

Summary

A VIEW ON LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

An exploratory study into
left-wing extremist groups
in the Netherlands

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Beke *reeks*

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Summary

As commissioned by the Dutch Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum WODC*) of the Ministry of Justice and Security, a study of left-extremist groups in the Netherlands was carried out. In this summary, the backgrounds, execution and findings of that study are discussed.

Background, definition of the problem, demarcation

Scientific studies of left-wing extremism are rare, although for many years now this topic has been on the agenda of inter alia the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst AIVD*) and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (*Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismedebestrijding en Veiligheid NCTV*). The NCTV and AIVD designate – in terms of polarisation as a potential breeding ground for extremism – various potentially divisive social themes, such as the integration of ethnic minorities, the position of Islam in Dutch society, European integration, geopolitical developments and identity issues. Themes embraced by extreme left-wing and left-extremist groups largely link in with these, and may be formulated as follows:

- seeking a classless society without borders or states (*anarchism*);
- resistance to asylum and migration policies, including resistance to repatriation of refugees and to raising barriers to counteract migration;
- preventing animal suffering;
- preventing environmental pollution and actions related thereto;
- resistance against ‘extreme right-wing’ parties and groups to prevent that their voice be heard (*antifascism and antiracism*).

The WODC of the Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned an exploratory study of left-wing extremism in the Netherlands and gave the following central definition of the problem:

In what themes do left-extremist groups play a prominent part in the Netherlands today and what can be said about their organisation, the themes that mobilise them, their modus operandi and their influence and position in the current political climate?

This definition of the problem was translated into three research questions:

1. In what way do left-extremist groups play a prominent part in the Netherlands today?
2. To what extent have left-extremist groups operated outside the law in recent years?
3. What position do these left-extremist groups take in Europe?

For the execution of this exploratory study, the concepts ‘left-wing’, ‘extremist’ and ‘groups’ were more clearly defined, with the help of scientific literature about the political spectrum (left/right-wing), activism, extremism and (political) groups. Based on this, the following definition of left-extremist groups came to be used for this research:

A left-extremist group is a group or collective consisting of at least two persons, which defines itself as left-wing or is considered as such by others. There are shared values and/or goals and a certain degree of mutual interaction and connectedness; at least one person has acted or attempted to act against the law on behalf of the group or in pursuance of a theme on which the group takes a prominent position, by means of targeted action against objects, companies, groups or persons; the conduct in question may entail security risks and/or affect people's sense of security.'

Research methods

To find an answer to the research question in the context of this central definition, various research methods were used, which are explained here.

The study was started off with an **investigation of open-source material**. It was recorded which left-wing oriented groups were mentioned on websites and internet fora in the period 2015 through 2017; subsequently, three researchers – with a view to notional unity – independently from each other assessed to what extent the

groups found were or might be engaged in extremist action or, as the case may be, action outside the framework of the law. The findings of the investigation of open-source material were put to police staff for their review and served as the basis for the other research activities outlined below.

In consultation with the National Police, the **police registration system** National Law Enforcement Database (*Basisvoorziening Handhaving BVH*) was consulted. Recent (2015 through October 2017) mutations were reviewed in regard to a selection of persons and groups deemed relevant in relation to left-wing extremism. Data gathered were used to produce a picture of the context in which those groups and persons take a clear position.

The research materials gathered through the investigation of open-source material and the study of police documentation were used to do a **network analysis**. In the network analysis, relationships among left-extremist groups and between left-wing extremist and non-extremist left-wing groups were mapped. Mutual relationships exist where groups actively support each other's action or jointly organise or take action, or where the same person or persons turn(s) out to be active in several different groups.

In addition, **interviews** were conducted, first of all among a group of security professionals (n=10) working in information gathering or, as the case may be, in intelligence and public law and order. In addition, four persons were interviewed who have expert knowledge of this topic because of their private situation, their scientific research or their profession.

The findings were given additional depth by an inventory and **analysis of court rulings** found on the *www.rechtspraak.nl* website. Stock was taken of the criminal offences in question, the circumstances in which they were committed and the sanctions imposed. Moreover, **observations** were made at left-wing oriented meeting places also frequented by supporters of left-extremist groups (n=2) and in regard to action taken by a number of these groups (n=3). A **social media analysis** was done of how left-extremist groups use social media. Messages on three specific events were targeted: the G20-Top in Hamburg, a counterdemonstration in a Dutch municipality and a demonstration in the 'Antifascism & Human Rights' context. Finally, **media abroad** were explored in regard to their publications on the left-extremist groups found in the research.

