



# With your back to society

An analysis of the sovereign movement  
in the Netherlands



*Cover photo caption:*

*Various government agencies receive letters from people who want to deregister, declare themselves sovereign, or file a report against the relevant authority based on the idea that its actions are illegitimate. Avoiding obligations can get people into serious trouble. When these self-declared sovereigns no longer pay rents, mortgages or taxes, they are confronted with rising debts. This can end in evictions.*

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With your back to society

# 1. Introduction

**Various organizations in the Netherlands are confronted with people who declare themselves 'autonomous' or 'sovereign'. The Supreme Court, the Tax Authorities, the Electoral Council, municipalities and provinces receive thousands of letters of citizens who emphatically try to place themselves outside of society.**

People who call themselves 'sovereign' believe that the Dutch government does not exercise legitimate power over them and that they can determine for themselves whether Dutch laws and regulations apply to them. Based on an alternative view of legal history they regard current Dutch laws as contracts that only apply when they explicitly agree to them. In their opinion they alone are responsible for their own lives. Such declarations of independence are not legally possible. Rejecting the legal basis for, for example, taxes and insurance and fines can have far-reaching consequences. Debts pile up and lead to confrontations with bailiffs and the police. During such confrontations, the sovereigns use pseudo-legal arguments and fantasy documents. In some cases this is accompanied by threats, intimidation and sometimes physical resistance.

These sovereigns often have the desire to create an alternative world, independent of the institutions. When a group of people chooses a parallel form of living together and does not interfere with 'regular' society, it can be argued that this has little effect on the democratic legal order. It maintains the current way of coexistence, because both ways exist side by side and do not resist the current way of living together. However, when this parallel form of living together becomes intolerant, this is a worrying development. This happens for example when messages are spread that undermine the democratic legal order, when significant parts of Dutch society reject the democratic legal order, if different values or rights are granted to a certain population group or if actions are extremist.

## **Undermining the democratic legal order**

An open and democratic society has laws and rules for mutual coexistence and for the relationship between citizens and government. Together these rules form the democratic legal order. The democratic legal order consists of a democratic legal state (political system) and a form of coexistence (open society). These can be called the vertical dimension and the horizontal dimension of the democratic legal order. The functioning of the democratic legal order is determined by the healthy 'functioning' of both dimensions and through the interaction

between them. Therefore, both the government and citizens are responsible for the proper functioning of the democratic legal order.

The democratic legal order is always developing. On the one hand there is a search for agreement on identifying the important problems in society and how they can be resolved. But on the other hand, a well-functioning democratic legal order means that constant contradiction is possible and organised. Having space for criticism, protest and demonstrations against the policy or actions of institutions is an essential part of the democratic legal order. Criticism, protest and contradiction show the pluralism that exist within societies.

Such contradiction has its limits. This lies in undermining or threatening the democratic legal order itself and thus national security. This happens for example when people or groups sow hatred, intimidate, incite hatred or make threats based on their ideas. The open rejection of institutions that are there to support the democratic legal order (e.g. parliamentary representation and public administration, independent judiciary, free press and science), the spreading and promoting of intolerance and images of enemies, or the violation of democratic behaviour are examples as well. They undermine the basis of the democratic legal order as a political system and method to live together. After all, a democratic legal order cannot exist without basic trust in the institutions, tolerance towards people who think differently, respect for the rights of minorities and other democratic norms, values and behaviour. That is why society must safeguard the boundaries of the democratic legal and be resilient to its threats.

This analysis addresses the question of the development of the Dutch sovereign movement and how it relates to the democratic legal order: is this movement undermining this order and if so, how does this manifest itself?

## Reading Guide

This publication consists of three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is contextual in nature and addresses the ideology of self-proclaimed sovereigns, the most important narratives that emerge from it and the international influence on the movement. In the second chapter, three different gradations are distinguished, with an analysis of each category whether and, if so, how and why they undermine the democratic legal order. The third chapter discusses the recent changes in the nature and extent of the sovereign movement in the Netherlands. Finally, the research question is answered in the conclusion.

## 2. A diverse sovereign movement

**There is not one, all-encompassing sovereign idea. In fact, dozens of interpretations of 'being sovereign' circulate on the internet, as a result of which people with very different points of view can be attracted to the ideas of the self-declared sovereigns. A number of common denominators within this sovereign ideology are discussed below, followed by a number of dominant narratives that are cited regularly. Finally, attention is devoted to the international inspiration of the Dutch sovereign movement.**

### Common denominators in ideas

The sovereign movement emerges from the broader anti-institutional movement, about which the AIVD<sup>1</sup> and the NCTV<sup>2</sup> have previously published. Just as is the case in this movement, the ideas of the sovereigns centre on the notion that a small, international, evil elite is in power, and that their actions come from a secret 'bigger plan'. This supposed elite is supposed to oppress, enslave and partly murder the population. According to followers of the movement, this elite is not only limited to the legislative, judicial and executive powers, but also extend to the media and science. According to them, this elite would invent events and phenomena, such as the corona pandemic or the war between Israel and Hamas, in order to implement its own agenda. The government and democratic institutions are, according to sovereigns, an illegitimate instrument of the elite.

