



Summary

Anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands

Explorative study into the ideas, degree of organisation, feeding grounds, potentials risks and existing perspectives for action

Summary

Objective of the study

Commissioned by the Scientific Research and Data Centre (WODC), the Verwey-Jonker Institute and RadarAdvies have conducted an exploratory study into the current state of anti-institutionalism in the Netherlands. We have looked into the ideas, degree of organisation, feeding grounds, possible paths towards radicalisation and potential risks to the democratic legal order. Based on our findings, we have outlined possible, feasible perspectives for action for policy makers, municipalities and executive professionals. Finally, the study aims to map out and provide possible courses of action for policy makers, local authorities and law enforcement agencies. These action perspectives aim to deliver constructive ways of dealing with people who hold anti-institutional beliefs as well as tools for strengthening social and institutional resilience against anti-institutional extremism.

Research design

The methodical execution of this study consisted of several components: desk research, social media analysis, interviews and a validation session. The desk research consisted of an open investigation of sources, based on scientific and non-scientific publications, from both the Netherlands and abroad. In order to provide further insight into the content of (sub)narratives and much-discussed themes within the anti-institutional movement, an additional, exploratory social media content analysis was carried out on publicly accessible anti-institutional narratives. To be able to lend depth to the findings from the desk research, the researchers have conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen experts on the phenomenon of anti-institutional extremism: academics (both Dutch and foreign), experts from the field and from the healthcare, social and security sectors (healthcare and security centres, psychiatry, the police, the National Support Centre regarding Extremism, LIEC/RIEC, the probation service). Discussions were also held with national government agencies (NCTV, AIVD). We have presented the preliminary findings from the desk research to all the experts interviewed, asking them to reflect on them and add any additional comments. The findings from both the literature review and the interviews were then presented to academics and experts in the field in a validation session. This session had two objectives: 1) discussing and thereby interpreting and reflecting on the research results and the answers to the research questions; and 2) jointly considering and refining feasible courses of action for combating anti-institutional extremism, based on various case studies. During the research process, the researchers have been guided and advised by a supervisory committee of scientists and policy makers.

Note on this study

Holding anti-institutional beliefs is not prohibited in the Netherlands and often stems from genuine concerns about and grievances towards the government and institutions. Furthermore, by no means all groups within the broader anti-institutional movement pose a risk to society or democracy. Anti-institutional mistrust and conspiracy theories can give rise to extremist behaviour, but this certainly does not always happen. This report substantiates that the vast majority of people with anti-institutional beliefs are not willing to resort to violence or are otherwise extremist. In order to properly understand the phenomenon, it is therefore relevant to also look at manifestations of anti-institutional sentiments that do not (yet) involve extremism. This study therefore presents a broad approach, looking at various phases and degrees of anti-institutionalism and the related motives and (sub)narratives, which may require different courses of action. To prevent an increase in the number of people willing to engage in extremist behaviour, it is important to take preventive action. In addition to the security perspective, especially the social and care perspective should be central to this as well. For this reason, this study aims to offer starting points for a constructive and emphatic way of dealing with people who hold anti-institutional beliefs, which takes into account underlying dissatisfaction or problems. This in addition to tools for strengthening social and institutional resilience against anti-institutional extremism.

Research results

The most important findings of this study are:

The 'evil elite' narrative functions as an all-encompassing story that reduces varying social discontent to one alleged cause: the evil, manipulative elite. The broad applicability of the narrative makes it remarkably powerful and versatile. Within these frameworks, issues such as climate change, measures to contain the corona virus, inflation, migration and 'woke' policies are not seen as isolated or complex social issues, but as parts of one larger, hidden agenda. In this way, the elite narrative functions as an umbrella narrative under which varied subnarratives converge and reinforce each other. That same plurality and ambiguity is visible in messages disseminated by anti-institutional networks. As a result, supporters of these movements, despite their diverse backgrounds or even apparent contradictions, find common ground in a shared goal. Concepts such as 'freedom', 'sovereignty', 'the elite', or 'the system' often remain deliberately vague and are not elaborated upon in detail. This allows them to function as binding symbols that transcend different backgrounds, beliefs, and ideological positions. The strategy of ideological agility partly explains why anti-institutional movements continue to adapt to current events and constantly incorporate new themes. The central narrative about the evil elite remains intact, but the substantive accents shift, such as from the corona virus to climate change, LGBTI+, and so on. Conspiracy

