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The Regional Face of Extremism: A Case Study of the Northern Netherlands

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Abstract
While the study of extremism has traditionally focused on the national and transnational contexts, systematic studies of extremism at the sub-national level remain scarce. This absence of such research is particularly striking in countries like the Netherlands, where efforts to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (P/CVE) are typically delegated to local authorities. Thus, moving beyond the focus on how and why extremism develops, this study analyses when and where it arises. We do so by focusing on the Northern Netherlands (i.e. the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe). This region is characterised by specific problems linked to societal discontent surrounding peripherality, the construction of wind farms, reception centres for asylum seekers, and induced earthquakes due to gas extraction. As such, it provides an interesting laboratory environment to study regional and local expressions of extremism. Empirical support is drawn from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, notably semi-structured interviews (N=33) with regional experts, professionals and practitioners, including municipal workers, police officers, and social workers. The findings indicate that the extremist landscape has changed considerably in recent years; specifically, anti-government extremism has become more prevalent than 'traditional' forms of extremism (e.g. far-left, far-right and religious extremism). While this is in line with national and transnational trends, the rise of anti-government extremism in the Northern Netherlands appears to be particularly pronounced because of the regional circumstances. This has implications for P/CVE efforts, since the latter remain largely geared towards and focused on countering jihadism. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the nature of extremism on the one hand, and P/CVE approaches on the other.

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Introduction

The post-9/11 period has witnessed a proliferation of research on radicalisation and extremism (Schuurman 2020). While the study of extremism has traditionally focused on national and transnational contexts, systematic examinations of extremism at the regional and local level remain scarce. Thus, heeding the call by Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2020: 30) to move

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beyond the focus on *how* and *why* extremism develops, this study analyses *when* and *where* it arises. We do so by focusing on the Northern Netherlands (i.e. the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe) in the period from 2014 to 2022.

The Northern Netherlands offers an interesting case to examine the regional dimension of extremism because it is both dissimilar and similar to other regions in the Netherlands and Western Europe more generally. On the one hand, the region is characterised by specific *regional* problems linked to societal discontent surrounding peripherality, the construction of wind farms, reception centres for asylum seekers, and induced earthquakes due to gas extraction. On the other hand, the region does not exist in a vacuum. In other words, just like any other region, it has been affected by broader trends and developments such as globalisation, immigration and European integration. Therefore, the Northern Netherlands provides an ideal 'laboratory environment' to study regional and local manifestations of extremism.

The main aim of this study is to offer an evidence-based, in-depth analysis of the regional dimension of extremism in Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe. The broader aim is to examine to what extent the local response is adequately equipped to deal with the regional manifestation of this phenomenon. As such, the research addresses two empirical research gaps. First, most existing studies on extremism in the Netherlands are primarily concerned with jihadism (de Graaf 2020; Schuurman 2018). Whereas the jihadist movement still constitutes the main terrorist threat in the Netherlands according to the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), this threat appears to be decreasing since 2020, while right-wing extremism and anti-government sentiments seem to be on the rise (NCTV 2022b). However, these rising threats remain un(der)examined. Second, as mentioned earlier, the vast majority of studies on extremism focus on international and national contexts, while regional and local developments tend to be overlooked. The absence of such research is particularly striking in countries like the Netherlands, where efforts to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (P/CVE) have, to a large extent, been delegated to local authorities (Ragazzi and de Jongh 2019). Indeed, as explained below, municipalities play a key role in Dutch P/CVE policy.

In a nutshell, the findings indicate that the extremist landscape in the Northern Netherlands has changed considerably in recent years; specifically, anti-government extremism has become more prevalent than 'traditional' forms of extremism (e.g. far-left, far-right and religious extremism). There is also cross-pollination between different forms of extremism, notably anti-government and right-wing extremism. While this is in line with national and transnational trends, the rise of anti-government extremism in the Northern Netherlands appears to be particularly pronounced because of regional circumstances. This has implications for P/CVE efforts, since the latter remain largely geared towards and focused on countering jihadism. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the nature of extremism on the one hand, and P/CVE approaches on the other.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section provides a working definition of extremism and distinguishes between four different subcategories (i.e. religious, right, left and anti-government extremism). Drawing on different strands of literature, the third section introduces the case by providing relevant background information on place resentment and polarisation in the Netherlands. The fourth section presents the research design and methodology. The fifth and main part of the article maps and analyses the regional dimension of extremism, and the sixth section examines to what extent this corresponds with local P/CVE efforts. The conclusion discusses the wider implications of the findings and presents a set of tangible recommendations for practitioners and policymakers who are involved in P/CVE initiatives.

Definitions & Categorisation

Extremism is a complex and contested concept that is defined and employed in various ways by different actors at different time periods and in different parts of the world. Broadly speaking, the term is used for movements, groups, individuals or activities that are deemed 'far removed from the ordinary' (Coleman and Bartoli 2015: 2). One of the main difficulties in defining extremism is that it is not a clearly delineated phenomenon; instead, it is a relational concept that is contrasted against a given benchmark, namely 'the non-extreme' (Schmid 2014). As such, the term is also inevitably context-dependent. The relational nature

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of the label 'extremism' and its (possible) far-reaching consequences are essential to take into consideration when reflecting on the phenomenon in the Northern Netherlands, and so the working definition used for the purpose of this research is inevitably contextually bound.