As a form of resistance, part of the anti-institutional movement creates parallel societies in order to escape the oppression of the evil elite outlined. This form of resistance also characterizes the sovereigns. Where followers of the anti-institutional movement generally do not have a concrete picture of what the world should look like after the fall of the evil elite, self-proclaimed

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<sup>1</sup> AIVD, Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands: a serious threat to the democratic legal order?, May 25, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> NCTV, Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands, December 2023.

sovereigns often do. In the sovereign worldview, the individual is the highest authority, without being oppressed by a government that makes self-rule impossible. To achieve this, sovereigns want a life in which they are as self-sufficient and independent as possible from Dutch society and the democratic institutions, which normally organize and protect society. They view Dutch legislation as a suggestion, which they only have to adhere to when they themselves agree to it. This philosophy can impair confidence in the legislative and executive powers, the judiciary and in the traditional media and science. The result is that the legitimacy of these institutions is questioned, which can be undermining for the democratic legal order.

Within the movement, people interpret the sovereign ideas differently. For example, there are people who call themselves sovereign or autonomous and believe that they cannot detach themselves completely from society, even if they wanted to. They recognize (parts of) the law, but believe that they themselves determine which laws and regulations they follow and which taxes they pay. Other self-declared sovereigns regard Dutch law and regulations as invalid and therefore sometimes refuse to meet the connected financial obligations that are imposed on them, such as paying taxes and fines. In extreme cases, some sovereigns want to resist the current system by force or believe that the evil elite will initiate a violent struggle they must prepare for. In practice, the distinction between the different gradations and groups is not always clearly defined.

In addition to this distinction in behaviour, several sub-narratives are propagated. They have in common that they deny the legitimacy of current Dutch law and regulations. These sub-narratives are interpreted differently and as such used to substantiate all gradations of sovereign action. Despite extensive argumentation, these narratives have no legal basis whatsoever.

## Different underlying narratives

Stemming from their belief in an evil elite, sovereigns are especially strongly drawn to the thought that the government and institutions are acting illegitimately. Persons or organizations that make a substantial contribution to driving the sovereign narrative, so-called boosters, respond to this and with their underlying narratives offer concrete reasons for sovereigns to withdraw from Dutch society and strive towards an alternative society. Conspiracy theories portray legitimate concerns and grievances regarding institutions in the frame of government actions and -failure as part of a secret, preconceived plan. Subsequently, the narratives offer an attractive and simple alternative with a number of simple rules of life that are enforced by fellow citizens, without complex national and sometimes international laws and regulations. For some of the sovereigns this offers a way out of debts and other problems with government agencies. In other cases, a solution is given for simply living under an 'evil elite'.

The following shows that sovereigns like to rely on existing legal concepts, but always come up with their own interpretations that are at odds with the meaning given to such concepts in law and philosophy. There are no clear dividing lines between the different narratives. Not



every sovereign believes in all narratives described below, this varies per person and per group. Sometimes adherents believe in multiple narratives at the same time.

### **Natural law and common law**

One of the most important narratives concerns legislation. Many sovereigns attach more value to natural law than to the legal system applicable in the Netherlands. Natural law appeals to universal, non-man-made, immutable laws. For example, fairly uncontroversial principles of natural law are the rules that you are not allowed to kill, steal or coerce. However, sovereigns give natural law a very unique interpretation. Some refer to concepts emerging from religious and spiritual movements. That sovereign interpretation of natural law leads to a set of rules that is at odds with the current legal system. Some of the sovereigns, for example, believe in some kind of karma principle. They argue that a person ultimately receives the consequences of their own actions; someone who commits violence will eventually have to deal with that kind of violence themselves. This sometimes has a dampening effect on the use of violence, but can also be considered as a license for sovereigns to respond with force to people who, according to them, have committed an act of violence.

Supporting this alleged highest right, natural law, is the common law according to the interpretation of the sovereigns. They believe that common law is based on natural law, with some man-made law adjustments. The common law of sovereigns legitimizes resistance against those who violate natural law. In practice this means that when the government makes laws that in their view are not in accordance with natural law, they do not have to comply with those laws.

