

# Terrorists attempted to take advantage of the pandemic, says Europol's new EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021



Terrorists use any opportunity to erode democratic structures, spread fear and polarise society. In 2020, terrorist organisations attempted to take advantage of the global pandemic to spread hate propaganda and exacerbate mistrust in public institutions. The New EU [Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021](#), published today, outlines the features, facts, figures and trends concerning terrorist attacks and arrests in the European Union in 2020.

## **2020 main figures**

- 57 completed, failed and foiled terrorist attacks in the European Union (reported by Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain);
- 21 people died because of terrorist attacks in the European Union;
- 449 individuals were arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offences in 17 EU Member States, a decrease of one-third compared with previous years.

## **The COVID-19 ramifications**

Terrorists exploit polarisation in society to pollute the social climate with violent ideologies. In recent years, polarisation of the political discourse has increased in the European Union. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this development. There has been a notable increase in intolerance of political opponents, while the number of individuals conducting verbal or physical violence is also increasing. Mental health remains an issue in relation to terrorism and violent extremism. The

situation created by the pandemic might be an additional stress factor, potentially encouraging vulnerable individuals to turn to violence. Extremists and terrorists have found new opportunities in the increased time spent online during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a large amount of disinformation actively disseminated online, extremists and terrorists have exploited social dissatisfaction to reach out and propagate their ideologies.

Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, said: "The latest report from Europol on the EU terrorism situation illustrates that in the year of the COVID pandemic, the risk of online radicalisation has increased. This is particularly true for right-wing terrorism. I discussed this trend in Lisbon today (22 June) with US Secretary for Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas at the EU-US JHA. We are committed to tackling this growing threat."

Catherine De Bolle, Executive Director of Europol, said: "The online domain plays a crucial role in enabling the spread of terrorist and extremist propaganda. In a world, which has become considerably more digital, targeting the propagation of hatred and violent ideologies spread online is an imperative. By sharing information in real time and using the latest technological advances within a strong data protection framework, we can further enhance the way we fight terrorism together. Ultimately, law enforcement's main goal is to target violent extremism and radicalisation to save lives and minimise the violent attacks against our society and our democratic system."

Claudio Galzerano, Head of Europol's Counter Terrorism Centre, said: "The new TE-SAT 2021 demonstrates the ramifications of a terrorist threat, which still remains high in the EU. EU Member States suffered 10 jihadist attacks, all perpetrated by lone actors. Some of the lone actors do have connections to like-minded individuals or terrorist groups, that being jihadists or right-wing extremists. Some of them were possibly radicalised online, with terrorists exploiting different events, controversies and vulnerable individuals. Meticulous assessment of the threat and coordinated efforts are of utmost importance to identify vulnerabilities and curtail the terrorist and extremist violence both online and offline."

## **Jihadist terrorism: lone actors behind all deadly attacks**

Jihadist terrorism remains the greatest threat to the European Union and is still influenced by developments abroad. The so-called Islamic State (IS), still active in Iraq and Syria, reaches out to supporters in Europe to incite

them to perpetrate attacks. Global affiliates serve to uphold the group's image of success – particularly those in Africa, which expanded in 2020. While hundreds of individuals are still held in detention camps in Syria, very few have returned to Europe during the past year.

In 2020, the number of completed attacks increased compared with 2019. Ten attacks killed 12 people and injured more than 47. A significant threat for several years, lone actors were behind all of the completed attacks. Some of the jihadist terrorists acting alone were in contact with terrorist groups. One example was the Vienna (Austria) attacker, who managed to transmit a video statement to IS.

Some of the lone actors have displayed a combination of extreme ideologies and mental health issues. Social isolation with fewer contacts who could pick up signs of crisis and increased stress as a result of the pandemic may have played a role in some cases. Other motivating factors may have included the controversy around the republication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, and anti-Islam actions by some right-wing actors in different countries.

## **Right-wing terrorism: increased prominence of the online communities**

Very heterogeneous with regard to forms of organisation, core ideological elements and political objectives, right-wing extremists unite against diversity and the democratic constitutional order. Right-wing extremists incorporate newly emerging narratives into their ideology to infiltrate communities that might not share the entire set of core right-wing extremist views. As an example, Identitarian movements have succeeded in reaching out to younger, more educated populations. Some are connected to protests against government measures aimed at containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased social awareness concerning climate and ecological issues has also impacted right-wing propaganda. Blaming the climate crisis on increased immigration and overpopulation, for example, eco-fascism aims to act as a bridge towards ideologies based on accelerationism, anti-Semitism and nationalism.

Suspects, linked to online communities with different degrees of organisation, are increasingly younger – with some of them being minors at the time of arrest. Right-wing propaganda is mainly disseminated online and gaming platforms have been increasingly used for spreading extremist and terrorist narratives. The perpetrators of 2019 attacks such as the one in Christchurch (New Zealand) were linked to transnational virtual communities. Members of such communities were also arrested in 2020.

The attacker who killed nine people in February 2020 in Hanau (Germany) was motivated by xenophobic and racist ideology. He had his own website, which he used to propagate his dehumanising views. By contrast, he does not seem to have been connected to transnational online communities.

## **Left-wing terrorism: new topics integrated into the narrative**

The numbers of left-wing and anarchist terrorist attacks remained stable in 2020, while the threat to public order is still significant in many countries. Italy reported 24 of the 25 left-wing and anarchist terrorist attacks in the European Union, while the remaining one was reported by France. The attacks targeted private and public property such as financial institutions and government buildings and included one attempted letter bomb attack.

In addition to topics such as anti-fascism, anti-racism and perceived state repression, left-wing narratives have integrated new ones, including scepticism about technological and scientific developments, COVID-19 containment measures and environmental issues. The support for an independent Kurdish state remained an important topic for left-wing and anarchist extremists.

## **Higher use of simple weaponry and “easy-to-make” explosive devices**

The lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of public spaces for mass gatherings probably had an effect on the use of explosives in terrorist attacks. In 2020, terrorists primarily used simple means of attack such as stabbing, vehicle ramming and arson. Two attacks involved the use of firearms – the right-wing attack in Hanau and the jihadist attack in Vienna – while one planned bomb attack was foiled.

Homemade explosives are mainly used by terrorists, with an increased proliferation of low-explosive mixtures such as gunpowder and a decreased use of the unstable triacetone triperoxide (TATP). The dissemination of bomb-making instructions and new ideas on bomb manufacturing decreased in 2020. This may explain the decreased use of more sophisticated improvised explosive devices.

Terrorists and extremists saw an opportunity in weaponising the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Jihadist propaganda and right-wing extremists both suggested different ways to use the virus against different targets. However, no attempts to use the virus as a bioweapon have been reported in the European Union.

## **Terrorist propaganda online: an increasing threat**

With the increased use of the internet during the pandemic, virtual communities have become increasingly prominent in the dissemination of extremist and terrorist propaganda. Since the Telegram takedown in late 2019, jihadists have been struggling to find new dissemination channels. As a result, jihadist propaganda has become dispersed across a variety of platforms. However, IS supporters tried to ensure the jihadist messaging reached target audiences. Terrorists exploited different events to amplify their propaganda. Al-Qaeda exploited the issue of discrimination in Western

societies to present itself as an alternative protecting the rights of the oppressed, while different jihadist groups used the controversy concerning the republication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad to gain new supporters and inspire attacks.

Online communities are having an increased role in the propagation of right-wing extremism. In recent years, such communities have coalesced around white supremacist or neo-Nazi views and shared language. The interactions in these groups further radicalise members with the idea that survival of their racially defined in-group depends on the destruction of the current system.