theories that propagate anti-institutional narratives are also constantly adapting to current events. This makes the ideology not only flexible and difficult to grasp, but it also appeals to a broad and ideologically diverse audience. The subnarratives are not solely independent narratives, but often overlap or are intertwined, effectively resulting in a 'salad bar' of subnarratives. An individual who is critical of nitrogen policy, for instance, can quickly be confronted with and inspired by other subnarratives, particularly through (mostly) online communities. The internet therefore plays an important role in the dissemination of anti-institutional ideas and associated subnarratives.

Although there is, broadly speaking, a shared anti-institutional ideology, there are hardly any formally organised groups with a clear internal structure, communication or clearly defined common goals. Within this broader, loosely structured environment, various subcultures can be distinguished, such as the sovereigns, conspiritualists and preppers, who – despite the lack of any formal organisation – share a recognisable style, motivation or focus. The most important subculture in the Netherlands is that of the sovereigns, the subculture we have examined in this study in more detail. Although the sovereign subculture does not know a classic organisational structure, recognisable elements of coordination, shared practices and mutual connection do exist, in particular at the level of ideological core beliefs and methods of action. In this context, the 'structure' does not consist of a classic organisation of people, but of shared beliefs, procedures and symbolism – these provide a certain uniformity that is not based on any central direction. Sometimes, physical meetings are held, which indicates that some people seek each other out. However, the dissemination of ideas mainly takes place online, where methods for taking action are readily available. Websites, Telegram groups and podcasts function as informal platforms where ideas, documents and strategies are shared. Membership of these online groups is mainly passive and fluid. Most members are likely to be loners who have little contact with each other. The methods of action, such as drawing up documents that can be used by people to declare themselves 'sovereign' or sending letters to government officials, or as a repository for referral to shared pseudo-legal sources.

Although there is hardly any formal or structural organisation, there are driving forces within the sovereign movement who sometimes have many followers. There are online chat groups as well, some of which have many members. Individual driving forces are active within various groups and play a prominent role in them, for example by giving lectures or selling courses. Drivers tend to find each other, but they also often seem to have difficulty working together, which hinders the further growth into a structured movement with an overarching management. An important role of the drivers is to create and propagate an online supply of documents, advice and workshops/webinars, as well as official-looking identity documents such as passports and driving licences. For some of the drivers, this is also a revenue model. This allows followers to make use of the shared methods of action mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Dutch anti-institutional activists and extremists draw inspiration from anti-institutional narratives expressed by German, American, and Canadian groups, such as the German Reichsbürger and Querdenker movements, and American sovereign citizens. Mainly, it does not go further than inspiration. The sovereign movement in the Netherlands overlaps in content with both the Reichsbürger movement in Germany and the sovereign movements in the United States and Canada. However, any mutual contact seems to be limited. In this study, we have not found any indication of structural cooperation with foreign groups. Rather than such cooperation, there appears to be ideological cross-pollination. Despite the substantive overlap between anti-institutional movements in Western countries – for example, in the form of sovereignty thinking and common law ideologies – in the Netherlands, it is actually often local grievances that lead to anti-institutional sentiments.

Background characteristics and motives of followers, with starting points for action perspectives

Dealing with adherents of an anti-institutional ideology and preventing possible radicalisation towards anti-institutional extremism, requires a somewhat different approach than that used for jihadism or right-wing extremism. Followers of an anti-institutional ideology are usually not members of violent networks, but individuals who feel misunderstood, excluded from or trapped in the system. As a result, they often fall between the cracks within existing radicalisation approaches. Anti-institutional mistrust and conspiracy theories can lead to extremist behaviour, but this is certainly not always the case. As this report demonstrates, the vast majority of people with anti-institutional beliefs are not prepared to resort to violence or are not extremists in any other way. To prevent an increase in the number of people willing to engage in extremist activities, it is important to take preventive and restrictive measures. In addition to the security perspective, in particular the social and care perspective should be central to this. When identifying and selecting courses of action, it is relevant to work from a preventive approach that takes into account the background characteristics, motives/breeding grounds, trigger factors and the possible stage of radicalisation a person is in. The conclusions below will provide points for consideration and starting points for possible courses of action for the government and implementing professionals. Where possible, we will also highlight any relevant differences with left-wing, right-wing and religious radicalisation and extremism.