This exploring study to a large extent is based on investigation of open-source material and interviews with security professionals. Therewith this study lacks a left-wing insider perspective. The research report presents an umbrella view of left-extremist groups in the Netherlands. We should note that not all persons belonging to or associating with these groups also have extremist tendencies. Partly for that reason, where possible the findings in this report are described at aggregate level and not traceable to specific groups.

In what way do left-extremist groups play a prominent part in the Netherlands today?

Nature and scope

The investigation of open-source material offers a view on 27 groups that may be termed left-wing extremist. A significant reservation in this respect is that nine of these seem to have used an ad hoc or “occasional” name: one that was found only once in the course of the research (on account of the unlawful action taken in question). Relatively speaking, most left-extremist groups focus on the ‘Antifascism & Human Rights’ theme, which *inter alia* includes such subjects as asylum and migration policies, ethnic profiling, integration of ethnic minorities, migration, the position of Islam, racism, repression and freedom. Accordingly, this theme may be designated the epicentre of left-wing extremism today. Some ‘earlier’ themes, such as ‘Anarchism’, have become largely incorporated in this.

Collaboration

The findings of the network analysis show that left-extremist groups work together, both with groups that work in the same context and with left-extremist groups that focus on different themes. Mutual cooperation is mainly evidenced by joint planning of action that may be designated extremist or supporting action taken by a left-extremist group (for example, trying to mobilise people). Mutual cooperation is clear *inter alia* from the fact that leading persons in one extremist group may also be active in another; however, this is no prerequisite for collaboration. After all, the network analysis shows that left-extremist groups also have ties with non-extremist left-wing groups or parties that, at least to the extent the research data have shown, only work inside the framework of the law. Corresponding ideas about the themes distinguished in this study can be a common denominator in such cases; differences in opinion then may exist about the way – inside or outside the boundaries of the law – in which these are or should be realised.

Modus operandi

In practice, persons may operate in different groups and both inside and outside the law to realise specific goals. Inside the framework of the law are, among other things, demonstrations (announced or otherwise), support of ideological sympathisers and informing and mobilising interested parties and civilians. Possibly coloured or one-sided information (framing) is used to confirm that one is right or to create an us-them contrast. Not only flyers, banners and social media are used for this but incidentally, also columns written for (national or other) newspapers. In addition to such actions within the framework of the law, there is action outside the law, targeting specific companies and persons or groups (in this case, ideological counterparts).

Extremist modus operandi targeting a company or person

Offences cover both violent and property offences. In a number of cases, for example where hunting cabins are vandalised, the risk of (perhaps fatal) injury to hunters is accepted. Alternatively, companies may be occupied, resulting in (temporary) operational standstill. Although occupation of a company falls outside the boundaries of the law, such action hardly ever escalates into violence against staff of the company in question and/or against the police. As such, consequences for the sense of security are limited in this respect. A number of other forms of action affects private lives more closely. An example are naming and shaming tactics, whereby for example photographs and private information (personal details) of companies and their owners, police officers or senior officials are published. In line with naming and shaming, criminal behaviour may be incited (indirectly or otherwise). A real-life embodiment of such action is found in the shape of home visits. Home visits are of a greatly intimidating nature and are at the top of the spectrum of force perpetrated by left-extremists. They largely entail vandalism in the form of arson, graffiti on residences or puncturing car tyres. The impact on victims of such action may be severe. Home visits may entail a long period of preparation (sometimes, years) and reconnoitring.

Extremist modus operandi targeting groups

Sit-ins and counterdemonstrations are intended to disrupt demonstrations of ideological counterparts. Depending on the exact context in which they take place, these are either inside or outside the framework of the law. The purpose of such action is to nip sounds perceived as racist or xenophobic in the bud and to prevent that such ideas gain a (firmer) foothold in the Netherlands. Left-extremist groups work meticulously on action such as this and there is a willingness to resort to violence. In regard to counterdemonstrations, for example, multiple attempts to discover demonstration routes were made and several preparatory surveys on location done to ascertain how and where 'counterparts' might best be attacked; facts show that in regard to several (counter)demonstrations, arms and heavy fireworks were brought to the scene. Accordingly, the presence of ideological counterparts always raises concerns of public safety and security, the more so since left-extremist groups usually fail to honour agreements – for example with regard to the location assigned and face-covering clothing – and seek to confront their ideological counterparts. The way left-extremist groups use social media may affect the public order and security. This is apparent from the fact that, prior to and surrounding their action, they create an us-them perspective. Incidentally, not only ideological counterparts are 'framed' in the course of this: also the legitimacy of the government and of police action is frequently put into question. Partly, use is made of one-sided or incorrect information in this regard, which is also disseminated to mobilise people.

