



## POLICY BRIEF 2021:6

Perspectives into topical issues in society and ways to support political decision making.

This publication is part of the implementation of the 2020 Government plan for analysis, assessment and research ([tietokayttoon.fi/en](https://tietokayttoon.fi/en)). The producers of the information are responsible for its content and it does not necessarily represent the views of the Government.

# Extremist speech online and in the Finnish news media

Leena Malkki, Daniel Sallamaa, Juha Saarinen & Sami Eerola,  
University of Helsinki

## Violence is also endorsed in Finnish-language online discussions

In recent years, several Western countries have expressed concern over the increasing volume of online extremist content that seeks to dehumanise other people and justify the use of violence. This type of speech has been produced and distributed especially by political and religious extremists and their supporters. The increasing volume of extremist content online is believed to facilitate radicalisation into violent extremism. There are also fears that extremist views may become normalised and mainstream over time.

This research project investigated the presence and manifestations of extremist ideologies in the Finnish-language media environment. The topic was examined from two perspectives: 1) What kind of violence-endorsing and dehumanising content is present in the Finnish-language online environment, especially content that is linked to broader political ideologies? 2) How have violent extremist activism and ideologies been covered in the Finnish-language national news media? This policy brief presents the key findings of the project.

## Extremist content on openly accessible online platforms

The research demonstrates that content that endorses violence and dehumanises others is available on openly accessible Finnish-language online platforms. The study analysed a number of platforms that are known to include discussions with far-right or far-left undertones. It furthermore looked at violence-endorsing discussions within jihadist worldview and online content related to the incel and school shooting subcultures. The study focused on content posted online between March 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. The analysed platforms were Hommaforum, Ylilauta, the Kansallinen Vastarinta website, Takku.net, Punk in Finland and the Facebook pages and websites of Varisverkosto and the Proletaarit community.

The study focused solely on openly accessible online content that can be read by anyone without the need to log in. The analysed platforms contain diverse discussions on a wide range of topics, and extremist comments only form a small part of their content. The platforms examined here are not the only places online where violence-endorsing and dehumanising content is present. There are also numerous discussions on various closed sites and platforms that contain endorsement and glorification of violence – most likely of a more direct and serious nature. It should be noted that this report did not seek to measure the volume of such content, but instead its primary objective was to find out more about its nature in the Finnish-language online environment.

During the data collection process, the greatest amount of content endorsing violence or dehumanising others was found in far-right and anti-immigration discussions. Harsh views about adversaries were also repeatedly found in far-left discussions. The study found some extremist content related to the subcultures that have formed around the school shooting and incel phenomena. The quantity of openly accessible jihadist content in the Finnish-language online environment declined steeply a few years ago due to strict countermeasures and is still very low.

## Speech about violence is more severe in far-right discussions

Violence is justified by arguments that are fundamentally similar in nature regardless of the ideological tendency involved, for example, by framing it as self-defence or by arguing that other, non-violent means are simply insufficient. Transnational ideological currents and discourses are strongly present in the Finnish-language online environment.

There are clear differences, however, between far-right and far-left discussions on violence. In far-right discussions, comments about using violence against ideological enemies are clearly more graphic – occasionally even containing sadistic features – than in the far-left material. In far-right discussions, violence is almost invariably to be directed against civilians, whereas far-left discussions focus more often on violence targeting property or armed forces in the context of a military conflict. Differences could also be seen between different online platforms, as some appear to be more permissive of content endorsing or even inciting violence than others.

The possibility of violence is strongly present in far-right discussions. In a large number of these discussions, it is assumed that the evolution of the societal situation will inevitably lead to some sort of violence. The dividing line is expected to run between the autochthonous population defending their own people or race on the one hand, and immigrants together with “cultural Marxists” and “tolerants” who support them on the other. Most threads suggest that a full-scale violent confrontation is believed to be looming in Finland, often only in the distant future, but some discussants expect the situation to escalate in the near future.

