The different faces of the protests against coronavirus restrictions

Introduction

In the 53rd edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) wrote about the persistent and sometimes intimidating manifestations of societal discontent since the outbreak of COVID-19.[1] Concerns about protests against coronavirus restrictions within society and the public administration have only been heightened by recent disturbances, such as the riots following the introduction of the curfew on 23 January. It is important not to revert to generalisations, but instead to describe the different faces of the protests. Rioting youths and hooligans are not the same people as peaceful protesters who, for example, harbour grievances about the government. Within the various protests against the coronavirus restrictions that have occurred since the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020, varying backgrounds and motives are discernible.

This analysis of the protests against the coronavirus restrictions touches upon a minority of the Dutch population. Despite the disruptive effect of COVID-19, the majority of Dutch people are adapting to the situation as best as they possibly can. However, over the past year, a minority has surfaced of people who, for various reasons and in various ways, are opposed to the coronavirus policy being pursued. This minority usually does not act out of political or ideological motives, but out of feelings of injustice, immense discontent or a different perception of reality. It is not a homogeneous group. People have very different motives for resorting to protests. In the Netherlands, the people involved are primarily individuals and professional groups who oppose government policy or aspects of it. A current example is the hospitality industry's criticism of the recent easing of lockdown rules because restaurants and cafés are not yet allowed to open. In addition, there is a small, amorphous group of people who generally oppose a hard to define group that they regard as 'the elite'. The latter category in particular consists of people who have a long-standing distrust of the government, science and the traditional media and have found confirmation of their beliefs in conspiracy theories, disinformation

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1   NCTV, Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands, 53rd edition (15 October 2020).

and misinformation.[2] In practice, this manifests itself in a diverse and tenacious upper layer that mainly has consequences for public order, on the one hand, and a more radical undercurrent, on the other, without a firm dividing line existing between the two sides.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the preventive measures and the vaccination campaign warrant a closer look at the Dutch protests against the coronavirus restrictions. Moreover, recent protests abroad against coronavirus measures or against the government, in which conspiracy theories, right-wing and in some cases left-wing extremism, anti-government sentiments, discontent with the policy pursued and other elements came together, call for a closer analysis of developments in the Netherlands. The storming of the Reichstag in Germany and the Capitol in the United States are particularly striking events. This analysis by the NCTV, in coordination with the National Police Force and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), examines these developments. The central question is whether the protests in the Netherlands also extend to anti-government extremism and, if so, how this extremism manifests itself. In answering this question, light has been shed on the following elements:

1. an analysis of the interaction between the upper layer and the undercurrent, focusing on the various forms of manifestation of the protests against the coronavirus restrictions. This is divided into the following:
   a. the manifestations of the upper layer, such as demonstrations and protests, legal proceedings, writing to and confronting authorities and scientists, for instance, and setting up dedicated media channels;
   b. forms of expression of the radical undercurrent, such as radical voices in the digital domain and around physical demonstrations, disruptions of public order, incidents, intimidation, targeted threats and actual violent incidents;

2　Disinformation is the deliberate, often covert, dissemination of misleading information with the aim of inflicting damage to the public debate, democratic processes, the open economy or national security. This is not the same as misinformation, which involves spreading false or inaccurate information unconsciously or without harmful intention.

2. the consequences and potential risks of the radical undercurrent;
3. conclusions.

The various motives behind anti-government sentiments, the role of conspiracy theories and the role of social media are discussed in greater detail in the appendices.

Interaction between the upper layer and the radical undercurrent

The societal discontent that has existed for some time has become more manifest and has hardened both online and offline since the outbreak of COVID-19. Societal discontent is understood to mean a generalised and implicitly negative perception of the state of society as a whole. Societal discontent does not necessarily stem from dissatisfaction with one's own personal life; people who are well off in their personal lives can equally be deeply pessimistic about the state of the country in general.[3] A number of the different individuals and groups find common ground in their rejection of specific government policies, or of the government, institutions or their representatives and 'the elite' in general (see Appendix 1). Anti-elitism is not a new phenomenon in the Netherlands. It has existed for decades and has been fuelled ever since the political rise of the Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2001. Since that time, populist political outsiders who oppose the political elite have been able to count on a significant following. This gained further momentum with the election of populist government leaders abroad who use their own facts and perceptions of the truth to oppose the elite, media and science, with former US President Trump as the principal exponent.