According to these sovereigns, the government should have no right to adapt natural or common law and should only interfere with what they consider to be the lowest level of legislation, such as administrative law, criminal law or civil law. Many sovereigns believe that they only have to comply with these laws if they agree to it. Many of them therefore do not feel bound by current Dutch laws and regulations.

Some therefore no longer pay taxes or fines, develop their own license plates, or even go so far as to demand compensation from authorities because of 'illegitimate action' or resort to vigilantism. Following the example of sovereigns in the United States and Germany Dutch supporters speak of 'common law courts' or 'tribunals', for handling complaints about the local or national government, and about their own 'sheriffs' for the enforcement of common law.

### **Maritime law**

According to sovereigns, maritime law is an example of one of the laws of the lowest level, which has been created by the government and is currently being applied to oppress them. This maritime law is based on a complicated interpretation of the legal history, which focuses on the fact that a new law was created in 1666, whereby 'Lost at Sea' declarations were regulated. When ships or crew members disappeared at sea and were not found, relatives had to be able to continue with their lives. For example, insurance and inheritances had to be able to be paid out.

To arrange this, the new law required that if crew members did not return within seven years and declared themselves as living people, they were considered 'lost at sea'.

A large number of sovereigns believe that this maritime law still applies, not only for people at sea, but for everyone. They believe that people are born free, but that a compelling twin identity was subsequently created. When newborns are registered in the civil registry, separate from the naturally free 'human', the legal construction of 'person', also called a 'straw man', secretly takes place. This explains why the government imposes all kinds of rules and taxes on the population as a 'person', while the free human should not really worry about that. The whole endeavour of the sovereigns is to abolish the person and to continue living as a human. According to them, when this is successful through deregistrations and unsubscriptions, people become immune to fines and penalty payments that are addressed to the 'person'.

### **Birth trust**

In addition to maritime law, there are people who do not just believe that they lose their rights when they become a 'straw man', but also that the government makes money of its use. Sovereigns use different stories to justify this. According to one of the stories, the Dutch government was supposed to be bankrupt following the Second World War, after which a trust was opened for each 'straw man' that was traded on the stock exchange. Based on an estimate of a person's lifetime earnings that trust would contain between 1.5 and 2 million euros. When sovereigns do not report themselves 'alive', the story says that banks, the Tax Authorities and the state are allowed to use this trust money. More and more sovereigns are trying to claim the non-existent trust by writing letters to the Tax Authorities. It can also provide additional legitimacy for not paying taxes and fines because the government could also retrieve the amounts due from the birth trust.

### **The SHAEF laws**

Finally, some of the sovereigns believe that the sovereignty of the Netherlands has been transferred to the Allies after Queen Wilhelmina fled to England in 1940. According to these sovereigns, Wilhelmina did not renew the ratification of the Constitution after the Second World War. In their view this means that the Dutch State does not have a valid legal basis anymore and can no longer exercise legitimate power over the Dutch people. Instead, it refers to the laws of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), on the basis of which the Allies governed the liberated areas after the war. Because the Allies have never transferred control to the liberated areas and because the Dutch constitution was not re-ratified, the SHAEF laws are still supposed to be in effect. According to this theory, the Dutch legislation and courts are therefore illegitimate: only courts recognized by the military government of the allied armed forces would be allowed to operate in the Netherlands; these do not exist in the Netherlands.

## Inspiration from abroad

The ideas of the self-declared sovereigns have their origins in the United States of the sixties and seventies of the last century. That is where the idea of the 'sovereign citizen' arose in protest against the authority and taxes of the federal government. For this reason in the beginning there was talk of 'tax protestors'. Part of this group is now considered to be a domestic terrorist threat in the United States<sup>3</sup>; many people involved in the Capitol storming in Washington DC on January 6, 2021 were 'sovereign citizens'. America's sovereigns believe in an alternative interpretation of the history of the country, where they, like the Dutch sovereigns, believe that many laws do not apply. For example, they also do not pay taxes and sometimes even demand money from the government. The idea that the State has no legitimacy is now prevalent in various countries with their own variations. However, the precise interpretation differs from country to country.