The far-right discussions also contain reoccurring comments dehumanizing those who are considered adversaries, such as immigrants, political decision-makers, civil servants, and ethnic and religious minorities. Violence against these adversaries is often found to be at least understandable and sometimes even encouraged. Glorification of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks is occasionally found, especially in the far-right discussions on Ylilauta, as well as comments that expressed hopes that someone else would commit similar acts. Sometimes the discussant themselves stated that they are considering committing acts of violence.

In the far-left discussions, the use of violence is most often discussed in the contexts of the situation in the Middle East and the Finnish far right. The discussions include strong expressions of support for the actions of Kurdish-led forces against ISIS and the Turkish army in Northeastern Syria. Violence targeting the far right is addressed in

particular in the context of the clashes concerning the Finnish parliamentary and European Union elections of spring 2019. Although there is a relatively high level of support for the use of force against the far right, especially in more informal discussions, there is also a wealth of content opposing the use of violence. Dehumanising comments about opponents – especially the far right but also the police – are also more common in more informal discussions than in the official material published by the far-left groups and networks themselves.

## **Use of violence is also criticized**

It is important to note that speech objecting to the use of violence is also present on both far-right and far-left platforms. It is, however, more prevalent in the far-left discussions. Differences can also be seen in how these criticisms are justified and rationalised. In far-left discussions, the moral rationale for using violence is challenged more often than in far-right discussions, where acts of violence are mostly objected to by questioning their tactical utility.

## Violent extremism in the news media

The second part of the study examined violent extremism through its news coverage. Violent extremism is familiar to many people solely through the media. Therefore, national news media coverage inevitably has an impact on how the public and also the decision-makers view the phenomenon. Even though the national news media no longer functions as the kind of a gatekeeper it once did, editorial decisions in news coverage still have a significant impact on how much and what kind of publicity extremist speech and activism can attract.

This research project analysed news coverage on violent extremism in the Finnish national news media between March 1, 2019 and December 31, 2020. The analysis included news coverage from Helsingin Sanomat, Iltalehti, Ilta-Sanomat and YLE's website. The analysis focused in particular on how extremist ideologies were dealt with in news coverage.

### Violent extremism receives wide coverage

The analysis demonstrates that extremism receives wide coverage in the Finnish-language news media. A total of 1824 published articles were found which means that, on average, 19 articles per week were published on the topic (i.e., almost five articles per week per analysed news media). The number of articles did not vary significantly between the different news media.

Most of the news coverage focuses on the far right (786 articles). There are also many articles on jihadism (592 articles, including only articles that have a connection to the Western context). The school shooting subculture receives the third highest number of articles (304). A large majority of those articles focus on the school attack in Kuopio. News coverage of left-wing anarchism and antifascism is much more scarce (59 articles) and only a handful of articles focusing primarily on the incel subculture were found (7). In addition, there are 76 articles that dealt with violent extremism on a general level or equally with several ideological currents.

The news coverage is not evenly distributed throughout the examined time period. The articles focus heavily on the aftermath of certain events that received significant public attention. The largest peaks are connected to the aftermaths of the mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the school attack in Kuopio. Additional peaks include jihadist and far-right attacks in Europe, the al-Hol camp issue, and domestic far-right activities.

Most of the news coverage deals with what has happened, how others have reacted to it, and what should be done in the future. Ideologies connected to these events, on the other hand, receive less attention. However, because the total number of articles is so large, it can be concluded that extremist thought receives a fair amount of attention. At the same time, the coverage given to the ideological aspects is, in many respects, so shallow that the picture conveyed about of the phenomenon remains superficial.

## **News coverage is primarily negative in tone and in line with many good practices**

News articles that contain anything that could be considered as the glorification of extremist thought or violent activism are very few. News coverage of jihadism is strongly dominated by the security threats associated with the phenomenon and the portrayal of ISIS's activities as brutal and extreme. A negative tone is also evident in the coverage on the far right. When it comes to school shootings, the tone has been two-fold: On the one hand, the acts are considered reprehensible, but the experienced difficulties behind the acts are covered in a more empathetic manner. In the news coverage of left-wing anarchist and anti-fascist activities, the tone is generally more neutral, especially in articles that profile the individuals involved in such movements.