Points for consideration

Adhering to anti-institutional extremist narratives is not prohibited in the Netherlands and does not automatically make someone an extremist. The same applies to persons who are non-active members of online anti-institutional chat groups; to persons who declare themselves 'sovereign' in letters to the municipality or authorities, or who go a step further and, for example, refuse to pay debts or taxes. Do not immediately label these persons as 'extremists'.

Also, be cautious about 'labelling' people with anti-institutional beliefs. Do not dismiss these people as 'cranks' who believe in conspiracy theories, and do not label them as 'loonies' based on whatever psychological or psychiatric issues they may have. Or, as Nanninga and Valk (2025) have put it: "Ridiculing and pathologising anti-institutional actors places their concerns and experiences outside the norm and can reinforce polarisation."

Signs of anti-institutional radicalisation often come to light through the educational system, neighbourhood teams or the police. More so than with jihadism or right-wing extremism, expressions of anti-institutional extremism can also be identified by parties such as the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration, the Central Judicial Collection Agency (CJIB), bailiffs, truancy officers or municipal tax departments. This means that identifying and interpreting risk signals can often begin without the traditional security partners. Cooperation within the chain therefore requires a broader perspective and the activation of partners who are not always accustomed to identifying radicalisation.

Anti-institutional radicalisation and extremism require an integrated approach in municipalities, with stakeholders from different domains, such as CTER and subversion or security, care and social services, working closely together to recognise, interpret and address phenomena. By strengthening cooperation structures across policy domains, local authorities can respond more effectively to the dynamic nature of radicalisation and extremism. This also applies to identifying and addressing mental health and other personal issues that underlie instances of worrying anti-institutional radicalisation or play a reinforcing role in it.

Pay more attention to the risks for children. Children of parents with anti-institutional beliefs are an underrepresented group when it comes to short- and long-term risks. In the long term, this can seriously harm children's development and have consequences for society as a whole. These risks require the involvement of other parties in the approach, such as the early involvement of the Child Protection Board.

Characteristics and backgrounds of adherents to anti-institutional beliefs

Take into account the relatively higher age of adherents to anti-institutional ideas, compared to individuals who adhere to jihadist, left-wing or right-wing extremist ideologies. These are relatively often middle-aged or older men and, to a lesser extent, women (aged 40 and above) who have had negative experiences and frustrations that young people have not yet encountered. These include frustrations about issues in their personal lives, such as job loss, divorce and health problems. Often combined with negative experiences with institutions when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Pay particular attention to non-urban regions. Supporters of anti-institutional ideas are more likely than average to live in rural areas and villages with 'relatively strong feelings' of social discontent and resentment against the Randstad, the conglomerate of big and medium-sized cities in the West. This is also the case in villages with close-knit communities that are used to solving problems themselves (without government intervention) or in agricultural municipalities where there is a relatively strong opposition to nitrogen policy.

Be aware that people with anti-institutional beliefs cannot be lumped together. They are a very heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds and motives. Supporters of anti-institutional ideas have very divergent backgrounds in terms of education, socio-economic circumstances and work. The unemployed and pensioners are relatively overrepresented, but working people and entrepreneurs are also among the supporters of anti-institutional ideas. Motives for anti-institutional sentiments vary with people's socio-economic situation. For example, people with lower levels of education or income often have a sense of exclusion, economic insecurity or financial problems as their motive/trigger. Higher-educated people or entrepreneurs more often blame the government for personal setbacks or business problems. Major life events such as a divorce, conflicts with family, dismissal or serious illness can also be motives and trigger factors. In addition, frustrations in daily life such as those caused by parenting or relationship problems, or problems in dealing with authorities may play a role as well.