The ideas of the Dutch sovereign movement are very similar to or completely overlap with the ideas of the sovereign movement in the United States. Strikingly enough sovereigns in the Netherlands rarely refer to American ideas or ideologues, but they do refer to for example American legislation, such as the Second Amendment. This article prohibits the government to violate the right to keep and bear arms. Dutch sovereigns usually draw their inspiration from Germany and Canada. The ideas of the Dutch sovereign movement have similarities with the German *Reichsbürger*, *Souveränisten* and *Selbstverwalter*. Supporters of this *Reichsbürger* movement find each other through a dislike of how democratic institutions and democratically elected representatives function. They do not recognize the current Federal Republic and believe that German laws do not apply to them. Part of this movement is extremist or even terrorist. Supporters of the *Reichsbürger* have been involved in hundreds of violent incidents in recent years, including shootings in which police officers were killed as well as the attempted storming of the Bundestag in August 2020. In 2022 and 2023, German police detained several supporters of the movement on suspicion of preparing a coup. There are no indications of preparations for this in the Netherlands. Other parts of the sovereign ideology in the Netherlands seem to be copied directly from Canada. A specific group of sovereigns in the Netherlands has adopted the ideas of an Canadian ideologue, who argues that there are good and bad people and that the good people are allowed to stop those who are bad, with force or violence if necessary. Common law should determine the penalty.

Finally, one might expect that there is a conceivable risk from the sovereign narrative that foreign actors try to influence this. They can covertly influence social sentiments to increase tensions that exist within Dutch society. For the time being, however, the threat of covert influence on the Dutch democratic legal order is limited. Influencing activities are more likely to be focused on countries that are considered to be more important or susceptible than the Netherlands.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Homeland Security, 'Intelligence Assessment. Sovereign Citizen Extremist Ideology Will Drive Violence at Home, During Travel, and at Government Facilities (2015).

# 3. Three categories

**There are differences in ideas and narratives and also in types of behaviour and the extent to which people can pose a threat to the democratic legal order. The violence that arises from the movement is still limited. The narratives discussed above do not in principle incite violent actions, despite the enemy image of an evil elite that want the oppress, enslave or kill the people. Everyone can interpret this in their own way.**

Roughly speaking, three different categories are distinguished, namely:

- Autonomous people or sovereigns who advocate change within the current system.
- Sovereigns who deny the legitimacy and validity of the current system and withdraw from it.
- Active resistance to the current system, with or without violence.

The last strand is by definition part of the second category; you must first deny the system in order to actively resist it, if necessary with violence. This is not the case the other way around. People can deny the system without opposing it with violence. These categories are not always as black and white as they seem. Persons change categories or are part of several at the same time. This distinction also means that not every person who calls himself sovereign is by definition considered to be a threat to the democratic legal order. In addition to ideas, behaviours are equally important. The three categories are further elaborated below.

## Change within the system

The first group of sovereigns is the largest category and probably consists of several tens of thousands of people. They are looking for self-sufficiency and want to live as independently as possible *within* the system, without rejection of the system or harbouring violent intentions. Some in this group call themselves autonomous rather than sovereign. There are sovereigns who do not see them as truly 'sovereign', because they themselves go one step further and step outside the system completely. People who call themselves autonomous sometimes also argue that they would not be able to completely separate themselves from society, even if they wanted to. At the same time, there are people who use both terms interchangeably and do not make a distinction.

This group of sovereigns (or: autonomists) is very varied and concerned with matters such as creating their own vegetable garden, or their own education and medical systems. Parts of this are undesirable because the group is increasingly isolating itself from Dutch society, but the group as a whole is not intolerant. Despite the fact that the sovereign narrative prescribes that people decide for themselves whether they comply with Dutch laws and regulations, this first group consciously chooses to continue doing so. It still pays taxes and rent and complies with Dutch laws and regulations.

Some sovereigns of this first type manage organizations. Some of these organizations share information regarding common law, but often explicitly state that everyone also falls under 'regular criminal law', with which Dutch laws and regulations are recognized. Many of the organizations that fall within this first type earn money by providing courses on autonomy, the sale of documents that state that people can deregister from Dutch society, the sale of so-called diplomatic passports and the sale of alternative license plates. This can be punishable in the event of fraud or incitement to forgery. But despite the fact that they, for example, encourage people to unsubscribe from society, they explicitly state that they must continue to comply with the law. How in their view these principles can be united, is not clear. In general this group does not deliberately undermine the democratic legal order. At the same time this group contributes to the dissemination of a narrative that can form a prelude towards more intolerant forms of isolationism, radicalization and extremism.

## Denial of the legitimacy of the system

The second, still significant category of several thousands of people consists of sovereigns who go a step further. They believe that the Dutch government is illegitimate and therefore choose to no longer adhere to Dutch laws and regulations. These types of sovereigns often meet online – but also physically – to discuss the ideology, ways of not paying taxes or rent and ways of showing society they are turning away from it. These methods include, for example, the introduction of own means of payment, the development of own fantasy documents for identification or the organisation of their own education, and the withdrawal of children from regular education.