A diverse upper layer has emerged around societal discontent, including people whose livelihoods have been affected by policy, citizens who dispute the proportionality of government policy and people who have a long-standing distrust of the government, science and the traditional media. The latter group in particular have found their beliefs confirmed in conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation (see Appendix 2). In addition, COVID-19 functions as a contrast medium, revealing elements of Dutch society that strengthen and weaken cohesion. On the one hand, the discontent and distrust that have been brewing for a while have risen more to the surface, but on the other, they have confirmed the marginal

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3   Toon Kuppens et al, 'Discontent, migration, hospitality and societal unrest'
      (WODC 2019).

size of the known far-left and far-right groups. Far-right individuals and groups have latched on to expressions of anti-government sentiments, aversion to 'the elite' and conspiracy theories circulating online to serve their own agendas, but their presence at the protests against coronavirus restrictions is less prominent than in other Western countries.

Social media facilitates discontent. People can voice their own opinions about COVID-19 and the response to the pandemic on social media and can make contact with like-minded people in the Netherlands and abroad. On the one hand, social media function as a ventilation channel; they serve as a vehicle for venting feelings of discontent and anger, which removes some of the readiness for physical action. A considerable difference therefore exists between the sometimes tens of thousands of followers of online channels, who oppose the government or the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, and the actual manifestations in the physical domain, on the other. Yet social media also bring different groups together, contribute to mobilisation and can create echo chambers that can accelerate radicalisation (see Appendix 3). The fierce, sometimes threatening discourse on social media adds fuel to the fire and can lead to the hardening of protests, in both words and deeds.

As a result of the ongoing protests and fierce criticism of the government on social media, a permissive context has arisen, from which individuals, groups and ad hoc alliances can derive legitimacy to discuss or commit unlawful actions, including violence. This is reflected in the dichotomy referred to earlier: in addition to the diverse and tenacious upper layer that mainly has consequences for public order, there is a smaller, radical and amorphous undercurrent within which radicalisation occurs - without a firm boundary existing between the upper layer and the undercurrent. In other words, during the coronavirus pandemic, a climate has been created with a lower threshold for discussing and committing unlawful actions, online or otherwise, than before. This does not stem only from discontent and anger. Individuals can also be testing the limits of the law as an outlet, out of boredom or out of a loss of structure due to COVID-19. For that matter, the ongoing resistance to the coronavirus policy may also provoke counter-reactions.

Manifestations of the upper layer

On the whole, the coronavirus measures have been accepted, are supported and are observed by the majority of the population.[4] The large and mostly silent majority is opposed by a small group that actually speaks out against the coronavirus policy, primarily in an activist manner.

Demonstrations and protests

Since the spring of 2020, protests in which hundreds and sometimes thousands of people have spoken out against the coronavirus measures have taken place, despite demonstration bans. These protests are remarkably persistent and have continued to take place over a prolonged period. The pandemic and the government's policy response have had a mobilising effect on people who distrust the government to a greater or lesser extent. The group has grown larger and more diffuse, and the readiness to take action has increased. Every single government action is looked upon extremely critically by the activists, particularly the actions of the police. Those who believe that the government is not an ally but an adversary will capitalise on any incident to demonstrate wrongdoing. Consequently, the tone against police presence is regularly grim. The same applies to emergency responders and journalists.

The protests are sometimes accompanied by public order issues, and football hooligans, rioters, wanton youths or conspiracy theorists capitalise on protests to seek confrontation, violent or otherwise, with the police. Recent examples are the protests at Museumplein in Amsterdam and Malieveld in The Hague, where a disparate crowd of policy critics, shop owners, professional groups, spiritual groups, anti-vaxxers, far-right groups and conspiracy theorists came together. While most people demonstrated peacefully, a small minority hijacked the protests. Since mid-March 2021, a certain degree of professionalisation seems to be occurring, in which activists have been anticipating violent clashes with the police by, for instance, forming protective groups.

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4   'Results of the Study on behavioural measures and well-being, Round 9', *National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the Netherlands Municipal Public Health Services and Medical Assistance in Accidents and Disasters (GGD-GHOR)*, 18 January 2021.

The protests have a wave pattern: from the summer onwards, the readiness to take action seemed to diminish, and most actions were of a smaller scale. This mobilised small, tenacious groups of a few dozen to hundreds of people, primarily anti-government activists and conspiracy theorists. Since the announcement of new restrictive coronavirus measures in mid-December 2020 and the curfew in January 2021, protests have again grown in larger in scale, and disturbances have also increased. It should be emphasised that there is a difference between the disparate crowd of people who usually demonstrate peacefully against the coronavirus policy and the hooligans and young people who deliberately start rioting as an outlet, out of boredom or because of a lack of structure (see 'Disturbances of public order').