In addition, social media messaging is used to justify illegal action – including violence – and to enhance, sometimes erroneously so, the scope of action.

Organisation and followers

Extremist action occurs mainly in the context of ‘Antifascism & Human Rights’ and ‘Environment & Animals’ themes. What action takes place in the name of a group is in the hands of a small group of persons seen as the (informal or otherwise) leader. The mutual relatedness between activist and extremist groups and persons creates options for onward “growth” from activism to violent extremism.

Based on police information for the period 2015 through October 2017, 182 persons were associated with left-extremist groups. The majority is between 25 and 40 years old (56%); a third (33%) is forty or over. The Dutch Central Intelligence Service (*Dienst Landelijke Informatieorganisatie DLIO*) of the National Police designated thirty to forty persons as priority persons. This means that a large group of between 142 and 152 persons have not been labelled as such. Part of them however may be seen as newcomers to the group. Although the ambition to do this exists, the police lack the capacity to compose more extensive personal files, with detail on attitude, behaviour and psychosocial features, either for those newcomers or for the priority group. In addition, it is still largely unclear what drives persons who belong to left-extremist groups or tend to seek to become part thereof. Composing personal files in which attention is paid to these subjects may provide more of an insight in these issues and may give further leads for future policy (including, for example, a person-oriented approach).

Outside influences on the development of left-wing extremism in the Netherlands

It has turned out to be difficult to link the data found in this study to the rise of right-wing populism and the economic crisis. The main reason for this is that right-wing populism has been growing for some time (see Van der Varst et al., 2010) and that the economic crisis is some years behind us. This makes both aspects difficult to operationalise, whereas in addition, this coincides with another reason: our data – related to the period from 2015 – do not touch on the periods in which these developments were (already) going on. This is why we looked for incidents that might be related to either or both development(s).

At present, topics in the ‘Antifascism & Human Rights’ theme are high on the agenda of left-extremist groups. They focus their action *inter alia* on groups, persons and companies which they believe facilitate Dutch government policy in the area of migration and asylum and on persons and groups that, according to them, have a

racist or fascist (political) agenda. In other words, left-wing extremism is reactive in nature and is related – incidentally, as is right-wing extremism – to developments in society. As such, left-extremist group action is largely determined by current affairs and society's (and the ideological counterparts') responses thereto. The above illustrates a connection between developments in society and objectives and activities of left-extremist groups. In view of the type of action in which these groups are involved (including counterdemonstrations against ideological counterparts) and their cause and targets for action, attention for topics in the 'Antifascism & Human Rights' theme may be placed in a context of growing right-wing populism.

Remarkable is that hardly any extremist action that took place in the research period was against targets that are considered capitalist. Moreover, where such action did occur it was largely taken from an anarchist perspective. Accordingly, in recent years the economic crisis or, if you will, socio-economic deprivation seems to have made hardly any, or in any case a lesser, contribution to themes on which left-extremist groups take a clear stand.

To what extent did left-extremist groups operate outside the law in recent years?

Frequency

Based on the information that was gathered, it cannot be established how often left-extremist groups operated outside the law, with the exception of the nine "occasional" names that were seen in relation to a single extremist action. There are several reasons why no exact conclusions can be drawn about the incidence of extremist action taken by the other left-extremist groups. First of all, not all action that takes place is claimed; this is true in particular of action that is at the higher end of the spectrum of force, such as home visits. Claiming such action may be disadvantageous to a left-extremist group, since it may put them more clearly in the security services' eye. In addition, victims do not always benefit from publicity and/or in consultation with the authorities may choose not to give publicity to left-extremist action. For these reasons, the sources consulted for this study reflect only part of reality. Actual left-wing extremist action does not, as a rule, result in a criminal investigation and a criminal trial, which implies a certain degree of lawlessness.

Support of violence

From the data gathered, a general conclusion that may be drawn is that *naming and shaming*, counterdemonstrations and home visits may be classified as violence. This relates to the risk of violence against ideological counterparts and/or the intimidating character of such action. It was noted that persons' willingness to carry out

extremist action declines higher up in the spectrum of force (where the action will have greater impact on the targets in question). The size of groups most willing to use violence is limited, therefore. The visibility of counterdemonstrations and the relatively high willingness of persons to contribute thereto mean that (the risk of) violence from left-wing extremist groups is considered relevant mainly from a perspective of public order – not quite rightly so, however. The limitations in the data gathered (see under ‘Frequency’) mean that information on action at the higher end of the spectrum of force is actually lacking; accordingly, there is little knowledge of the impact of such action on victims and the democratic legal system.