The narrative that the government is illegitimate and Dutch laws and regulations invalid, encourages a number of actions. Various government agencies such as municipalities, police and the tax authorities receive letters from people who want to claim their birth trust, wish to deregister, declare themselves sovereign or file a report against an agency based on the idea that it is acting illegally. Avoiding obligations can get people into serious trouble. When these selfproclaimed sovereigns do not pay rent, mortgage fees or taxes, they are faced with increasing debts. This can result in eviction. Cancelling mandatory insurance, filing false tax returns and keeping children of compulsory school age at home, provide additional problems or lead to criminal offences, as well as the loss of confidence in regular care and assistance. In this way, people become increasingly isolated from the institutions that are equipped to help them or even end up in the criminal justice system.

Individuals who are already in a difficult financial position may be extra susceptible to the misleading messages from sovereign boosters, especially when they already have bad experiences with the authorities. Such boosters promise mountains of gold, such as the birth trust money or the removal of financial obligations. But in the meantime they only cause (more) trouble for people. Possibly some of these boosters consider the sovereign philosophy mainly as a revenue model: for a fee they offer documents, advice and other services that would be necessary to become sovereign while the situation for their clients only gets worse. Sometimes a double morality is in play; some of them themselves? for example correctly pay their own taxes. By the end of 2023 two self-appointed legal advisors were arrested on suspicion of tax fraud, embezzlement and forgery.

Although the sovereigns in the Netherlands have a non-violent past, recent times show more intimidation, threats and some minor violent confrontations with, for example, police and bailiffs. For example, a bailiff was detained and a police officer was attacked when he asked a sovereign for her driver's license. Local politicians and civil servants, judges, journalists and scientists can find themselves feel hampered in their work and are actually hindered by intimidation, including the threatening tone in letters they receive. Because groups of sovereigns are in danger of getting into more and more trouble because, for example, they no longer pay their bills, it is expected that the number of violent incidents will likely increase. This also applies to the number evictions or visits by bailiffs in which the police play a role. This trend is reinforced by the fact that these sovereigns, based on their ideology, reject the help of government agencies.

## Violent resistance against the system

The last category of sovereigns consists of people who believe that a future violent struggle with the government and democratic institutions is inevitable. This is the smallest group of a few dozen to a hundred people and is a subsection of the second category.

By spreading a terrifying enemy image of an evil elite that is out to oppress, enslave and murder, some sovereigns may conclude that violent resistance is necessary. Such enemy images demonize and dehumanize opponents; the use of terms such as 'oppression', 'tribunals', 'genocide', 'holy war' and 'existential struggle' can contribute to the supposed need for violence. The alleged representatives of the elite regularly receive threats. Generally speaking these are threats of citizen arrests or tribunals. What these tribunals should look like is not clear. Part of this group will only boast, but to some such messages can legitimize violent action against these supposed representatives. This threat is increased by doxing. In online groups, sovereigns regularly distribute addresses and personal data from for example bailiffs, police personnel and (municipal) officials.

Moreover, based on the belief that every individual has their own rights that no one may tamper with, manuals are circulated for so-called 'sheriffs' and sovereign 'courts'. The sheriffs themselves are sovereign and are supposed to defend natural and common law. The deployment of these sheriffs should also accomplish the transition to a new society. They would have been

qualified and trained in the use (fire)arms and techniques for self-defence. The arrested persons are consequently tried on the basis of common law. There is also talk of forming 'citizen militias' to enforce common law under the leadership of such sheriffs. If this vigilantism leads to confrontation with the police or with people who refuse to cooperate, this can potentially lead to violence.

In addition, a so-called 'Resolution of the Sovereign Dutch people' is shared through social media channels. This contains references to the 'evil elite' and the terms 'war' and 'genocide'. This resolution can be considered a call for violence. For example, this resolution states: "(...) Do we, the free Dutch people, give the irrevocable notice that gives us the right to arrest, try and in that context kill the perpetrators of crimes against humanity if needed (...)." The resolution further calls for self-armament and the arrest of enemies.

An even smaller group of sovereigns goes so far as to organize themselves online and physically in preparation to defend itself in the violent struggle with the government and institutions they expect, or even speak of an offensive approach. The same development took place before among American sovereign citizens and the German Reichsbürger. Martial arts lessons are also being taken in the Netherlands or the use of violence and the collection of (often legal) weapons is being discussed. This may lower the threshold to use violence. Such preparations are often defensive in nature, although arrests have been made for threats of violence against officials, occupying or carrying out an attack on a town hall and arresting a judge. With several sovereigns, (fire)arms and ammunition were found. In September a sovereign was sentenced to eight months in prison for attempting to buy semi-automatic weapons and ammunition for a group of like-minded people.