Legal proceedings

In addition, activists manifest themselves through legal proceedings. The *Viruswaarheid* ('Virus Truth') action group instituted various preliminary relief proceedings on various issues, including the legitimacy of the coronavirus measures, a temporary obligation to wear a face mask, the use of the PCR test, government communications about COVID-19, vaccination campaigns and the legal basis of the curfew. The group also demanded access to coronavirus policy documents, including the minutes of Outbreak Management Team (OMT) meetings, the health experts' advisory body that advises the government on the measures to be taken to combat the coronavirus.

Judgments in such preliminary relief proceedings seem to have had little effect on the readiness to take action, even in those cases where the action group won. This may reinforce the beliefs of opponents of the measures, which may somewhat reduce the support for the policy pursued. However, the majority of the population continues to comply with the measures. People did not capitalise on the lack of clarity on the enforcement of the curfew on 17 February 2021 to take to the streets en masse in the evening – in fact, the majority of the population supports the curfew. The action group has also called on the public to file charges against police officers for assault during demonstrations. Furthermore, in the initial months of the coronavirus measures in the Netherlands, dozens of charges were filed by citizens against government members, OMT members and other professionals involved in the measures. The charges filed by the

complainants include offences against personal freedom, common assault and leading and participating in a criminal organisation.

Open letters and confrontation

Thirdly, politicians, policymakers, medical professionals and others are being called to account online via open letters or personal messages. When the 'Temporary Act governing the COVID-19 Measures' was discussed in October 2020, for instance, the email addresses of members of the Senate were circulated on Facebook and Telegram, along with a sample letter fiercely protesting the introduction of the act. Following calls from various action groups, the members of parliament received large numbers of virtually identical emails. A self-appointed extraparliamentary committee of inquiry also exists, which is conducting an investigation into the coronavirus measures taken based on public hearings of witnesses such as doctors, scientists, lawyers and professors and will submit a final report to the House of Representatives. This has intimidating hallmarks because the names of politicians and members of the OMT or the Red Team who have rejected invitations are published on the website. This may restrict the persons concerned in freely exercising their office or profession. Another example is a letter in which the *Viruswaarheid* action group wrongly alleges that general practitioners can be prosecuted if they fail to inform clients of the alleged side effects of coronavirus vaccines. The letter was sent to 5,000 general practitioners and medical specialists. Some school boards have received a similar letter. Such actions can come across as intimidating, particularly where private data are involved.

Own media channels

Various individuals and groups who are critical of the government or the coronavirus measures have launched their own Internet platforms where they can disseminate messages without any moderation. This has occurred partly because online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have been cracking down on the spread of possible disinformation and conspiracy theories since 2020. Moreover, various citizens feel that the traditional media are echoing government policy too much and are not giving any room to other voices or that social media platforms are removing too much information too easily. Several print magazines spreading highly critical

opposing views have also been published, such as *De Andere Krant* and *Gezond Verstand*.[5]

Forms of expression of the radical undercurrent

The upper layer can resort to radicalisation by instigating unlawful actions, or to discussing them, within a radical undercurrent. As the above shows, there is no firm dividing line. This undercurrent is expressed in various ways and in varying degrees.

Radical voices in the digital domain

Most expressions of protests against the coronavirus restrictions by far take place in the digital domain, including the expressions of the radical undercurrent. Activists and others feel that demonstrations, legal proceedings and email campaigns do not go far enough and are calling for strongarm tactics using online channels. Expressions of protest on social media channels are often larger in scale and fiercer than in the physical space; there are hundreds of online channels where the government's alleged malicious intentions are vehemently discussed. Partly due to the influence of conspiracy theories, a threatening tone is regularly adopted towards government institutions, politicians, journalists or scientists. This could contribute not only to undermining trust in and the legitimacy of such institutions in due course, but also to undermining the democratic rule of law, when these people will no longer able to freely exercise their profession.

Along with seditious 'shitposts', more concrete action proposals are also disseminated. In early March, for example, two people were arrested for sedition because they reportedly posted a call on social media to commit an arson attack on a Municipal Health Service (GGD) coronavirus testing centre. At the end of January, a man was arrested for threatening to 'blacklist' photographers and journalists. And in early July 2020, a man was arrested who is affiliated with an online group with 12,500 followers on

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5 *Gezond Verstand* has featured articles on topics including COVID-19, the alleged dangers of face masks, the vaccine as a weapon and the potential unreliability of vaccines. *De Andere Krant* has dedicated an entire edition to COVID-19 headlined 'COVID-1984'.

Facebook and is active in various Telegram groups. He talked about 'citizen's arrests' of ministers and employees of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). The repeated online distribution of doxing lists containing address details of police officers, politicians, journalists and others adds an extra dimension to such statements. This is carried out both by people who oppose government policy, or aspects of it, and by conspiracy theorists.