In this article, extremism is defined as a phenomenon whereby individuals or groups are prepared to use *illegal means* to pursue goals that are driven by a *set of ideas and beliefs*. The combination of actions and ideas/beliefs distinguishes extremism from radicalism, where the emphasis is on the goals (i.e. the ideas, not the means), and from criminality, where the emphasis is on the means (i.e. illegal actions, not the ideas). Extremism is also theoretically distinct from activism in the sense that activists generally operate within the boundaries of the law, while extremists are prepared to break them. In practice, however, the boundaries between radicalism, activism and extremism are often fluid (e.g. Lowe 2017).

For the purposes of this study, we distinguish between four subcategories of extremism: religious extremism, right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and anti-government extremism.[2] Characteristic of extremist worldviews is the sharp distinction between an in-group and an out-group and the belief that the success or even the survival of the in-group necessitates illegal or violent action against the out-group (Berger 2018). Yet different forms of extremism justify and operationalise these beliefs in different ways.

Religious extremists primarily base their self-identification and, accordingly, the motivation, justification and meaning of their actions against an out-group on a religious tradition; typically perceiving themselves as holy warriors engaged in a cosmic battle against representatives of evil (Juergensmeyer 2017). This also applies to transnational jihadism, which was the most prominent manifestation of religious extremism during the research period of this study. Right-wing extremism is characterised by the combination of nativism, racism and authoritarianism (Carter 2018; Mudde 2019). In practice, this often translates in a defence of social hierarchies, notably because far-right actors are driven by the belief that inequalities between people (whether they be racial, ethnic, economic, religious or cultural) are natural and desirable.[3] While the far right believes in inequality, the far left strives for

[2] These categories are not all-encompassing; however, they were chosen because they proved useful for mapping the phenomenon in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands.
[3] The far right is an umbrella term to denote a broad range of actors located on the right end of the political spectrum, including radical and extremist ones (Mudde 2019).

radical equality (Bobbio 1996). This may refer to economic equality (e.g. anti-capitalism), but it can also be defined in socio-cultural terms (e.g. opposition to restrictive asylum and immigration policies). In recent decades, left-wing extremist actions appear to have increasingly concentrated on environmental issues and animal rights. A final sub-category of extremism employed in this article is what we refer to as 'anti-government extremism'. While this term is less common in the academic literature, it is used here to denote a fundamental rejection of the legitimacy of 'the government' as such (which is sometimes perceived to form part of a broader conspiracy of power-hungry elites), or issue-driven extremism directed against specific government policies (e.g. measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19 or restrictive environmental policies) (see Bjørgo and Braddock 2022; Jackson 2022).

Introducing the Case: The Northern Netherlands

The Netherlands is a relatively small and densely populated country. As a result, geographical distances between urban and rural areas on the one hand, and the so-called *Randstad* (i.e. the political, economic and cultural centre) and the periphery, on the other hand, are naturally quite small - especially in comparison with countries like the United States or the United Kingdom.[4] Although physical distances seem negligible in the Netherlands, there is clear evidence of territorially rooted societal discontent (de Lange *et al.* 2022; van den Berg and Kok 2021; van der Ploeg 2020). In essence, this type of discontent refers to the feeling of being left out, unappreciated or overlooked by politicians and policymakers (Huijsmans 2023). Because these feelings of discontent are often particularly pronounced in so-called 'places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018), it is also sometimes referred to as 'place resentment' (Munis 2022), 'rural consciousness' (Cramer 2016) or 'regional resentment' (de Lange *et al.* 2022).

The Northern Netherlands is arguably a textbook case of a 'place that does not matter'. Indeed, the region can be described as 'peripheral' by any measure. In terms of spatial distance, it is relatively far away from the *Randstad*. It is also sparsely populated and characterised by low population density; with approximately 1,7 million inhabitants, it

[4] The *Randstand* is the crescent-shaped metropolitan region in the central-West of the Netherlands that includes the four major cities of the country: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

accounts for about 10 percent of the total population of the Netherlands (CBS 2022a). While the region includes one major city (i.e. the city of Groningen) and several mid-sized cities and towns, it is predominantly rural in character. Perhaps more importantly, the average distance to facilities such as schools, hospitals, public libraries, sports centres and cultural amenities is higher than in the rest of the country (CBS 2022b), and levels of income and education are comparatively lower (CBS 2022a).[5] The peripheral image of the region is further reflected in the fact that the northern provinces are notoriously poorly represented in national politics. Even though the Netherlands is not divided into local constituencies (since there is a single, nationwide electoral district), and Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Netherlands technically do not represent a specific geographical location, there are comparatively few MPs from the three northern provinces (NOS 2021).

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that the region has provided fertile soil for societal discontent. Over the past decades, the Northern Netherlands has had to face a set of specific regional issues related to gas extraction (i.e. induced seismicity), wind farm initiatives and reception centres for asylum seekers, all of which have fuelled anti-government sentiments. First, since the late 1980s, the Province of Groningen has been affected by human-induced earthquakes caused by gas extraction from the Groningen gas field. While most of the revenues from this gasfield went to the *Randstad,* local residents suffered the consequences of the gas extraction, ranging from damage to property and declining housing prices to rising levels of anxiety and stress (Van der Voort and Vanclay 2015). This has contributed to feelings of discontent and resentment among the local population, many of whom felt that economic interests were prioritised at the expense of their personal safety and well-being (Bakema *et al.* 2018; Moolenaar 2022).

In addition to problems caused by induced seismicity, the construction of wind farms in the region has been a major source of upheaval. Because of rising concerns over anthropogenic environmental effects and the general need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the Dutch government has sought to increase the supply of renewable energy

[5] There are also some noteworthy differences *within* the region. For instance, the population of the cities of Groningen, Leeuwarden and Assen is relatively young, highly educated and economically better off, whereas several rural areas have experienced population decline, which has further reduced social cohesion and access to facilities (van den Berg and Kok 2021).