### **Different expressions of sovereigns**

*Sovereigns have diverse backgrounds and ideas, and also express themselves in diverse ways. Sovereigns often have a conflict-oriented attitude in their contact with the government. The following provides a general overview of the diverse expressions of sovereigns in the Netherlands.*

**Meetings:** *There are several physical sovereign assemblies, in which they come together to speak about their ideas, how they should behave in accordance with them, and the legal documents that could form its basis.*

**Letters to authorities:** *municipalities, bailiffs and collection agencies are among the authorities that receive letters. For example, they are held liable for loss of property. Such letters are often peppered with pseudo-legal language and incorrect claims. They are often provided with different signatures and fingerprints in blood or red paint.*

**'Termination of management authorization':** *When persons declare themselves sovereign, they generally do so in the municipality where they live and often also at the Electoral Council, the Supreme Court or the King's Cabinet. They do this through of a 'termination of management authorization'.*

**Upbringing & Education:** Because sovereigns consider birth registration as the starting point of the relationship with the evil government, they encourage people not to register newborns anymore. Some sovereigns also do not trust government-accredited education. They are trying to set up their own schools, practice homeschooling or weekend schooling. The risk of such developments is that children fall through the cracks and are withdrawn from social view.

**Use of fantasy documents:** Persons buy or sell fantasy documents as 'diplomatic passports', self-invented license plates, stickers with 'Corps Diplomatique' or embassy signs for the own homes, indicating that users as a sovereign do not fall under the Dutch legal system. This can lead to seizure of vehicles, for example.

**Streaming:** Arrests or evictions are filmed by attendees, streamed and shared via online groups.

**Filing a report:** Sovereigns, often after being confronted with debts they incurred, file a report to the police against, for example, municipal officials, judges, home landlords or bailiffs for coercion, forgery, extortion, threats or theft. Reports are often also filed against the tax authorities for 'unlawful seizure of a business account'.

**Claims:** Sovereigns serve claims against the bailiffs, tax authorities or mayors due to lost income, and against specific police officers for alleged 'kidnapping and hostage-taking' through arrests or 'unlawful conduct'.

**Doxing:** Private data from, among others bailiffs, police personnel, public prosecutors and tax office employees are shared in app groups that sometimes count more than a thousand members. This is punishable, people who do this can be prosecuted for, among other things, sedition and threat.

**Making (online) threats:** there are regular arrests of persons for expressing threats, both online as through letters or verbally. In this way people are threatened with death, ranging from public figures to notaries and employees of a bailiff's office. Sovereigns also declare that they are willing to resist to the death or commit attacks, when it comes to for example out-of-home placements due to debts they incurred or supervision orders for of their children. Sometimes threats are combined with extortion, coercion and sedition.

**Deprivation of liberty or citizen's arrest:** In case of seizures by bailiffs due to high debts there have been threats with citizen's arrests or bailiffs have actually been held by sovereigns. In some cases, an (attempted) 'citizen's arrest' followed as a result of doxing.

**Preparing for a confrontation with the government:** Some sovereigns are preparing for a violent struggle with the 'evil elite', for example by arming themselves, following lessons at shooting clubs or practicing martial arts. During a house search with sovereigns in 2023 several daggers, samurai swords and firearms were found. The same year a sovereign ex-member of the armed forces was prosecuted for purchasing firearms.



## 4. Change in nature and size

**The Dutch sovereign movement first became visible around 2010. Two years later the Sovereign Independent Pioneers Netherlands (SOPN) participated in the House of Representatives elections, where they received 12,982 votes. The movement then remained relatively silent. Sometimes the ideas surfaced in lawsuits, but both the number of people that no longer recognized Dutch institutions and direct confrontations between government and sovereigns remained very limited. However, in recent years the number of sovereigns has multiplied and the nature of the movement has changed. More people are actively avoiding laws and regulations and even take steps towards violence.**

### **The supporters in the Netherlands**

The level of support in the Netherlands is important to determine the extent to which there is a threat from the sovereign philosophy. It cannot be determined with certainty how many persons precisely identify themselves as sovereign. The number of followers is difficult to estimate due to the highly changing landscape and the overlap in followers between different online channels and boosters. Judging by the number of followers, viewers and responses to important sovereign boosters and online groups, the number of letters municipalities receive and the number of sovereigns that come into contact with the tax authorities it is estimated that at least several tens of thousands of persons more or less adhere to sovereign ideas. Some are convinced of the sovereign narrative, while others might send a letter to the Tax Authorities under the motto 'if it doesn't help, then it won't hurt'. Social media play a connecting role, although Dutch sovereigns also meet physically and organize meetings. The expectation is that the sovereign movement will grow even further.

