conflicts prior to or not evident before the pandemic: *Far-right extremists aim to deepen social conflicts and to provoke an atmosphere of upheaval. They aim to create a state of exception where radical measures are legitimate or even desirable, and more generally The role is one of an antagonist always trying to make things worse;*
- the impact that this pandemic originating from Asia has had on people from that area, also causing hate speech and hate crime: *blaming immigrants both before and during lockdown.*

The penultimate question focuses on the possibilities that the far right can find to exploit the pandemic and the social effects it has produced: “How do you think right-wing extremism will exploit the social conflicts emerged during the pandemic in many countries?” Specifically four seem to be the predominant orientations:

- *most actors will call out for “the own people first” when it comes to distribution processes in economic crises* thus reinforcing some narratives in Europe and the US about social inequalities seen from the perspective of right-wing extremism;
- *probably on welfare issues (related to public health)*: another key aspect especially in some countries where culturally there is a greater focus on welfare issues and reflected where the presence of certain forms of right-wing extremism seems to be the greatest;
- *Spread fear*: considering, for example, the spread of conspiracy or negationist theories, their narratives and communication strategies;
- *Through wedge issues like ‘free speech’ or distrust of government decisions during the Coronavirus*: this is particularly related to the anti-government dimension of some components of right-wing extremism;

The previous four aspects are underlined which are also essential dimensions for understanding the communication, tactical and organisational methodologies of right-wing extremism in the days of the COVID-19.

The last question concerns the role of fake news in the days of the pandemic and in relation to right-wing extremism: “*What do you think is the relationship between right-wing extremism and fake news in time of pandemic?*”

First of all, it is interesting to note that the various answers are not unanimous in finding differences between crisis times and routine times: for some, the communication strategies related to the spread of fake news are the same both in times of crisis and in normal times, differentiating themselves only for the content.

Others, on the other hand, do not fail to point out the use of right-wing extremism of fake news during these months of pandemic:

Far-right extremists have an instrumental relationship to truth. They do not care if the information that they spread are true or not. As long as it fits into the strategic patterns, they have no ethical boundaries to construct reality according to their ideologies. Hence, fake news are always an important component for far-right mobilization – their content are just disseminated much quicker in crisis times.

Furthermore, there is a tactical dimension – organizational: *Right-wing extremists use disinformation for the sake of recruitment and radicalization. They deliberately spread false information to motivate other individuals to*

adopt their ideologies. Additionally, right wing extremism thrives on conspiracy theories.

The analysis of this online investigative survey orients the vision of the dimensions and orientations that are useful for understanding the dynamics present between different forms of extremism and the times of crisis of the pandemic. Considering the information collected, a specific focus will be proposed with regard to extreme right and the context of the pandemic.

4. Fusion Extreme Right in time of pandemic

The current pandemic has been a push factor in some extreme right-related phenomena. In particular, some issues have emerged emerging for narratives built by right-wing extremism; media coverage, media frame and extremist strategies.

The issues that have been addressed are influenced by the previous history of extreme right and how this has been conceptualized over time by various institutional and non-institutional agencies.

Despite the different ideological and organizational currents, which have multiplied over the last decade, it is good to remember what Ong claims (2020): *Generally, the worldview of right-wing extremists falls into four intertwined buckets: racial supremacy/replacement, anti-government, policy-centred beliefs such as anti-abortion, civil liberties, and pro-gun rights, and misogyny.*

The hybrid and ambivalent dimension of current forms of extreme right are also underlined by other authors such as Hoffman and Ware (2020): *They appear to be “mixing and matching ideologies to justify and explain the targets of their animus and give wider context to their violence.”*⁵

Moreover, the ideological perspective, which in many parts has been sustained to be well defined and built around clear boundaries, is now being questioned by taking for the most part what Hoffman and Ware (2020) define: *a culture of culling and cherry-picking ideologies.*

Looking at the frames you can identify others that are those proposed by McNeil-Willson, (2020):

six ‘crisis frames’ were found to be used across statements from the six organisations under study: three frames examined the causes of the spread of the virus (COVID-19 as a result of migration, Globalisation, and poor national governance); one frame examined the impact of the virus on potential activism (COVID-19 as leading to a diminishing of civil liberties); one supported

⁵ Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Challenges of Effective Counterterrorism Intelligence in the 2020s,” Lawfare, June 21, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-effective-counterterrorism-intelligence-2020s>.

activist response to the virus (Resilience-building against COVID-19); and coalesced around misinformation about the virus, authorities or other activist groups.