An example of a radical voice was the Twitter hashtag '#Burgeroorlog' ('#Civil War'). It was shared several thousand times following the vote on the Temporary Act Governing the COVID-19 Measures on 27 October, accompanied by a call to travel to The Hague. Hardly anyone responded to the call. Around the same time, a local action group posted photographs of crossbows on Telegram and called to buy cudgels. Doxing lists were distributed once again. Shortly afterwards, this Telegram channel was removed for unknown reasons. Around the same time, a QAnon activist designated Dutch courts and judges as 'legitimate targets'. The video was viewed 17,000 times within a matter of hours. In some cases, online statements have an even more concrete purpose. In December, for example, a shop owner posted photographs of a fully automatic weapon on WhatsApp, along with the message that he wanted to use it to shoot Prime Minister Rutte. He was arrested when new coronavirus measures were announced on 14 December and he threatened the Prime Minister by telephone.

Furthermore, on Thursday, 10 December 2020, a 40-year-old man from Dordrecht was arrested on suspicion of threatening to commit a terrorist offence. The Public Prosecution Service launched an investigation after a tip-off from US authorities. According to the police, the man is known for his statements opposing the coronavirus measures, the Dutch government in general and the police in particular. He has also written fierce anti-government rhetoric on various public, Dutch and international online channels and is alleged to have threatened to commit violence with firearms on YouTube. He was carrying a firearm at the time of his arrest, but there are no indications that he had also made concrete preparations to actually carry out his online threats.

Radical voices around physical demonstrations

When action groups opposing the coronavirus measures and conspiracy theorists come together, the tone and attitudes towards politicians, journalists or the police can harden. Cross-pollination between the two groups takes place on social media channels and during demonstrations: people who are part of both online communities share conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation about the virus and the response to the pandemic. In some cases, action groups who originally opposed government policy also refer to conspiracy theories to underpin their own grievances. Demonstrators who regularly demonstrated in front of the House of Representatives called politicians passing by 'elite paedos', 'child abusers', 'Satanists' or 'deep state'. Last summer, a 26-year-old man threatened a member of parliament for several minutes following a demonstration. According to the man's statement, he was drunk at that time; he later cursed the police on Facebook and posed with a weapon. He was given a suspended sentence. In October, suspected QAnon supporters chanted anti-Semitic slogans during a demonstration in Den Bosch.[6] Some action groups also claim that the police and the intelligence services instigate violence during demonstrations as part of a covert agenda, which breeds a hostile attitude towards the very same police.

Disruptions of public order

Although the nature, severity and scale of the protests has been smaller than in neighbouring countries to date, they are increasingly being accompanied by disturbances of public order in an un-Dutch manner. The persistence and intensity of the protests has not been seen in the

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6   QAnon supporters broadly believe that there is a covert shadow government ('Deep State' or cabal) of global elites that uses its power to oppress the population and to traffic and abuse children. Distrust of governments, science and traditional media is reinforced by calls to do your own 'research' and embrace Q's 'truth' – or to 'wake up' as supporters have done, a togetherness summed up by the phrase 'Where We Go One, We Go All' (#WWG1WGA). At the end of September, Dutch current affairs television programme *Nieuwsuur* reported that four large Facebook groups in the Netherlands were affiliated to QAnon, with almost 12,000 unique members. In October, Facebook and Twitter began deleting QAnon accounts for violating platform rules, prompting followers to switch to Telegram. The largest Dutch channels on Telegram sometimes have thousands of followers, but they are usually more limited.

Netherlands for a long time. Unlike previous years when the Riot Squad had to be deployed a few times on average to restore order, it has been called in dozens of times since June 2020. The protests involving disturbances can be divided into three categories:

1. protests involving small-scale disturbances of public order, such as a small and unannounced protest against the coronavirus measures in The Hague on 20 August. The atmosphere quickly turned grim, after which dozens of people attacked the police;

2. demonstrations hijacked by the radical undercurrent, hooligans and rioters so they can riot 'legitimately', such as the Museumplein protests in Amsterdam that have been ongoing since 17 January and the Malieveld protest in The Hague on 14 March. On Telegram, rioters and conspiracy theorists share tactics for resisting the police, police officers in plain clothes and the Riot Squad during such protests;

3. primarily riots, such as the protest in Eindhoven on 24 January and the 'curfew riots'. These riots are separate from the protests against the coronavirus restrictions discussed in this analysis. However, they are an indirect consequence of COVID-19 restrictions and the permissive context outlined, within which the threshold for discussing and committing unlawful actions, online or otherwise, has been lowered. The riots seem to serve mainly as an outlet, a result of boredom, a lack of structure, daytime activities and perspective and copycat behaviour. The introduction of the curfew served as an incentive mainly for youths who were bent on rioting and looting. Unrest had already occurred in August and December in the various towns and cities marred by riots.