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sources (Langbroek and Vanclay 2012). This has led to a proliferation of wind farms, including the so-called 'wind park N33' in the Province of Groningen.[6] From inception to completion, the construction of this wind park was deeply controversial (van Wonderen and Postmes 2022): it gave rise to fierce resistance and protest from municipalities and local citizen's initiatives, thereby eventually turning it into 'one of the longest-running and most contested Dutch cases of onshore wind farm planning' (Verhoeven *et al.* 2022: 4).

A third source of regional discontent is linked to the presence of reception centres for asylum seekers. The Netherlands operates a centralised system for asylum applications. To start their asylum procedure, all asylum seekers who have entered the Netherlands by land need to report in Ter Apel, a small village located in the southern tip of the Province of Groningen. The presence of a large asylum seeker centre (AZC) in Ter Apel has regularly attracted protests, including marches and demonstrations by extreme-right organisations.

Taken together, the three issues discussed above have fuelled feelings of discontent and resentment in the Northern Netherlands. In addition to these local issues, however, the region has also been affected by broader trends, notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the nitrogen crisis, which have contributed to an erosion of trust in political institutions (Den Ridder *et al.* 2022). For instance, measures taken by the government in response to the outbreak of the coronavirus led to several large-scale demonstrations in Northern cities, some of which resulted in riots and vandalism (NCTV 2021a). In addition, protests against government plans to reduce nitrogen emissions have been relatively strong in the region since 2019. Just like the 'corona protests', the so-called 'farmer's protests' reflect broader (anti-government) grievances (Van der Ploeg 2020).

In sum, the Northern Netherlands has been affected by local and national issues that have given rise to anti-government sentiments and regional resentment. These feelings have, at times, led to radicalisation and manifestations of extremism. Before mapping and analysing the extremist landscape, the following section briefly describes the research design and methodology.

[6] Wind park N33 is located in the municipalities of Veendam, Midden-Groningen and Oldambt.

Methodology

To explore the regional dimension of extremism, this article employs an in-depth, qualitative case study analysis that hones in on the subnational level. While most scholarly works treat countries as single units of analysis (particularly in comparative politics), this approach does not allow for capturing subnational variation. Focusing on the subnational level, by contrast, enables us to keep cultural and historical variables constant whilst identifying patterns and particularities that tend to be neglected when focusing on the national-level perspective.

The research was conducted in 2022, and in this article, we focus on the period leading up to that year from 2014 onwards. This starting point was chosen because international developments surrounding jihadism and the Syrian War around 2014 (in particular the increased threat of foreign fighters and domestic jihadism) laid the foundation for the Dutch P/CVE approach (Vermeulen and Visser 2021).

Empirical support for this article was drawn from a combination of primary and secondary sources. First, we mapped the existing knowledge on the topic by analysing scholarly and non-scholarly publications from different institutes and agencies, such as the NCTV and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). Building on the existing literature, we then compiled a database of extremism-related incidents that took place in the Northern Netherlands in the period from 2014 until 2021. For this purpose, we systematically searched the two main regional newspapers, *Dagblad van het Noorden* (DvhN) and *Leeuwarder Courant* (LC), as well as other open-source material such as court rulings, national newspapers and reports by (semi-)government agencies and research institutes. We purposely used a broad search string to include a wide range of incidents, such as large-scale public protests and potentially extremism-related violations of law that took place in the three northern provinces between January 2014 and December 2021. This initially yielded a database of 96 incidents, which we then edited manually to exclude duplicates. The three researchers involved in the project then individually coded the incidents based on the working definition and categorisation used for this study. Borderline cases were discussed internally within the team, and if consensus could not be reached, the cases were removed from the list. The remaining incidents were subsequently labelled by date, location, province, type of actor,

and subcategory of extremism (i.e. religious, left-wing, right-wing, or anti-government). This resulted in a final list of 65 extremism-related incidents, ranging from threats and destruction of property to a violent attack on a journalist.

Although the database provides an indicative overview of the regional spread and development of extremism in the Northern Netherlands, it is not exhaustive. In light of these limitations, the findings were complemented and triangulated by drawing on the secondary literature and aggregate data we received from the Counterterrorism, Extremism and Radicalisation (CTER) intel cell from the Police.[7] Finally, we also triangulated the findings with semi-structured interviews (N=33) with professionals, practitioners and regional experts, including municipal workers, police officers, and social workers.[8] The respondents were selected based on regional distribution and occupational diversity. The aim was to obtain a sample that included perspectives from urban and rural municipalities in all three provinces, as well as representatives of all the different partners involved in local P/CVE efforts. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and March 2022. The aim of the interviews was to get a better understanding of how practitioners and experts view, interpret, and address the phenomenon. To this end, they were asked to describe the 'extremist landscape' from their own perspective and trace developments over time. They were also asked what definition of extremism they employ in their working environment, and how the local response is organised. Whenever possible, interviews were digitally recorded in order to ensure a detailed and accurate transcription. Recordings were complemented with notes and observations taken during the interviews. The transcriptions and fieldnotes were then organised thematically and compared within and across cases by the three researchers. By combining insights from these different sources, the article provides a rich and nuanced analysis of the main extremism-related trends and actors in the Northern Netherlands between 2014 and 2022.

[7] We received anonymised overviews of the number of CTER registrations from 2018 until 2021.
[8] A full list of interviews conducted can be found in the Appendix. Interviewees were fully informed about the research project and we obtained consent to use their insights. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (CETO) of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Groningen on 31 August 2021. For privacy reasons, references to the interviews have been anonymised.