It is striking that the majority of sovereigns appear to be between 40 and 60 years old. This average age corresponds to the sovereign movements in e.g Germany and the United States. The relatively high age is striking. Presumably people are more susceptible to sovereign ideas when they have been concerned about the state of the country for years or even decades, are distrustful towards the government or rebel against 'the elite'. Especially when they have had negative experiences with the institutions of the democratic legal order during their life.<sup>4</sup>

The ideology offers a way out for various people who not feel heard enough by the government, are disappointed in the government's response to certain events or no longer have confidence in the problem-solving capacity of the government. This concerns, for example, the measures during the corona pandemic, but also the benefits affair, the hard handling of earthquake damage in Groningen, the nitrogen crisis, the housing shortage, or the increasingly expensive food and groceries and the rising energy prices. Furthermore, the loss of trust may be based on personal problems and grievances, or a perceived lack of control over one's own life.

Sovereign boosters respond to this by claiming that the government and institutions are acting illegitimately and that persons therefore do not have to comply with laws and regulations. Legitimate concerns and doubts regarding institutions are placed in a frame that portray government actions and failures as part of a secret, preconceived plan. For some, they offer a way out of personal problems with government agencies such as tax debts or simply living under an 'evil elite'. The availability and accessibility of this sovereign narrative has increased enormously through social media.

## Resilience against sovereign ideas

The possible growth of the sovereign movement partly depends on the resilience of Dutch society against sovereign messages. It is difficult to determine how great the actual resilience is. For now, a big majority of Dutch society rejects the idea that they can declare themselves to be sovereign. People regularly engage in discussions on social media with distributors of the narratives. The inimitability of their argumentation often causes sovereigns to be dismissed as 'woo-woo'. The media also regularly publish critical articles in which sovereign ideas are refuted and the possible consequences of ignoring legislation and regulations are outlined. This even applies to some anti-institutional media outlets, where the sovereign narrative is criticized and it is stated that a declaration of sovereignty does not exempt people from laws and regulations.

The institutions are also taking action against the sovereign movement. The tax authorities recently won summary proceedings against a sovereign booster who advised people not to pay taxes anymore. Also a number of recent arms licenses of known sovereigns have been revoked recently, because those involved indicated that they did not recognize Dutch legislation and regulations. As a result, the right to their firearms permit expired. Although to some this

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<sup>4</sup> See for example: NCTV, 'The different faces of the corona protests', April 2021.

message seems to be a reason to question the sovereign ideas, it actually strengthens other sovereigns in theirs. Within sovereign groups help and advice is asked which next steps to take against the government and institutions. This shows that once people adopt these types of narratives, it is difficult to convince them of the contrary. That is why it is important to put effort into increasing resilience to these types of messages, especially among people who do not (yet) have anything to do with such ideas ('prebunking'). That is often more effective and efficient than attempts to bring back people who have already fallen prey to them ('debunking').

## A movement with growth potential

Although resistance to the ideas in Dutch society is strong, this has probably decreased in recent years. Where before sovereign views were held by very small groups of people who were taken seriously by few, these sounds are now audible in various places in society. The group of followers has increased significantly and still appears to be growing. The growth of the movement is probably partly inspired by the actual actions of the institutions. The measures taken during the corona pandemic in particular have increased the potential breeding ground for the narrative. In addition, for example, the benefits affair is cited by many sovereigns as an example of the existence of an evil elite. Moreover, confidence in the Dutch government and politics has been low in recent years. These types of developments probably make people more open to alternative explanations for events.

The large-scale distribution of factually incorrect messages, which undermines trust in the legislative, executive and judiciary powers, and in the traditional media and science, undermines the legitimacy of these institutions. In combination with the growing group of followers, these messages and anyone who makes a substantial contribution to them, probably pose a serious long term threat to the functioning of the democratic legal order. Moreover, the sovereign narrative encourages the creation of, sometimes intolerant, parallel societies with their own legislation and institutions. The more people spread these messages, the more trust is undermined.

In addition, due to their willingness to act, sovereigns increasingly find themselves in confrontation with institutions. Evictions, mounting debts and stagnant personal relationships can lead to severe stress, feelings of abandonment and anxiety. This can have repercussions on sovereigns, but also on their relatives. The consequences experienced by children of sovereigns has not yet been sufficiently investigated, but it is very likely that they also experience disadvantages from the actions of their parents. In the short term, an increase in the number of sovereigns probably results in an increase of the number of (smaller) violent incidents and personal dramas.