According to this framework, the prospect of resilience is a useful theme to be explored and not new as it is already considered for Islamic extremism and some of its pervasions (Lucini, 2017):

[...] these Far-Right groups emphasised engagement in activity designed to develop community resilience and – in contrast to initial commentary by analysts – conspiracy theories and practices of misinformation were largely not used. These findings suggest that the early stages of the COVID crisis has seen a shift by certain Far Right groups not towards practices of encouraging violent contention but rather using propaganda to emphasise their contribution in supporting the family unit, communities and the nation, against the failures of authorities in dealing with the virus. (McNeil-Willson, 2020)

In fact, resilience is not a new internal element for extremist groups: *Resilience-building has a long documented history of being used by ‘extremist’ and contentious groups and has been flagged as potential concern in regards to the COVID-19 outbreak.*⁶ (McNeil-Willson, 2020)

Furthermore,

The findings suggest that these Far Right groups have been highly responsive to the development of COVID-19 in ways that are significant: [1] they have focussed most of their frame response on authorities, stressing activism which is implied as creating a better response to those enacted by authorities, and has, in some ways, been; [2] pro-social, building resilience in communities against the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown; and [3] that such pro-social responses significantly outweigh conspiracy-based framing or attempts at spreading misinformation or encouraging violence. (McNeil-Willson, (2020)

In this sense, resilience and its proactivity component do not only express anti-government sentiment tout court, but a high level of internal activism, organized by a precise communication and propaganda strategy, to manage and overcome the crisis, obtaining if possible concrete benefits and visibility.

Having considered this as an innovative factor in understanding the phenomenon of the extreme right and its potential development during the pan-

⁶ Gunning, 2007, *Hamas in Politics*; Nancy J. Davis and Robert V Robinson, 2012, *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare: Egypt, Israel, Italy and the United States* (Indiana University Press: Indiana); Colin P. Clarke, 2020, ‘Yesterday’s Terrorists Are Today’s Public Health Providers’, *Foreign Policy*, 8th April, section Argument; Mia Bloom, 2020, ‘How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis’, *Just Security*, 3rd April.

demic, some issues appear to be more significant and of greater interest in the medium and long term, such as:

1. Bioterrorism and Extreme Right

The relationship between bioterrorism and the extreme right has been an underestimated topic, at least from what emerges from open source and digital ethnography, while there have been events that have brought a fringe of right-wing extremism, such as the one defined as eco-fascism to be careful for the use that the COVID-19 virus could have had especially on some communities: *For example, a post in a Telegram channel called Eco-Fascist Central circulated in March advocated for members to target Jewish communities by simply coughing on the door handles of local synagogues* (Karmon, 2020).

In the context of the new potential for the use of forms of bioterrorism by groups or extreme right figures, it is important to remember that the fascination with bioterrorism by the extreme right is not new⁷ or exclusive phenomenon linked to the current pandemic: *In his now famous novel, The Turner Diaries, published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald in 1978, right-wing extremists use nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiologic weapons to take over the world.*⁸ (Karmon, 2020)

In addition, interest in this form of threat seems to come from some of its intrinsic characteristics: *Easy communicability and the fact that biological warfare is anonymous are other reasons.* (Karmon, 2020) and

Anybody can use and successfully deploy biological warfare agents. Biological weaponry can be made by very small groups of people, or even just one person acting alone. The value of the masses is negated absolutely in favor of brainpower of the individual. And by working alone, and in secret, that one individual can strike at any time, undetected, and carry out his will. The monopoly of violence, the balance of terror has thus shifted to the launcher of a shot which comes out of the dark. (Gazette in Karmon, 2020)⁹

This also shows the paradox and attention that some members of the extreme right would have in promoting a war in some “clean” aspects through the use of invisible agents such as viruses.