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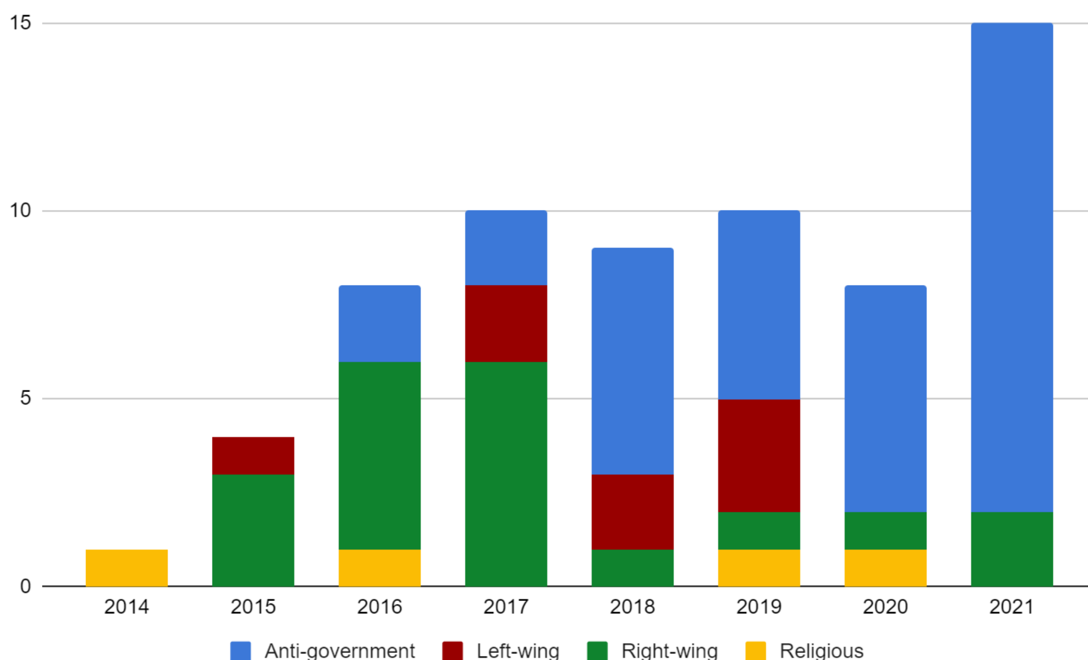
Extremism in the Northern Netherlands

The findings indicate that extremism in the Northern Netherlands is a diffuse and multifaceted phenomenon that has changed considerably between 2014 and 2022. Whereas 'traditional' forms of extremism - notably jihadism, left-wing extremism, and (classical forms of) right-wing extremism - manifested themselves to a limited extent in the region, new forms of extremism have emerged. This particularly concerns various forms of anti-government extremism, but the data also points to a rising trend of cross-pollination between anti-government extremism and (newer forms of) right-wing extremism. These developments have contributed to rising numbers of extremism-related incidents in the Northern Netherlands since 2014. This is illustrated by Figure 1, which visualises the 65 extremism-related incidents that have been identified by the researchers in the three northern provinces between 2014 and 2021.

Fig. 1: Number of extremism-related incidents in the Northern Netherlands, 2014-2021



These findings, which were corroborated by the regional experts interviewed for this study, clearly indicate that 'traditional' forms of extremism (i.e. religious; left-; and right-

wing extremism) hardly came to the surface during the research period.[9] First, although jihadism is still considered the main security threat at the national level (NCTV 2022b), the number of jihadist detainees and returning foreign fighters was remarkably low in the northern provinces. An investigation of the available open-source material (i.e. newspapers and court proceedings) indicates that only three out of the 305 foreign fighters who left the Netherlands for Syria or Iraq resided in the northern provinces at the time of their departure. Moreover, only three out of the 65 extremism-related incidents recorded in the region were related to jihadism.[10] This included, for example, an Islamic State supporter from the city of Groningen who was sentenced to two years in prison for preparing/promoting a terrorist offence and possessing a loaded firearm (Zijlstra 2020). Taken together, this suggests that during the period of investigation, religious extremism (and in particular jihadist extremism) was a marginal phenomenon in the northern Netherlands.

Second, left-wing extremism also hardly occurred between 2014 and 2022. The far left in the Northern Netherlands has an unpredictable and reactive character, which is in line with the national-level developments (AIVD 2013; van Ham *et al.* 2018). Accordingly, organisations that are classified as 'left-wing extremist' by the AIVD, such as *Anti-Fascistische Aktie* (Anti-Fascist Action; AFA), were mainly active in response to far-right activities (see below). For instance, protest actions by AFA's northern offshoots (i.e. AFA-North and AFA-Fryslan) that occurred during the period of investigation were all directed against (alleged) right-wing extremist and fascist actors and primarily concerned counter-demonstrations during the so-called 'refugee crisis'. It is noteworthy that climate change and animal welfare were not high on the agenda of far-left actors in the region, although they did stage some actions across the regional borders (e.g. RTV Noord 2019).[11]

Third, incidents that involved traditional right-wing extremist actors were also relatively rare. The contemporary far-right scene in the Netherlands is highly diverse. Generally speaking, we can distinguish between traditional extreme-right organisations, such as neo-Nazi groups, and newer forms of far-right extremism, including alt-right actors,

[9] Interviews 19, 27, 28, and 29.
[10] A fourth case of religiously-inspired extremism recorded in our database was not even related to jihadism; instead, it involved an alleged Christian fundamentalist, who sent threats to abortion clinics (Verbrugge 2020).
[11] This might change in the coming years; at the end of 2022, for instance, an intersectional group of climate activists occupied a council meeting in the city of Emmen in Drenthe (BNNVara 2022).