# 5. Conclusion

**This analysis answers the question whether the Dutch sovereign movement is undermining the democratic legal order and, if so, how it manifests itself. The democratic legal order consists of a democratic constitutional state (political system) and the way of living together (open society), also called the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the democratic legal order.**

There hardly seems to be any undermining of the horizontal dimension. No other rights are granted or denied to specific population groups and criticism of existing power structures is encouraged rather than discouraged. Although sometimes disagreements arise over ideology within sovereign groups, internal dissidence or withdrawal from the groups is not made impossible. Sovereigns primarily turn away from the government and other institutions, but often maintain an open and inclusive attitude towards fellow citizens. They try to convince them of their ideas.

The vertical dimension is being undermined. This happens both in the longer term due to the factually incorrect messages behind the sovereign ideology and narratives, as by the threat of violence in the short term. And then there are also many criminal acts that could affect the functioning of the democratic legal order. Such as for example the intimidation and threats of civil servants and politicians, which hinders them in the performance of their work. Autonomists or sovereigns seeking change within the current system might not undermine the democratic legal order because of their behaviour, but they do contribute to the conservation and possible growth of the movement as a whole. The following takes a closer look at the undermining of the vertical dimension of the democratic legal order.

## **Undermining by factually incorrect messages**

The sovereign ideology undermines the democratic legal order by spreading factually wrong messages that undermine confidence in the legislative, executive and judiciary powers, the traditional media and science. This will undermine the legitimacy of these institutions. This is not just about the fact that the messages are factually incorrect. A large-scale belief in such untruths fuels the inability to function as a society on the basis of a shared sense of reality. One person's facts become another person's fables. Except for the possibility that supporters of

these ideas will resist by the use of violence, it can lead to intolerant isolationism. The sovereign philosophy encourages evasion of existing law and regulations in favor of its own, sometimes intolerant, parallel societies with their own legislation and its own institutions.

Because of the extent to which sovereigns try to turn away from Dutch society and the level of distrust they harbor against government and institutions, the expectation is that the ideas will probably continue to play a long term role in Dutch society. New government measures, for example regarding nitrogen and the climate, or personal circumstances when people encounter a bailiff at the door, are repeatedly portrayed by sovereign boosters as a government's way of oppressing them. In doing so they also state that Dutch laws and regulations are only a suggestion and the government is acting illegally. Because the narrative is constantly adapted to new events and measures, it is also very agile in the longer term. Combined with the speed with which their theories are spread via social media, the reach of the ideas will probably remain large.

## Concerns about growth

The more people spread and receive these messages, the more the trust in the democratic legal order is undermined. It is estimated that there are several tens of thousands of people in the Netherlands who to a greater or lesser extent believe in the sovereign ideology. This magnitude is not such that it poses an existential threat to the democratic legal order, but there are concerns about the continued growth of the movement and the existing breeding ground for the ideas. Not least because citizens can also get themselves into enormous trouble if they act on the advice that follows from the philosophy.

Given the strong growth in support over recent years, the idea poses a bigger threat to the democratic legal order than it did in the past. The expectation is that the movement will continue to grow. The ideas may seem like a way out for people who feel insufficiently heard by the government, who are disappointed in the actions of the government during certain events, or no longer have confidence in the solutions of the government for various complex and often interconnected problems. The common thread of sovereign ideology, regardless of the underlying narratives, is that the current Dutch legislation and regulations are not valid and that the government is acting illegally. Sovereigns are probably not so much attracted to the movement by its complicated narratives, but especially by its ultimate conclusion that the government is acting illegitimately; after all, they believe in an evil elite.

It proves difficult to get people to change their minds once they are convinced of the sovereign narratives. The harder sovereigns are tackled by institutions because they do not adhere to the laws and regulations, the more they are marginalized and turn their backs on society. After all, this will strengthen their belief that there is an evil elite oppressing them.

## Short term threat of violence

In contrast to the broader anti-institutional movement, the sovereign narrative and organizations and individuals prescribe different options for action. Moreover, the sovereign movement knows how to organize itself. This is of particular concern when it comes to the second and third categories within the movement of sovereigns: persons who deny the current system and people who are planning to actively oppose the current system, if necessary with violent acts. Supporters from those categories are regularly involved in violent incidents, for example in response to traffic controls, arrests or evictions. In addition, (fire) weapons were found with various supporters. Some sovereigns are preparing for a violent confrontation with the government and threaten to use violence. In combination with the expected growth of the sovereign movement as a whole, it is likely that this threat will increase in the future.



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