2. Fake News and disinformation

Since the beginning of the pandemic, given the fact that the virus in circulation was not known by the scientific community and that therefore it was

⁷ <http://whitenationalist.org/lindstedt/mmgaz10.html#10mmig01>.

⁸ Stern, J. (1999). The Prospect of Domestic Bioterrorism. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, CDC, 5(4), 517-522, URL. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid0504.990410>.

⁹ <http://whitenationalist.org/lindstedt/mmgaz10.html#10mmig01>.

difficult to predict effects and impact, many false information and misinformation are circulating and with some surprise not only through social media.

In particular, these communication strategies have focused on some key topics¹⁰ such as:

- false information about the origin of the coronavirus and its medical implications;
- unreliable information then concerned the emergency phases and the first response to the crisis, for example the Italian case where untrue information had circulated about the first total lockdown;
- fake news about the supposed ethnic component of the virus and its spread caused by some immigrant or foreign people:

Since the corona outbreak in early December 2019, there have been posts on Telegram, 4chan and Gab linking the coronavirus to racist and anti-Semitic slurs and memes. This has ranged from racist posts to parodies of Chinese people mocking their hygiene and eating habits. They have used terms such as “corona-chan”, and “boogaflu” (modification of the term “boogaloo” used to reference a future civil war). Fake news, rumours, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories that have been spread during the Coronavirus crisis not only raise prejudices about Asians, Jews, Chinese, foreigners, immigrants but also present them as the causes for the virus, for which they are to be blamed and punished. The most worrying aspect of the far-right’s coronavirus-related campaign is the call for actual attacks.¹¹ (Karmon, 2020)

- fake news concerning some conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories that, for example, can be exemplified with the example of QAnon.

The main limitation in countering these forms of fake news and misinformation is that we can count on communication infrastructures that allow a great dissemination of the news, not directly and fully controllable: any intervention seems more effective in the next stage the circulation of the news, thus making the prevention tools more difficult to implement.

In addition, the wide variety of institutional and non-institutional programmes, both at European and individual states in the fight against these

¹⁰ <https://www.disinfo.eu/coronavirus>. https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en. https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en.

¹¹ Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri, “The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism website*, April 5, 2020, [#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate).

forms of communication, must be taken into account, making a wide-ranging system even more complex. (Lucini, 2020¹²)

3. Conspiracy theories

It was normal to expect that given the lack of knowledge of the viral agent and therefore the cause of the outbreak, information and history about the origin of this virus and related disease began to be conveyed. In particular, considering the interpretive spaces left empty by the scientific community itself and governments in the management of the resulting crisis, different theories, built to blow an information need or to take advantage of the opportunity to convey their own vision of society have taken place.

What is interesting to focus on the impact of conspiracy theories promoted by the far-right movement QAnon, which is mistakenly attributed to be a prevalent threat in the US¹³, but which has instead had feedback in other parts of the world, for example in Italy.¹⁴

Despite their sometimes underestimation these theories turn out to be dangerous, because they adopt mechanisms of manipulation and distortion of reality, building a new context that affect the perception of the people involved, producing real psychological addictions and the effect of Rabbit Hole.¹⁵

It therefore becomes interesting to delve into the dynamics and mechanisms that allow this movement and its theories to develop and spread so quickly, given that a first systemization of this movement took place in 2017.

Similar to the phenomenon QAnon is that of the boogaloo that has oriented some protests, often violent, concerning the measures of management of the pandemic: *Boogaloo enthusiasts weaponize reopen protests to mobilize enthusiasts for armed confrontation with law enforcement and lawmakers during COVID-19 restrictions en masse* (Finkelstein, 2020).

¹² <https://www.itstime.it/w/extremist-avantgarde-and-fake-news-in-time-of-pandemic-1-by-barbara-lucini>.

¹³ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-a-conspiracy-of-dunces-qanon-and-the-threat-to-the-u-s-homeland>.