identitarian formations and accelerationism. Just like elsewhere in Europe (see Mudde 2019), traditional extreme-right groups are in decline in the Northern Netherlands, while these newer manifestations seem to be gaining momentum. This is interesting, given that traditional right-wing extremist organisations have strong historical roots in some (particularly rural) areas in the Northern Netherlands (Demant *et al*. 2009). Some remnants of this past could be seen between 2014 and 2022, when several neo-Nazi groups were active in the region, including *Kameraadschap Noord-Nederland* (Camaraderie Northern Netherlands; KNNL), *Nederlandse Volks-Unie* (Dutch People's Union; NVU), *United We Stand*, and *Frysk Heidens Front* (Frysian Pagan Front). As shown in Figure 1, however, the activities of these groups primarily occurred at the peak of the so-called 'European refugee crisis' (2015-2017). KNNL is a case in point; this regional offshoot of the international neo-Nazi group Blood & Honour became active in the Northern Netherlands in the fall of 2015, when they organised several protests against AZCs in the region. Once the numbers of incoming refugees had decreased, their activities died down (Wagenaar 2016: 45-46). The case of KNNL is illustrative of a broader trend, which is also reflected in national and international developments (AIVD 2018).

Neo-Nazism seems to have given way to newer forms of right-wing extremism. Prominent examples are Erkenbrand, an alt-right study association founded in 2016 that organises social activities for higher educated people with nationalist and far-right ideas (Sterkenburg 2021b: 87); and various identitarian formations. The latter include *Voorpost* (Front Post), *Identitair Verzet* (Identitarian Resistance), and Pegida, who strive to stop the alleged 'replacement' of the Dutch people and organise protests against immigration, islamisation, and anti-blackface activists (Wagenaar 2018: 35).[12] While the number of extremism-related incidents in the Northern Netherlands by these types of formations has remained limited, the increasing popularity of their views - particularly among youngsters - is a cause for concern for national and regional authorities, especially in view of national and international developments (AIVD 2018; 2020).

Last but not least, the data suggests that anti-government extremism is on the rise in the Northern Netherlands. As explained above, both local and national issues have fuelled anti-government sentiments and regional resentment in the region. The protests resulting from

[12] Pegida originated in Germany in 2014 and stands for 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West'.

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these developments lowered the threshold for extremist behaviour (NCTV 2021a), which came to the fore in the Northern Netherlands in two distinct ways (see also Jackson 2022). On the one hand, extremist behaviours emanated from people who reject the government's authority altogether and often find their ideas confirmed by conspiracy theories and misinformation. Beliefs in an invisible, power-hungry elite were on the rise in the region (Altena 2020), which was publicly expressed in online and offline contexts. Although this mostly manifested itself in demonstrations and other forms of activism, it also resulted in some illegitimate actions such as daubing public properties with conspiracy slogans and setting fire to 5G transmission towers (e.g. Sikkom 2021; Sjoukes 2021). A related form of anti-government protest concerns so-called 'sovereignists' and 'defence groups', who refuse to recognise the government's authority and established self-defence groups claiming to protect demonstrators as well as Dutch traditions and culture in general (NCTV 2022a; Hardeman 2021).

On the other hand, several extremist behaviours were predominantly issue-driven, and thus fuelled by specific government policies. Three of these issues are particularly worth mentioning. First, the government's COVID-19 policies induced a number of incidents, including threats against politicians and public health workers (e.g. Rechtbank Noord-Nederland 2020), an arson attack on a testing facility (Dagblad van het Noorden 2021), and the throwing of a Molotov cocktail into the house of a local journalist who had written critically about COVID-related conspiracy theories (De Rechtspraak 2022). Second, government plans to reduce nitrogen emissions led to fierce farmers' protests across the northern region, which were initially mainly activist in nature, but hardened over time (NCTV 2020: 3). These protests, too, resulted in several extremist behaviours, such as illegal blockades and the ramming of the door of the Province House in the city of Groningen (Rechtbank Noord-Nederland 2021). Third, the aforementioned construction of wind farms led to several illegitimate protest actions. Politicians, entrepreneurs, companies, and journalists were threatened, asbestos was dumped, and the house of a wind farm contractor became the subject of an arson attack (e.g. Wollerich 2017).

Taken together, these trends demonstrate that the face of extremism in the Northern Netherlands has changed considerably since 2014. New forms of extremism have emerged,

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and they have a distinctive character regarding their organisational structures, sets of ideas and repertoires of action. The organisational forms of contemporary extremism are highly diffuse; centralised forms of organisations have largely given way to loose, flexible networks and coalitions in both online and offline contexts (see e.g. NCTV 2021b; Sterkenburg 2021a). Similarly, extremist actors appeared to be less driven by clear-cut, coherent ideologies, but rather by diffuse and fragmented cocktails of ideas and beliefs that were drawn from a variety of sources and fuelled by international developments as well as national and regional issues. Moreover, the anti-government sentiments and far-right ideas characterising these newer forms of extremism were often expressed in relation to very concrete (national and regional) issues, ranging from COVID-19 and nitrogen policies to wind farms and asylum seekers' centres. As a result of this intimate connection between extremist behaviours and broader protests, the boundaries between activism, radicalism and extremism seem to have become ever more fluid.