Incidents, intimidation and targeted threats

Incidents have also occurred in which people have uttered threats to politicians, journalists, scientists, the police and special investigation officers, healthcare workers, transport workers and others. Several members of the Outbreak Management Team (OMT) have been threatened. Aside from threats on social media, visits were paid to the homes of several OMT members, and letters containing intimidating texts were personally delivered to their homes. Coupled with doxing lists circulating online, home visits are a concerning development; they can come across as threatening and intimidating. There have been several instances in which police officers returning home from work have been confronted by someone.

Excluding the riots, it is striking that the number of concrete reports of COVID-19-related threats and violence has declined relatively since the summer. It should be noted that reports are not always made. Verbal and physical aggression is not necessarily caused by societal discontent, anti-government sentiments or conspiracy theories and is often due to people having a shorter fuse during the COVID-19 pandemic than they did before. According to the Public Prosecution Service, between 16 March and 28 June 2020, 294 reports of coronavirus-related crimes were received, including 161 cases of threats and 30 violent incidents. In many cases, the expressions were directed against the police, special investigating officers and healthcare workers; in three cases, violence was committed against hospital staff. After that period, from early July to mid-March 2021, 123 new reports of such crimes were received.[7]

Actual violent incidents

Thirty telecom masts have been set on fire in the Netherlands since early April 2020. Seven arrests were made in this connection. There seems to be no connection between the various arson attacks, nor are there any indications of a network organisation, coordination, management or even an overarching ideological motivation. The sudden violence seems to have been largely instigated by the conspiracy theories suggesting that there is a link between 5G networks and the spread of COVID-19. Copycat behaviour may have also occurred, in which individuals draw inspiration from previous fires and the resulting media coverage. As evidenced by other disturbances, people may also be pushing boundaries as an outlet or out of boredom. The abrupt decline in arson attacks since the beginning of May seems to confirm such motives: the arrests and the coverage in the Dutch television programme *Opsporing Verzocht*, ('Wanted by the Police') may have deterred people, while the easing of government measures may have also played a role. Similar actions remain conceivable.

In addition to the numerous online threats and a few physical threats, instances of intimidation and the hard edges of the protests against the

7   'Updated figures on coronavirus-related crimes and offences', *Public Prosecution Service*, 9 July 2020 and 18 March 2021.

coronavirus restrictions, a few concrete violent incidents have occurred against coronavirus testing centres. Examples include an explosive that exploded near a Municipal Health Service (GGD) testing centre in Bovenkarspel in early March 2021, an attempted arson attack on a testing centre in Limburg and windows being smashed at two testing centres in December. In November, an isolation post near a coronavirus rapid testing centre in Beek en Donk was severely damaged by heavy duty fireworks due to dissatisfaction with the coronavirus measures. In October, testing centre signs in Breda were repeatedly vandalised or plastered with texts such as 'Covid 19 = hoax'. Incidents are sometimes sparked by boredom. In December, for example, youths in Urk pulled out the plug of a mobile testing centre several times, which meant that light, heating and the Internet were temporarily unavailable. The GGD staff who called the youths to account were pelted with fireworks. On 23 January, a testing centre in Urk was torched during disturbances. When the Dutch broadcaster NOS was filming the burnt-out testing centre the next day, pepper spray was sprayed on the face of an NOS security guard.

Undercurrent limited in size, but radical and tenacious

The disparate and diverse group of people who explicitly and sometimes vehemently speak out against the coronavirus policy are opposed by a large, often silent majority of people who support the policy. They are endeavouring to mobilise the silent majority and the government to pursue a different course because they assess the risks of COVID-19 differently, consider the measures disproportionate or are driven more by a conspiracy-based aversion to 'the elite'. This critical group usually expresses its views online. The discourse of systematic distrust of the government and knowledge-producing institutions is echoed by numerous social media groups and in conspiracy theories. The statements made online, which can be fierce, should not be confused with concrete threats, but could indeed pose risks to social stability in due course: on the one hand, radical statements can become commonplace and polarisation can increase; on the other hand, parallel realities can arise in which the most rudimentary matters can lead to disagreement, when facts are continuously disputed and a common perception of reality comes under pressure.[8] In both cases, a decline in trust in the democratic rule of law – and thus a breeding ground for extremism – is a potential consequence.