Supporters of anti-institutional ideology are less often ideologically motivated than those who are radicalised on the left, right or by religion. There is a group that genuinely believes in anti-institutional ideology and takes action based on this belief. However, many people within the target group are not or are less ideologically motivated, and act out of personal frustrations, experiences of loss or systemic distrust. It is precisely because of these backgrounds that some individuals are still in contact with social services. This offers opportunities for early intervention, provided

that professionals in the social and healthcare sectors are equipped to recognise the signs and engage in conversation about them. A key theme and guiding principle here is to listen carefully to individuals and assess the motivations or underlying issues that have led them to embrace and possibly express anti-institutional ideas.

Motives for becoming active ('participating') in anti-institutional groups

Adherents to anti-institutional ideology regularly feel the need to find explanations for what has happened to them in life, or explanations for social developments that they are negative about or do not fully understand. By actively joining an anti-institutional group or community, they gain insight into what might be going on, including their personal circumstances. This may create the impression that anti-institutional beliefs and actions mainly happen to people, and are understandable, because of suffering and personal grievances. Yet, we cannot ignore the role of personal responsibility and conscious choices made by individuals. Within this context, supporters of anti-institutional ideology should be seen as individuals who make conscious choices, rather than merely as passive victims of social media, political rhetoric or influencers. In anti-institutional radicalisation, for example, the need for a goal in life and being seen (status) by others is relatively strong (more so than in left-wing, right-wing and religious radicalisation). Acting out of opportunism as a possible solution to personal problems (a lifeline) is also more prevalent in anti-institutional radicalisation than it is in left-wing, right-wing and religious radicalisation.

Motives and triggers for violent actions

Section 5.3 lists eight factors that may deter anti-institutional extremists from committing (violent) extremist and/or terrorist activities. These are: 'ideology plays a limited role', 'limited calls for violence', 'the belief that people must wake up by themselves', 'limited leadership', 'limited cohesion', 'opportunities for forms of expression other than violence', 'no coherent, clear, romantic images or rewards' and 'sensitivity to a listening ear, an empathic and help-oriented approach'. The first seven categories are statements and characteristics linked to the anti-institutional movement itself, such as ideology and degree of organisation. The government and professionals have little influence over these. Yet, the last category, 'sensitivity to listening, empathetic and help-oriented approach', does offer prospects for action. A constructive attitude towards people with anti-institutional beliefs and/or who carry out anti-institutional actions, is a protective factor that can prevent individuals from becoming radicalised (any further). It is important for civil servants/policy makers and executive professionals to be aware of factors that may increase the risk of potential violence. It is also important to recognise these factors in personal contacts or conversations

with individuals who hold anti-institutional beliefs. In summary, these factors include previous experiences with violence, both as a victim and as a perpetrator; traumatic life events; despair and feelings of hopelessness as a result of major personal problems, combined with frustrations in dealing with the government and institutions in resolving these problems; and additional risks among people who are trained in the use of violence, for example as professional soldiers or police officers. One should not be naive about potential security risks. A small percentage is willing and able to use violence. In addition, doxing, threats and intimidation of government officials by this target group are common. This may potentially have a significant impact on the execution of tasks and on the private lives of professionals. It is therefore important for professionals, but certainly also for organisations, to prepare for discussions with sovereigns and to take some precautionary measures (see the action perspectives for further explanation).

Existing, feasible action perspectives

Based on the literature and document studies and expert interviews, the report identifies fourteen possible action perspectives for constructive, empathetic and restrictive interaction with people with anti-institutional beliefs. The action perspectives are categorised into four clusters:

1. Dealing with persons who adhere to anti-institutional ideas (by officials and executive professionals who are in direct contact);
2. A preventive local approach by municipalities and local partners (policy, governance);
3. Increasing resilience and social defences (officials and executive professionals; municipalities; the national government);
4. Supra-local coordination coming from the national government.