These developments are vividly illustrated by the trend of cross-pollination between and within different forms of extremism in the region. Prominent examples of this trend were the so-called 'corona protests' and 'farmer's protests' in the region (NCTV 2021a). In both cases, anti-government sentiments, conspiracy theories and far-right ideas came together in relation to very concrete policy issues, which fuelled several extremist behaviours in the region. This trend of cross-pollination was also visible in the online sphere. An exploratory content analysis of several Telegram channels in 2021-2022 showed regular interactions between conspiracy platforms, far-right networks and issue-driven protest groups. Replacement theories, for example, were repeatedly shared in anti-government networks, and far-right groups regularly forwarded calls to participate in protests against specific government policies.[13]

In short, while extremist manifestations in the Northern Netherlands seem to reflect national and international trends (see e.g. Beugelsdijk 2021), the rise of anti-government extremism in conjunction with (newer forms of) far-right extremism appeared to be

[13] Within the framework of this study, we conducted an exploratory social media analysis on extremist networks in the Northern Netherlands. We scraped and analysed data from a number of public websites and social media channels of extremist actors from the Northern Netherlands between September 2021 and April 2022 (see Nanninga *et al.* 2022: 26-32).

particularly pronounced in the Northern Netherlands between 2014 and 2022. Regional discontent and resentment were reinforced by specific policy issues and, at times, blended with conspiracy theories and far-right ideas, which provided fertile ground for new forms of extremist behaviour in the region. These behaviours should therefore not be seen as isolated incidents, but rather as extreme manifestations of broader shared grievances.

The Local Response

The changing character of extremism in the Northern Netherlands raises the question whether the local response is adequately equipped to address contemporary manifestations of the phenomenon. Prior to answering this question, we first provide a brief overview of the local response infrastructure.

The local response is driven by national P/CVE guidelines, which were set up in 2013-2014, when the war in Syria and the increased threat of jihadist foreign fighters gave new impetus to P/CVE policies in the Netherlands (Vermeulen and Visser 2021). The Dutch approach is often characterised as ‘broad’ and ‘integrated’, as it integrates ‘soft’ preventative and ‘hard’ repressive and curative measures, and involves close collaboration between a wide range of actors, including local and national authorities as well as societal partners. P/CVE efforts are delegated to a large extent to local authorities, in particular municipalities (Ragazzi and de Jongh 2019). This is based on the idea that local authorities and community-based organisations, such as mosques and schools, have a good understanding of the local environment and can therefore play a key role in signalling and preventing radicalisation (Roex and Vermeulen 2019). Central to this local response is the so-called *Persoonsgerichte Aanpak* (Person-centred approach; PGA), which is aimed at recognising and dealing with (possibly) radicalising individuals at an early stage. To this end, local authorities are expected to establish a network and an infrastructure in order to develop a good overview of relevant developments in their region and to pick up signals about possible radicalisation (Vermeulen and Visser 2021). When serious signals are reported, the case is assessed by a ‘core team’ consisting of the municipality in question, the Police and the Public Prosecution Service. If this preliminary assessment provides good cause for further investigation, a multidisciplinary

‘case team’ consisting of the three ‘core parties’ and, if relevant, external partners such as the Probation Service and the Council for Child Protection, analyse the available information, formulate an action plan and monitor its implementation (NCTV 2017).

These national frameworks have shaped P/CVE efforts in the Northern Netherlands over the last decade. According to our respondents, northern municipalities have invested in establishing and maintaining communication networks with local partners, such as social and healthcare institutions, schools, youth workers, and mosques. They have also built an infrastructure for signalling possible cases of radicalisation at an early stage, for instance by offering training on recognising jihadist extremism to hundreds of professionals. Finally, the PGA is regularly applied: in most municipalities, incoming signals are assessed by a ‘core team’, after which serious cases are dealt with by a ‘case team’. This resulted in dozens of cases across the region between 2014 and 2022.

The interviewees were largely positive about the implementation of P/CVE measures in the Northern Netherlands.[14] However, we also found significant differences between municipalities regarding the scope and quality of the network and signalling infrastructure, the numbers of professionals that were trained, and the numbers of signals that were received and assessed. For example, while the municipality of Groningen treated dozens of PGA cases over the last few years, other municipalities did not receive any signals of possible radicalisation and, accordingly, did not assess any cases at all since 2014.[15] These differences were partially caused by the size of the municipalities at hand, but also by the prioritisation of the theme on the local level and, relatedly, the available capacity and expertise.

Despite these local differences, some general patterns were noticeable regarding the connection between local P/CVE policies and the phenomenon of extremism in the Northern Netherlands. The main finding of our study in this respect is that local P/CVE efforts were disproportionately focused on jihadism. Despite the limited manifestations of jihadism in the region, many of the professionals and practitioners interviewed for this study primarily, or even exclusively, associated terms such as ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’ with jihadism, and related the phenomenon to Salafism, migrant communities, asylum seekers and local

[14] Interviews 1, 2, 18, 19, and 26.
[15] Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 32, and 33.

mosques.[16] For instance, when asked about local cases of extremism, one respondent was quick to emphasise that the municipality maintained good relationships with the 'Turkish prayer house and Moroccan mosque.'[17] Another respondent indicated that this focus on Muslim communities felt wrong, since 'we also do not go to the Catholic church if we are concerned about Pietje' (i.e. a random individual).[18] Meanwhile, however, this same respondent also proceeded to underline the importance of maintaining close ties with the mosque, partly because the municipality often received questions about these ties. This disproportionate focus on jihadism is also reflected in the data compiled in the Police registration system for incoming signals on terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. Out of the total number of 1,192 registrations in the system for the period 2018-2021, 56.8 percent concerned 'islamisation' (i.e. the label used for signals related to jihadism). Although the registrations themselves were not accessible to the researchers due to privacy reasons, these aggregated numbers also indicate a disproportionate focus on jihadism among the professionals reporting and assessing these signals, especially when compared to the (relatively low) numbers of jihadism-related incidents in the region between 2014 and 2022.