The manifestations in the physical space are more limited than those online, but they are tenacious. Peaceful demonstrations can quickly turn grimmer and be directed against law enforcement officers and journalists, for instance. Moreover, protests have a magnetic effect on militant individuals and groups, such as hooligans and the radical undercurrent. The ongoing protests and fierce online criticism of the government provide a permissive context, from which individuals, groups and ad hoc alliances can derive legitimacy for discussing or committing more far-reaching acts.

There is a danger that the group of radical activists will become isolated, if the majority proves to be unrelenting and influence cannot be exercised on

8   See for example: Russel Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying. The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton 2019).

decision-making processes. The mobilisation capability of a number of well-known action groups seems to be diminishing, partly as a result of fragmentation into other groups, while the mutual solidarity between various activists also seems to be disintegrating somewhat. The easy dismissal of the activists by the majority without considering the underlying grievances can also lead to isolation. Opponents of the coronavirus measures, in turn, are called to account by people who are annoyed with coronavirus relativists and deniers; this may also lead to intimidation and threats. Isolation can contribute to reinforcing the 'us versus them' mentality as well as susceptibility to conspiracy theories and to the radicalisation of small groups or lone actors. The National Support Centre for Extremism (LSE) has noted that the number of reports about people with radical beliefs has risen since the onset of the pandemic.

The Risk of Potentially Dangerous Persons

The absence of serious acts of violence does not alter the fact that individuals who might resort to more far-reaching action, whether or not as a form of retaliation or self-realisation, pose a security risk. Individuals may act out of a combination of personal grievances, possible mental problems, a fascination with weapons and fierce government criticism – reinforced by COVID-19 and the restrictive coronavirus measures. In the National Counterterrorism Strategy 2011-2015, the NCTV already warned about Potentially Dangerous Persons (PDP), who may resort to violence based on a combination of factors. It was pointed out that there is a possibility that radicalised lone actors might attack symbols of society driven by 'motives other than the traditional political or religious motives'. Specific reference was made to perpetrators acting alone, who do not act out of a clear ideology but rather out of hatred for the system or because of assumed conspiracy theories. This may stem from the 'wider tendency in Dutch society to hold the government or politicians responsible for any form of setback', in which individuals may find justification for taking matters into their own hands.[9] Some of the individuals known for their negative fixation on certain politicians, for example, have spoken out against them in the context of COVID-19.

9   NCTV, *National Counterterrorism Strategy 2011-2020* (April 2011). See also: NCTV, *National Counterterrorism Strategy 2016-2020* (July 2016).

In conclusion

This analysis of the protests against the coronavirus restrictions touches on a minority of the Dutch population. Most Dutch people have accepted the coronavirus measures and comply with them as best as they can. Although strong criticism is sometimes levelled at politicians, the media and various knowledge institutions, they are also widely supported. Support has come under pressure recently, as also reflected in the results of the elections of the House of Representatives: although the number of seats for the coalition has risen compared to 2017, Forum for Democracy – the party most critical of the coronavirus policy – has also been rewarded with a gain in seats. The sense of urgency for the coronavirus measures seems to be waning. Stable key figures such as intensive care hospital admissions or deaths, imminent vaccinations or the perceived arbitrariness of the easing of restrictive measures may contribute to this. This diminishing sense of urgency, combined with the long duration of the pandemic, is causing a certain degree of 'coronavirus fatigue' among the population. There has been a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel for some time now, but the tunnel is longer and contains more twists and turns than had been hoped.

In answering the central question in this analysis – whether the protests against the coronavirus restrictions in the Netherlands have extended to anti-government extremism and, if so, how this extremism manifests itself – it has emerged that relatively few actions have been identified as extremist to date. This does not alter the fact that there definitely are concerns. The combination of a persistent presence of activists in the public space and the number of highly critical, radical voices on social media has created a permissive context, from which individuals, groups and ad hoc alliances can derive legitimacy for committing unlawful actions, including violence. The fundamental distrust of the government emanating from a radical undercurrent sometimes leads to disturbance of the public order, intimidation, threats or vandalism. Moreover, the danger is unpredictable: potentially dangerous persons, who may act out of a combination of this permissive context, other grievances and personal problems, pose a security risk.

A diversity of manifestations and motivations lie behind the protests against the coronavirus restrictions. The discontent in the Netherlands stems to a limited extent from a political and ideological motivation. Those involved are primarily people and professional groups who oppose government policy or aspects of it. In addition, there is a smaller group that opposes what they regard as 'the elite', with no firm dividing lines between different motives or action groups. People also resort to action based on personal grievances or problems. With regard to the manifestations, there is a substantial gap between the online tsunami of hate, shitposting and toxic language and violent communication on the one hand, and the actual, physical manifestations on the other. Discontent manifests itself primarily online, where social media serve as a vehicle for venting discontent and anger. With radical statements and the sowing of systematic distrust becoming commonplace, the legitimacy of the government, administration and enforcement may be jeopardised in due course. This poses potential risks to social stability and the democratic rule of law.