Degree of current and future threats

The interviewees estimate that in particular groups that operate in the context of the ‘Antifascism & Human Rights’ theme constitute a threat today and in the near future. In line with the nature of the data gathered, most respondents mainly envision risks to the public order. This does not mean that the significance of the impact on the democratic legal system should be underestimated. This is explicitly pointed out by the AIVD, although (see at ‘Support of violence’) the need for additional knowledge is keenly felt. The talks with respondents from the security domain show that in addition, continued attention should be paid to topics in the ‘Environment & Animals’ and ‘Anarchism’ contexts. Although the latter theme has largely merged with the ‘Antifascism & Human Rights’ theme, anarchist groups abroad have shown themselves to be not averse to action at the higher end of the spectrum of force (including bomb attacks). In the ‘Environment & Animals’ context, left-extremist groups may well become active in the near future, on such themes as nanotechnology.

The geographical concentration of left-extremist groups is diverse. Some are active only locally or regionally; others take action all over the country. Several groups show high mobility, therefore. In view of the informal hierarchy in left-extremist groups and the relatively small group of persons willing to take part in action at the very top of the spectrum of force, information on the persons in question is important for an estimation of current and future threats. Insight in the identity of the current leaders, identification of newcomers and drawing up risk profiles may be helpful factors in this respect.

Position of Dutch left-extremist groups in Europe

Only limited conclusions may be drawn about how the ideas of left-extremist groups in the Netherlands relate to those of left-extremist groups abroad. Firstly, this is a consequence of the fact that foreign respondents would (or could) not take part in this study and – where they *were* able to – did not know enough about

the Dutch situation to be able to make a comparison. In addition, in this exploratory study only the development of left-wing extremism in the countries surrounding the Netherlands (Belgium, Germany) was incorporated, largely using media communications.

Roughly speaking, left-wing extremism in Germany seems to have developed along the same lines as in the Netherlands. This may be deduced from foreign media themes and the ties with foreign groups mainly on the 'Antifascism & Human Rights' and 'Environment & Animals' themes. Groups largely use the same *modus operandi* and support or facilitate each other if action is taken in their home country. To the extent comparisons can be made, in particular in terms of themes and *modus operandi* there are similarities between Dutch and foreign left-extremist groups; at the same time, looking more in detail one sees clear differences in terms of the size of the left-wing extremist scene and the willingness to take action higher up in the spectrum of force. The Dutch left-wing extremist scene is much smaller than the German one; for that reason, for deliberation and action Dutch left-wing extremists seem to be more willing to travel abroad, where that scene is larger, than the other way around. In addition, not only in Germany but also elsewhere in south Europe more action with a higher degree of violence seems to be taken.

Conclusion

The developments described in this report link in with the AIVD's observation (2013) that groups that are active in the areas of antifascism and human rights have started collaborations. The degree of cooperation seems to have intensified in recent years; reason to speak of an 'Antifascism & Human Rights' theme in this study. The research has made clear that operations inside and outside the framework of the law – in other words: activism and extremism – are closely related and of a greatly reactive nature. In line with the findings from earlier research (Van der Varst et al., 2010), violent offenders and coercers may be classified as extremists. Van der Varst et al. (2010) showed that the group of violent offenders is small. Also the current study illustrates this point of view. Violence against the police, ideological counterparts (in the broader sense of the word) and persons or companies that facilitate 'unjust policies' may be considered justified on account of the roles, activities and/or positions of the persons in question. The higher up in the spectrum of force the action in question is, the fewer people may be found willing to contribute thereto.

In comparison with Van der Varst et al. (2010), there have been no qualitatively fundamental changes in the left-wing extremist landscape (in terms of, for example, action methods). In their study, Van der Varst et al. (2010) only provide a typology of extreme left-wing and left-extremist groups. For that reason, no trends in the number of left-extremist groups can be distinguished. However, the current

research shows that, although the left-wing extremist scene in the Netherlands is small – definitely when compared to other countries – there are certainly newcomers. Who they are, what drives them and which risks are concerned remains unknown for the moment. This applies to the same extent to interconnections between groups and the parts played by specific leaders therein. Accordingly, to gain more intelligence on left-wing extremism should be a police focal point. Leads for the way this may be realised can be derived from the approach to other problem groups (such as hooligans). It is important that the focus is not limited to possible public order risks: although attention for left-wing extremism mainly leans in that direction, there is indeed action at the higher end of the spectrum of force that heavily impacts victims' private lives. A clear idea of such impact and the consequences for the democratic legal system may help formulate future policies. Besides victimhood and the impact on the democratic legal system, also the lawlessness should be carefully considered: to date, this seems largely to have gone hand in hand with extremist action, with, for various reasons, hardly any criminal prosecution to follow.



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