The analysis found that news coverage follows widely shared practices in reporting on terrorism and violent extremism. For example, in the news coverage of the school attack in Kuopio, most of the attention is focused on rescue operations and the course of events rather than on the perpetrator.

However, there are also articles that give publicity to the content produced by the perpetrators of violent activities. For example, their manifestos are sometimes discussed in detail while the images used in the articles include symbols and images from the extremists' own material. When the message and symbols of extremist movements appear in the news media, it is typically through manifestos compiled by the perpetrators of violent attacks or the visual material chosen by the editors.

## **Questions for further consideration**

Violent extremism is a societally significant issue, and it would be difficult to justify ignoring it in the news coverage. The coverage on extremist actors and ideologies can be seen as serving citizens by providing an opportunity to understand a diverse range

of societal phenomena. On the other hand, news coverage may end up giving disproportionate attention to marginal perspectives or even inadvertently justifying such views.

There appears to be a consensus in western countries that reporting on violent extremism in the media is important but requires restraint and case-by-case consideration.

In the light of this research project, the following questions would merit further consideration:

- Has the volume of news coverage been, in all respects, proportionate to the societal significance of the covered events and phenomena?
- Are there sufficiently clear and comprehensive editorial guidelines on how content produced by those involved in violent extremism should be reported on?
- Would a broader contextualisation of violent extremism be useful, especially when it comes to the ideologies and views of those involved?
- Do news media have enough thematic knowledge on extremist worldviews to avoid unintentionally reinforcing or justifying them?

## Additional reading

Malkki, Leena, Daniel Sallamaa, Juha Saarinen, Sami Eerola (2021). *Extremist speech online and in the Finnish news media*. Publications of the Government's analysis, assessment and research activities 2021:72, <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-394-4>.

Malkki, Leena & Matti Pohjonen, *Jihadist Online Communication and Finland*. Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2019:29 (Ministry of the Interior, 2019), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-300-2>.

Malkki, Leena & Juha Saarinen, *Jihadism in Finland*. Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2019:31 (Ministry of the Interior, 2019), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-302-68>.

Paronen, Antti & Juha Saarinen (toim.), *Karavaanin sotapolku: Näkökulmia jihadismiin*. Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, julkaisusarja 1: tutkimuksia nro 42 (Helsinki: Maanpuolustuskorkeakoulu, 2020), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-25-3154-7>.

Sallamaa, Daniel, *Ulkoparlamentaarin äärioikeistoliikkeitä ja maahanmuuttovastaisuus 2010-luvun Suomessa*. Valtiotieteellisen tiedekunnan julkaisuja 97 (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, Eurooppa-tutkimuksen keskus, 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/253474>.



## Further information:

**Docent Leena Malkki** works in the Centre of European Studies at the University of Helsinki. She specializes in the study of political violence and extremist movements. More information: <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/leenamalkki/>. Twitter: @leenamalkki

**M.Soc.Sc. Daniel Sallamaa** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Helsinki focusing on the study of political violence and extremist movements. His thesis deals with the Finnish far right in the 2000s. More information: [daniel.sallamaa@helsinki.fi](mailto:daniel.sallamaa@helsinki.fi)

**M.Sc. Juha Saarinen** is a doctoral candidate and researcher focusing on jihadism. Twitter: @JP\_Saarinen

**BA Sami Eerola** is a student at the University of Helsinki. He worked as a research assistant in the project.

## Extremist Narratives in Finland Today project is part of the implementation of the Government plan for analysis, assessment and research for 2020.

### Chair of the steering committee:

Head of Development Tarja Mankkinen

Ministry of the Interior, e-mail: [tarja.mankkinen@intermin.fi](mailto:tarja.mankkinen@intermin.fi)



Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminta  
Statsrådets utrednings- och forskningsverksamhet