In addition to the radical undercurrent and online statements, there is a diverse and tenacious upper layer that mainly has consequences for public order. This distinction is not absolute, and the two sides interact with each other. What is striking is that the trend for disturbances of public order has been bucked. The tenacity, intensity and hardening of the protests during this period differ from previous decades. The disruptive effect of COVID-19 and the preventive measures are therefore unprecedented. Hardening occurs in various ways. Protests turn grim when radical online statements and conspiracy theories are echoed, or protests that are intended to be peaceful may have a magnetic effect on more militant individuals and groups. Protests seem to be increasingly used by rioters to 'legitimise' riots.

Potential risks in the longer term:

- widening and deepening polarisation;
- a breeding ground for increased radicalisation and extremism;
- increased mixing of radicals and hooligans;
- increased unlawful actions, disturbances of public order and threats against politicians, law enforcement officers and journalists, among others;
- actions by lone actors or 'suicide bombers';
- exhaustion of police capacity due to persistent public order issues;
- the possibility of undesirable foreign interference (UFI), for example, in the form of disinformation or attempts to destabilise society;
- erosion of trust in the government, the democratic process and the rule of law.

'Trigger events' that can accelerate or deepen discontent

- a new wave of coronavirus infections, or the introduction or failure to introduce new or more stringent government preventive measures;
- retrospectively established serious side effects of a vaccine or medicine to prevent COVID-19;
- COVID-19 developments in other countries;
- police measures affecting certain interest groups;
- an economic crisis;
- the formation of the government;
- unforeseen geopolitical developments;
- unforeseen events with a major social impact, such as an attack or a major security incident.

Appendix 1: Three motives for anti-government sentiment

A prolonged crisis period in which the government plays a leading role gives rise to societal discontent, which sometimes extends to anti-government extremism. This discontent is by no means clear-cut. The phenomenon can be divided into three categories or underlying motives, although this distinction is primarily indicative; the frameworks outlined below are by no means absolute. Individuals who are inspired by a certain motive to speak out against the government may later act from a different motive. People also act out of personal grievances, mental health problems, boredom or a combination of these. The categories are as follows:

Political ideology

Various political ideologies are directed against the government or democratic procedures. Far-left anarchism rejects any form of central authority, and far-right accelerationism seeks to use unrest to cause a race war to replace democracy with a white ethnostate. Compared to countries such as Germany, far-right groups only play a limited role in Dutch discontent. Links are sought based on a shared aversion to 'the elite' and known far-right groups turn up at protests, flaunting flags at the Museumplein protest in Amsterdam on 17 January 2021, for example. However, they are too marginal and fragmented to have any significant impact. Although far-left individuals and groups link COVID-19 to their own themes to propagandise their ideology and to argue that the crisis exposes the failure of the current political system, they usually distance themselves from the protests against the coronavirus restrictions.

Against specific government policies

Certain groups of citizens and professional groups oppose specific government policy on COVID-19 or aspects of it. This resistance is fuelled by changes in policy arising, for example, from new knowledge and insights into the virus or new developments. Citizen protests against government policies on climate change, nitrogen pollution or the construction of wind turbines have been visible for some time. In such cases, citizens and professional groups sometimes feel disproportionately

or unnecessarily severely disadvantaged by policy choices. Feelings of injustice or powerlessness may compel them to take action, such as posting vehement statements on social media or staging various forms of protest in the physical space. Examples include the repeated farmers' protests from 2019 onwards and protests by business owners whose businesses are grinding to a halt because of COVID-19 and the measures taken. Calling the government and institutions to account demonstrates that they generally have by no means lost faith in the democratic system.

Against 'the elite'

The third category is a small, but highly diverse and amorphous group of people who generally oppose a hard to define group they regard as 'the elite'. They harbour a strong distrust of politicians and knowledge-producing institutions such as the media, science and experts. They therefore do not specifically oppose government policy, but rather everything they believe to be part of the administrative elite. Far-right individuals and groups are also seeking links with this theme. People within this category are highly susceptible to conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation. Conspiracy theories are reflected in banners or intimidating slogans during protests against the coronavirus restrictions; more specifically, in April and May of last year, people were encouraged to set fire to transmission masts because the masts were alleged to help spread COVID-19.