This focus on jihadist extremism is understandable given the emphasis on the jihadist threat in public debates and policy documents, as well as the fact that the national P/CVE framework is mainly geared towards countering jihadism. Accordingly, professionals in the Northern Netherlands have been primarily trained to recognise and interpret signs of jihadist radicalisation.[19] Finally, as one of the interviewees also remarked, anti-government sentiments and far-right ideas are increasingly normalised, whereas jihadism is more easily seen as 'alien' and therefore more threatening.[20] At the same time, however, the disproportionate focus on jihadism is deeply problematic, not in the least because of the casual way in which the issue is associated with a particular religion and religious community, and the resulting securitisation of Islam (Vliek and de Koning 2021). Moreover, the focus on jihadism contributes to the fact that other forms of extremism are not noticed and/or recognised as such

[16] Interviews 1, 3, 7, 11, 14, 30, 31, and 32.
[17] Interview 7.
[18] Interview 32.
[19] Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, and 18.
[20] Interview 3.

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- notably the rise of anti-government extremism and newer manifestations of far-right extremism.

It is striking that especially in regions where P/CVE structures have remained underdeveloped, professionals often stated that their region had not yet witnessed (non-jihadist forms of) radicalisation and extremism. When asked about examples in this respect, we received answers such as: 'We don't have that,' 'There is hardly anything going on here,' 'As far as I'm concerned, it's fairly quiet here,' and 'Since jihadism, I haven't seen any radicalisation coming by.'[21] These claims are questionable when compared to other data; in the words of an experienced professional, 'if they would start looking better, they would have it as well.'[22] Even when these developments were being noticed, non-jihadist forms of extremism were not always recognised and/or labelled as such. For example, one municipal worker was quick to label two adolescent girls who had travelled to Syria as 'extremist', while describing two young men who were registered in the Police's database as 'extreme right' as 'kids who lost track' and 'spent too much time behind their computers.'[23] Another respondent stated the following: 'Nazi flags in the house of a father with a kid: that is not reported, because, yeah, he is a sweet father after all.'[24] Regional experts and more experienced practitioners we interviewed confirmed that signals of jihadist radicalisation were more quickly labelled and treated as such than other cases of extremism, which might be partly explained by the increasing normalisation of far-right ideas in the Dutch public sphere (cf. de Jonge and Gaufman 2022).[25]

In sum, the focus on jihadism among local practitioners points to an obvious discrepancy between the face of extremism in the region on the one hand, and the local response on the other. This is alarming because it can generate a 'blind spot' in the sense that other forms of extremism described earlier are not seen or recognised as such. This blind spot has fuelled the perception that radicalisation and extremism are marginal phenomena in the region, which has affected the prioritisation of the theme among (national and local) policymakers and administrators. This, in turn, has led to fewer resources directed at

[21] Interviews 6, 8, 9, 14, and 31.
[22] Interview 5.
[23] Interview 12.
[24] Interview 5.
[25] Interviews 2, 3, and 5.

addressing radicalisation and extremism. Indeed, all but one of the interviewees signalled a lack of capacity to adequately deal with radicalisation and extremism. Despite serious efforts by some of the larger municipalities and individual 'pioneers' in recent years, the vicious circle at play seems to prevent them from implementing sustainable improvements: the lack of insight and awareness has caused low prioritisation, underfunding and lack of capacity, which, in turn, has prevented the development of a better view on the phenomenon. In short, despite relatively well developed local networks, a disproportionate focus on jihadist extremism might prevent local P/CVE efforts to adequately deal with the multifaceted and rapidly changing phenomenon of extremism in the Northern Netherlands. 'If this will remain the case,' a municipal worker concluded, 'our response will keep lagging behind.'[26]

Conclusion and Discussion

This article has provided an in-depth analysis of the regional dimension of extremism in the Northern Netherlands. While the northern provinces are generally overlooked in scholarly research as well as in national threat assessments by agencies such as the NCTV, this study indicates that the face of extremism in the region has changed dramatically in recent years. Jihadism, left-wing extremism and traditional forms of right-wing extremism manifested themselves only to a limited extent between 2014 and 2022, while newer forms of extremism appear to be on the rise. This is particularly true for anti-government extremism directed against the government as such and/or against specific government policies, but the results also point to cross-pollination with (new forms of) far-right extremism. These developments have coincided with an overall increase in the number of extremism-related incidents in the region in recent years.

The findings suggest that manifestations of extremism in the Northern Netherlands were strongly affected by and in line with national and international developments. Most notably, the rise of anti-government extremism in the region, including its intertwinement with conspiracy thinking, far-right ideas, and issue-driven activism, fits a broader national and international pattern (cf. Bjørgo and Braddock 2022; Jackson 2022). In the Netherlands and

[26] Interview 4.

beyond, complex and interrelated processes such as globalisation, immigration and the declining appeal of grand ideologies have contributed to polarisation and an erosion of trust in political institutions. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, these developments have resulted in large-scale anti-government demonstrations, which have lowered the threshold for extremist behaviour (Beugelsdijk 2021; NCTV 2021a; Den Ridder *et al.* 2022). These national and international developments form an important backdrop for the rise and emergence of new forms of radicalisation and extremism in the Northern Netherlands. Indeed, it is impossible to fully understand the regional manifestations of extremism without considering the wider national and international context.