¹⁴ <https://www.newsguardtech.com/it/qanon-italy/>; <https://www.wired.it/attualita/media/2020/08/04/qanon-complotto-diffusione-italia/>; <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/wu-ming-1/2020/09/02/mondo-qanon-prima-parte>; <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/wu-ming-1/2020/09/18/mondo-qanon-seconda-parte>.

¹⁵ <https://www.reddit.com/r/QAnonCasualties/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/25/qanon-facebook-conspiracy-theories-algorithm>; https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/23/qanon-conspiracy-theories-loved-ones?fbclid=IwAR2kJoepWfo-iYC9BHQeX1Fe_plGKSBWDMoF9A-WocIQY-Wjck_5fX3CVAU.

This type of threat appears to be more important than ever in this pandemic scenario, given the influence their narratives have on younger people¹⁶ thus placing the risk of polarization and radicalization, more concrete.

4. Tech-Extreme Right

The aspects of the use of technology by the far right are not an innovative factor in analysis. The case French, represented by the investigative report conducted by David Doucet e Dominique Albertini (2018) focuses on the digital evolution of the extreme right in its communication strategies, operative strategies¹⁷, recruitment tactics and financing methodologies¹⁸.

The actual extreme right at global level and in the current pandemic context is also unfolding along these directives. This is especially true referring to that culture of the Alt-Tech (Donovan et al. 2019) that can be sum up in this way:

Therefore, while no-platforming efforts have raised public awareness of online hate speech and racist organizing, they have also necessitated the development of alternative platforms to prolong the life of the movement. We argue that the so – called “Alt-Tech” platforms also serve as recruitment and organizing sites for the far right, allowing for direct communication and continued engagement. (Donovan et al. 2019)

The definition of Alt Tech leads to the consideration that within this phenomenon and for its understanding, it is necessary to move from a vision of network to a pyramid: in fact, online platforms seem increasingly to resemble pyramids with convergence vertices and not only to the structure of the networks typical of the first digital systemizations.

This vision is valid without forgetting the predisposition of the extreme right in the process of colonizing online spaces, or displacement in the days of the pandemic, considered as peculiar communication tactics.

The consideration of these different themes, to which both narratives and cultural interpretations of relevance to policies and law enforcement programs are linked, leads to the definition of Fusion Extreme Right, as it is no longer possible to read this phenomenon so complex, with past interpretative categories, for which the tame ideology defined boundaries and labels

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/sep/23/children-interested-in-extremism-covid-says-neil-basu-counter-terrorism-officer?fbclid=IwAR1mkB0nhNm-rLnKcCn-op7oBmUOrn8BBU5exob9vkU3sfdJog6VPB5K33E>.

¹⁷ <https://www.afr.com/world/pacific/christchurch-massacre-shooter-sentenced-20200824-p55opk>.

¹⁸ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-financing-the-radical-right-in-plain-sight>.

through which to understand the phenomenon: cultural aspects and the reference context become the central elements for future analysis.

5. New perspectives on Fusion Extreme Right

These two research activities carried out within the Converge project produced interesting results and insights from both a theoretical and a methodological perspective.

The first point provides the proposal of some concepts relevant to the understanding of a different framework relating to the extreme right, such as:

1. Geopolitical extremism: this concept refers to the dual meaning of right-wing extremism as a product of the activities of international networks and national movements; but also as a geopolitical action where socio-political, cultural and economic contexts affect the manifestation of local extremist forms;
2. Expected violence: the concept of expected violence is combined with two typical activities of experts and analysts such as expectation and prediction. The relationship between these two areas and the relationship produced considering the previous cultural and interpretive factors of the experts, lead to the concept of expected violence, with the typical characteristics of the sociological process of self-fulfilling prophecy. In particular, there is still little relevance to previous cultural knowledge, their background in defining and interpreting a threat for both the fields of experts and media coverage;
3. Symbolic violence: which is a sociological concept borrowed from Bourdieu first in the 1970s and then by Gerbner. For the interpretive purposes of this paper it will be the meaning given by this second Author to be considered: *Symbolic violence... is a show of force and demonstration of power' showing 'who can get away with what against whom.' It functions as an instrument of social control that tends to maintain the existing social order.*¹⁹