Appendix 2: The role of conspiracy theories

People who have a long-standing distrust of the government, politicians and institutions are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation relating, for example, to the origin of COVID-19, vaccinations, 5G, alleged paedophile networks or 'the elite' in general. Conspiracy theories are understood to serve as an explanation for an individual or social situation or development experienced as unfair by imagining it to be the deliberate result of a group of people who are covertly working together with malicious intentions.[10] In other words, conspiracy theories are often directed against a group of people who are perceived to be the enemy or those secretly responsible for a specific threat such as COVID-19. Social criticism primarily disputes the ethos and legitimacy of such institutions. Partly due to the disappearance of the meaningful frameworks of religion, ideology or science, conspiracy theories can provide order and structure in a seemingly chaotic world. They help to explain and interpret complex events. This does not necessarily need to be problematic. As an expression of discontent, conspiracy theories can provide insight into the functioning of the government, media or science.[11]

However, conspiracy theories are not only an expression of distrust. They are also drivers of polarisation, the hardening of society and radicalisation. Conspiracy theories offer a discursive sanctuary where a miscellany of political grievances, desires and demands come together and connect. Social media in particular enable people to easily place their personal or collective discontent within conspiracy theories in order to distil an appropriate explanation from them. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, groups that initially opposed government policy mainly online likewise

10   Jelle van Buuren, 'Doelwit Den Haag? Complotconstructies en systeemhaat in Nederland 2000-2014' (doctoral thesis, Leiden University 2016).

11   Jaron Harambam, 'De waarheid op losse schroeven. Complotdenken in een tijd van epistemische instabiliteit' (doctoral thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam 2017).

refer to conspiracy theories such as those of QAnon. Vice versa, the Dutch coronavirus policy is a prominent theme within the Dutch online QAnon movement. This affiliation can deepen polarisation and fuel radicalisation by amplifying the 'us versus them' way of thinking, designating enemies, delegitimising moderate opinions by presenting them as part of a conspiracy and justifying violence.

It should be noted, however, that conspiracy theories and social discontent in themselves rarely lead to extremist violence. Research shows that, where there is a relationship between such violence and conspiracy theories, it is primarily attributable to a combination of other grievances, personal problems, possible mental health problems and contextual factors. Conspiracy theories are an ideal fit for personal grievances and offer space to individuals with mental health problems.[12] Conspiracy theories could pose risks to the democratic rule of law in due course: the systematic distrust of the government, institutions, media or science can lead to the emergence of a parallel perception of reality, disagreement about rudimentary matters and the disappearance of the basis for political, scientific or social discussions.[13] The facts for some consequently translate into fables for others.

12   Van Buuren, 'Doelwit Den Haag?'.

13   Muirhead and Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying*.

Appendix 3: The role of social media

Trust in the government and traditional media in the Netherlands remains high, and the readership of and trust in traditional media has increased throughout the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, however, social media add fuel to the fire when it comes to protests against the coronavirus restrictions. Most expressions of societal or other discontent, anti-government sentiments and conspiracy theories take place online, where social media serve as a vehicle for venting discontent and anger and for connecting with like-minded people.[14] Shared feelings of discontent, injustice or anger have given risen to a diverse group of active citizens who feel threatened. This not only implies the risk of people coming into contact with disinformation, misinformation and seditious statements, it also creates echo chambers where there is no place for dissidents and where hardening is facilitated. Events with profound consequences, such as COVID-19, act as a catalyst for the emergence of such private online communities and offer room to circulate conspiracy theories. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, conspiracies are moving from the fringes of the Internet to the mainstream far faster than before. Social media platforms function as a trap for distrust, allowing people to enter a world laden with conspiracies based on algorithms and conversations with like-minded people. Facebook and Twitter have meanwhile also removed QAnon-related accounts and pages in the Netherlands.

Although social media bring like-minded people together and offer a platform for vehement expressions of discontent and anger, they also act as a brake on manifestations in the public space. Social media are without obligation and superficial; with an online outlet, concrete action is no longer needed to share the feeling of being critical and politically relevant. Discontent or anger vented online about a certain event has a self-affirming effect, is a relief and creates a bond between people. Consequently, there is little need to swap the digital domain for the physical world – this could actually lead to deception, as confirmation there is not a matter of course.

14   Van Buuren, 'Doelwit Den Haag?'.

As this analysis also shows, there is a large discrepancy between online sentiment towards the government and actual actions in the physical space. Online anti-government channels sometimes have tens of thousands of followers, whereas offline manifestations against the coronavirus measures mobilise significantly fewer people. Concrete reference points for organising a social and political conflict, a clear ideological direction, a vision of the desired society, strategy and tactics are often absent in societal discontent and conspiracy theories. However, statements on social media contribute to the permissive context for discussing unlawful or violent actions: anyone can post political hate messages and anyone can read them or be inspired by them.