The figure below provides an overview of the identified courses of action ('how'). These are clustered according to who is to take action ('who') and what the approach focuses on ('what').

| | CLUSTER 1: Dealing with adherents to anti-institutional ideology | CLUSTER 2: Preventive local approach | CLUSTER 3: Increasing resilience and defences | CLUSTER 4: Supra-local coordination |
|------|--|--|---|---|
| WHO | Officials and executive professionals in direct contact | Municipalities (policy and governance) and local partners | Officials and executive professionals; municipalities; the national government | The national government |
| WHAT | Dealing with people who adhere to anti-institutional ideology | Preventive integrative local approach | Increasing resilience and defences | Supra-local coordination of an integrated approach and shared frameworks |
| HOW | <p>(1) Dealing with mistrust and hostility; empathetic conversation; effective communication and setting boundaries</p> <p>(2) Meaningful contact: what do these people need and how can institutions provide it to them?</p> <p>(3) A better understanding of underlying psychosocial problems and better interventions</p> <p>(4) To recognise and deal with conspiracy theories</p> <p>(5) To raise consciousness about factors that play a role in the propensity to resort to violence</p> <p>(6) To set standards and limits</p> | <p>(7) Cross-domain collaboration</p> <p>(8) Facilitating the building and exchange of knowledge</p> <p>(9) Upgrading the detection structures</p> <p>(10) Raising awareness and increasing priority among governance and partners</p> | <p>(11) Increasing resilience (individually, the environment and society)</p> <p>(12) Increasing social defences (including: an approachable, transparent and just government, citizenship education, social involvement and dialogue)</p> <p>(13) Increasing social defences against conspiracy theories</p> | <p>(14) Learning network, clear positioning of the theme, perspectives for action per professional group, follow-up research, linking prevention and repression</p> |

Suggestions for follow-up research

We have not conducted any additional in-depth interviews with individuals active in anti-institutional groups as part of this study. The added value of such interviews would be to test, deepen and nuance the findings of the study with them in more detail. This research method might also provide more insight into offline manifestations of anti-institutional ideology, since we have only been able to answer this research question to a limited extent in this study. Thus, the first recommendation for further research is to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals who are active in the anti-institutional movement. This may include in-depth interviews with active individuals, such as those who actively disseminate anti-institutional narratives or who are 'drivers' within anti-institutional networks. It may also involve in-depth interviews with individuals who are more passive, such as people who, although they are members of online anti-institutional communities, are only marginally active in them.

The study showed that it was possible to map out information and insights relevant in particular to the sovereign subculture and to answer the research questions on that basis, but not so much for other subcultures. This limits the generalisability of our findings to the broader anti-institutional movement. The second recommendation for further research therefore concerns more empirical research into narratives, breeding grounds, degree of organisation and possible risks of anti-institutional subcultures other than the sovereigns, in order to increase the generalisability of the findings to the broader anti-institutional movement. An interesting subculture might be the 'prepper community', for example.

In this study, we have conducted a limited social media analysis of public sources to identify subnarratives within the 'malicious elite narrative'. However, within the anti-institutional movement, there are also other, more constructive narratives about, for example, self-determination and citizen autonomy, which would be interesting to explore in more detail in follow-up research. The third recommendation for further research is to conduct a broader/more extensive social media analysis of (sub)narratives within the anti-institutional movement.

We have explained in the report that individuals with anti-institutional beliefs tend to be relatively older. Currently, however, there is very little scientific literature available on the motives and triggers for, and experiences of, radicalisation at a later age. Most literature on radicalisation focuses on radicalisation among young people or young adults. The fourth recommendation for further research focuses on further studying and substantiating the motives for and triggers of radicalisation in later life.

Sects, fundamentalist religious groups, spiritual networks and conspiracy-minded circles show similarities with anti-institutional movements in terms of ideological, sociological and psychological characteristics, among other things. This type of research can help improve our understanding of anti-institutional movements and groups in the Netherlands because they show parallels with (new) religious and spiritual movements. As a fifth recommendation for further research, we would like to support the recent call by the University of Groningen (Nanninga and Valk, 2025) to include the religious studies perspective in further research into anti-institutional movements in the Netherlands.

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