At the same time, however, some forms of extremism in the Northern Netherlands appear to be particularly pronounced due to regional circumstances. As a perceived peripheral 'place that does not matter', feelings of societal discontent and regional resentment are strongly present in the region. Anti-government sentiments have further been fuelled by a set of specific regional issues related to gas extraction, wind farm initiatives, and reception centres for asylum seekers. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not very surprising that extremist behaviour in the region typically manifested itself in relation to very concrete issues, some of which were nationwide but particularly pronounced in the region (e.g. nitrogen policies), while others were thoroughly regional or even local in nature (e.g. wind farms; AZCs). The (seemingly) issue-driven extremism in the Northern Netherlands thus appears to be symptomatic of broader feelings of societal discontent and regional resentment.

The Northern Netherlands, in short, has provided a fertile ground for (diverse and diffuse forms of) anti-government extremism due to a complex interplay between international, national and regional dynamics. These findings illustrate the importance of studying the regional dimension of extremism, something that is often overlooked in the scholarly literature. By focusing on *when* and *where* extremism materialises, this study has not only mapped new territory in the field of extremism studies, but also shed new light on the complex dynamics and the regional variations in manifestations of extremism.

Prior to discussing the wider implications of these findings, two important caveats are in order. First, while this article has provided an in-depth analysis of the extremist landscape in the Northern Netherlands, it does not engage explicitly with the research subjects

themselves. In other words, our research has identified general patterns, but it does not provide any insight into the lived 'worlds of meaning' experienced by individuals or groups involved in the incidents that we labelled as 'extremist'. Future research should systematically engage with these subjects, allowing them to express their perspectives in their own terms. This approach, in turn, could provide deeper insights into the underlying drivers behind regional resentment and why it sometimes leads to extremist behaviour. Second, given the regional focus of our study, the findings may lack external validity. In other words, the single-case study research design restricts the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, follow-up research should focus on other regions in the Netherlands and beyond, to determine whether the results extend beyond the three provinces discussed in this article.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings have significant implications for P/CVE policymakers and practitioners in the Northern Netherlands and beyond. This article has exposed structural discrepancies between national policy frameworks and regional expressions of extremism: whereas the former primarily focused on jihadism, manifestations of this form of extremism remained strikingly limited in the Northern Netherlands. Yet, as explained above, local practitioners have disproportionately focused on countering jihadism, thereby largely overlooking and/or not acknowledging other, more recent forms of extremism. This has serious implications for the prioritisation of and, relatedly, the capacity to adequately address the phenomenon in the region.

One of the key lessons to be drawn from this study, therefore, is that it is crucial to raise awareness of regional variations of extremism among both policymakers and practitioners. In the context of the Northern Netherlands, this means acknowledging the fact that, notwithstanding the seriousness of the threat of jihadism over the last decade, it is important to *also* recognise other forms of extremism. Tangible recommendations in this respect are to supplement nation-wide threat assessments produced by national agencies like the NCTV with (periodical) regional analyses of extremism; offer (more) training to practitioners in recognising non-jihadist forms of radicalisation and extremism; appoint liaison officers to address possible biases against migrant and Muslim communities (vis-à-vis the normalisation of anti-government sentiments and far-right ideas); facilitate regional coordination by coupling more experienced and broader trained partners with less experienced

ones; and facilitate sustainable, long-term investments in P/CVE efforts in order to align capacity and expertise with the changing phenomenon of extremism in the region.

More generally, this study into the regional dimension of extremism suggests that it is crucial for P/CVE efforts to take local contexts and variations into account - particularly in countries like the Netherlands, where P/CVE efforts have been largely delegated to local authorities (compared to more centralised frameworks, such as those in France). Future studies should therefore be more attentive to regional manifestations and variations of extremism. This article has also paved the way for cross-regional comparative research, both within the Netherlands and beyond. By being more attentive to the specific places and spaces where people develop extremist views and mobilise to commit extremist actions, we can also improve preventative measures. In times of increasing political polarisation and rising anti-government sentiments, it is ever more important to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying patterns that drive societal discontent and place resentment, as well as the mechanisms that can then pave the way for radicalisation and extremism.

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Appendix 1. List of interviews

Interview	Organisation	Province	Date
1	Municipality	Groningen	08-11-2021
2	Municipality	Drenthe	16-11-2021
3	Municipality	Groningen	22-11-2021
4	Municipality	Groningen	24-11-2021
5	Municipality	Friesland	14-12-2021
6	Municipality	Drenthe	15-12-2021
7	Municipality	Drenthe	20-12-2021
8	Municipality	Groningen	12-01-2021
9	Municipality	Groningen	16-01-2022
10	Municipality	Groningen	16-01-2022
11	Municipality	Groningen	16-01-2022
12	Municipality	Groningen	24-01-2022
13	Municipality	Friesland	25-01-2022
14	Municipality	Friesland	26-01-2022
15	Dutch Probation Service	n/a	26-01-2022
16	Dutch Probation Service	n/a	26-01-2022
17	Care and Safety House	Drenthe	26-01-2022
18	WIJ Groningen	Groningen	26-01-2022
19	NCTV	n/a	17-02-2022
20	Public Prosecution Service	n/a	24-02-2022
21	Public Prosecution Service	n/a	24-02-2022
22	Police	n/a	03-03-2022
23	Police	n/a	03-03-2022

24	Council for Child Protection	Groningen	03-03-2022
25	Council for Child Protection	Friesland	03-03-2022
26	National Support Center for Extremism	n/a	04-03-2022
27	AIVD	n/a	11-03-2022
28	AIVD	n/a	11-03-2022
29	AIVD	n/a	11-03-2022
30	Police	Drenthe	24-03-2022
31	Police	Groningen	24-03-2022
32	Police	Friesland	30-03-2022
33	Care and Safety House	Friesland	30-03-2022

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