Taking into account the general perspective of the extreme right it is possible to say, that certainly the display of certain symbols or rituals of violence is aimed at social control but proposing alternatives and revisions to the status quo. The pandemic was precisely an intervening variable that allowed to bring out this goal, producing concrete opportunities in the realization of the purpose of increasing discontent with crisis management, with narratives built to promote this vision;

4. Extreme right and Soft skills: soft skills are a set of methodologies and tools useful to counter phenomena such as polarization and radicalization

¹⁹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100546777>.

(Lucini, 2020). They have been shown to be missing or not adequately developed within the Law Enforcement Agency. With regard to extreme right, soft skills have dual significance: on the one hand, they are necessary to counter this form of extremism as well, so training and planning in this regard should be a priority;

on the other hand, they are skills that belong to most of the exponents and far-right movements.

In this regard it is worthwhile to consider the communication dynamics and narratives used for the dissemination of messages, for the purposes of recruitment and funding: there are many soft skills used in an organizational approach, which can also be found in extreme right organizations.

The methodological perspective that has been confirmed and that needs further development is that of online ethnography: this method of qualitative research that applies in digital environments offers the opportunity to know and deepen extremist cultures and their cultural manifestations (cultural products such as music and images) returning a general view of phenomena, where at the center of this analysis emerge in cultural factors that are the drivers of the development of many extremist movements.

Finally, the research so far conducted on the relationship between right-wing extremism and the pandemic leads to confirmation of a theory called graft theory and proposed in 2017. (Lucini, 2017).

The graft theory (Lucini, 2017) was initially produced to interpret the phenomenon of Islamic extremism, but it was confirmed that this view could also be adapted to extremist phenomena.

The graft theory (Lucini, 2017) is essentially based on the concept of decoupling (Lucini, 2017), that is, how an extremist culture can multiply over and over again adapting to the various historical, political, social, cultural and economic contexts. In this particular case, decoupling took place with the spread of conspiracy theories and the adaptation that followed the impact of the pandemic, in the development of the dynamics typical of extremist groups both online and offline.

This mode of action is evidence of the level of creativity and resilience of the far right in general, considering that this form of extremism can be used for feelings of frustration, distrust, anger, rage (Ebner, 2017) that intercepts in dedicated contexts and hotbeds both online and offline.

Understanding this perspective and its cultural links, free or better aware of their limited vision of experts, is the first step in understanding the innovative scope of this threat and formulating effective and resilient responses to this form of extremism.

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Annex A - Outline Online Investigative Survey

General Information

Your Profession

Varieties of Extremisms

1. Do you think that the societies that are experiencing COVID-19 are increasingly polarizing towards different forms of extremism? (i.e. civil unrest against crisis management measures; far-right movement ...)
2. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has brought out a multitude of different (mixed) forms and organizations, tending to extremism or extremists. What do you think are the most threatening?
3. Islamic extremism was the first extremist actor to be considered a threat from the very first moments of the pandemic. Do you agree? If yes, how do you think Islamic extremism is exploiting the current pandemic?
4. Do you think that the various (mixed) forms of extremism have benefited from more online activities? If yes, how and for what types of extremism?
5. Do you think fake news is a specific strategy for current forms of extremism? If yes, what dynamics are most relevant and for what forms or extremist groups?

Right-wing extremism and COVID-19 pandemic

6. Right wing extremism seems to be at the height of its renewed development. According to you, what threats come from this form of ex-

tremism in the scenario of the current pandemic? (Please, in case of, differentiate about far-right; right-wing, alt-right...)

7. What do you think is the relationship between right-wing extremism and the current social conflicts in many countries, in time of pandemic?
8. How do you think right-wing extremism will exploit the social conflicts emerged during the pandemic in many countries?
9. What do you think is the relationship between right-wing extremism and fake news in time of pandemic?

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