

## **Ireland and Transnational Right-Wing Extremism: Steadfast Resilience or Blind Vulnerability?**

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Throughout the last two decades the primary threats that has dominated the counter terrorism landscape internationally has been that of the challenge posed by radical Islamist related extremism. A particular focus on radical Islamist related extremism has been driven by the significant directed or inspired attacks perpetrated in the West by various Islamist extremist groupings and in particular those carried out by Al Qaeda and ISIL. Notwithstanding this, considerable concern is now orientating towards the upward trajectory of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE). This paper sets out to examine the presence and impact of transnational VRWE in Ireland and to assess whether VRWE is a threat which requires greater attention at a national level.

This paper argues that all though the right wing has had limited political success in Ireland, a nascent transnational threat from VRWE can pose a threat to Irish security owing to its capacity to activate and mobilise violent political and social actions both in the physical and virtual environments. The role of the online environment as an enabling medium for the propagation and influence of right wing discourse is also a concern. Although efforts to combat spread of VRWE ideologies are advancing at the EU level, further efforts at a national level to control and regulate violent discourse and hate speech online are necessary to stem the influence of hateful and sometimes violent discourse as portrayed by right wing entities.

Throughout the last two decades the primary threat that has dominated the counter terrorism landscape internationally has been that of the enduring threats posed by radical Islamist related extremism. A particular focus on radical Islamist related extremism has been driven by the significant directed or inspired attacks perpetrated in the West by various Islamist extremist groupings but in particular those carried out by Al Qaeda (Stanford University, 2019) and The Islamic State (ISIL). Notwithstanding this enduring threat of radical Islamist extremist terrorism, considerable concern worldwide is now orientating on the upward trajectory of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE).

In January 2021 the UN Security council convened a ministerial level meeting on efforts to combat global terrorism. This meeting cited growing concern on the rise of right wing extremism worldwide (UN, 2021). At this meeting, Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence, Simon Coveney, reiterated the concern of the growing threat of right-wing extremism and terrorism (DFA, 2021) and the collective need to address it.



Within the past year recent EU level threat assessment publications from EUROPOL (EUROPOL, 2020) have highlighted the presence of right wing extremists operating within Ireland who maintain connectivity and support the agenda of the wider right wing extremist milieus worldwide. The growing trend in right wing extremism has been accelerated and fuelled by other factors worldwide as highlighted by Pantucci and Ong (2021) that “Global events provided fertile grounds for already ascendant extreme right-wing ideology and violence to thrive and further metastasise in 2020” (p.118). This paper sets out to examine the presence of transnational VRWE in Ireland and its ideologies and the subsequent considerations for Irish national security.

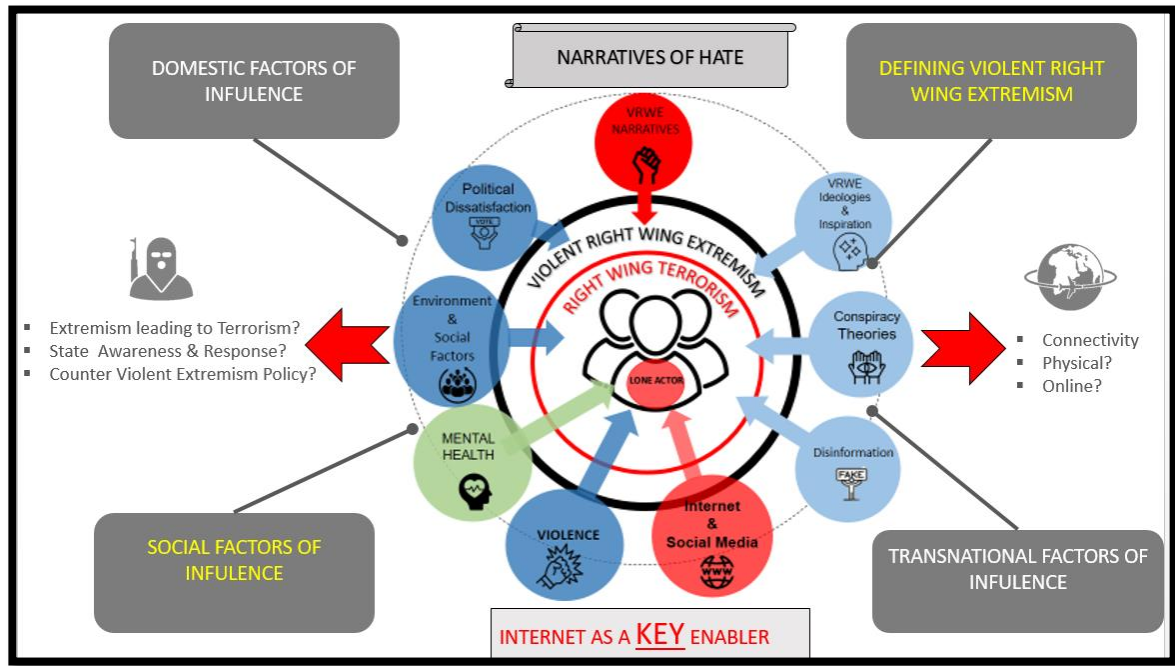
## **Background**

The decision to focus research on the topic of VRWE stems from the fact that the majority of academic research on extremism and radicalisation in Ireland, from both a national and international perspective, has centred primarily on the subject of Islamist related extremism and radicalisation in the context of Irish Islamist extremism and associated threats (Fox, 2016; McCorry, 2020). In contrast however the theme of VRWE in Ireland is one that has received little in-depth academic research. As a consequence there is limited understanding and awareness of its core ideologies, and factors that influence its adherents, and how they apply to Ireland. In an article published in the Defence Forces Review 2020, Margna (2020, p.83) further emphasises the limited prominence the Irish State has placed on the understanding of the presence of right wing extremist activity “In Ireland, the attention to this topic has been limited and of a fragmentary nature” (p.83). As illustrated in Figure 1: Sources of Influence and Drivers of Violence : Violent Right Wing Extremism, the factors energising right wing influence both globally and nationally are diverse.

The Christchurch attack in New Zealand in 2019 provides an example of a lethal and recent VRWE terrorist attack, which resulted in 51 deaths. Of particular note with the Christchurch attack was that the incident occurred in New Zealand which had (in 2019) an assessed low threat level from domestic right wing extremism and a “sparse extreme far-right scene” (CTC, 2021). The Christchurch attack incident serves as a stark case study of the threat VRWE poses even in countries less synonymous with VRWE or where it has not deemed to have had a significant presence.

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the presence of transnational VRWE in Ireland. In examining this topic, three core questions arise:

1. What is the definition of VRWE and can their ideological characteristics be identified?
2. In defining the threat of transnational VRWE are there identifiable global trends compounding this ideology?
3. To what extent is the role of the internet and social media accelerating the perceived rise in violent radical extremism nationally and internationally?



**Figure 1:** Sources of Influence and Drivers of Violence : Violent Right Wing Extremism.

Source: Author

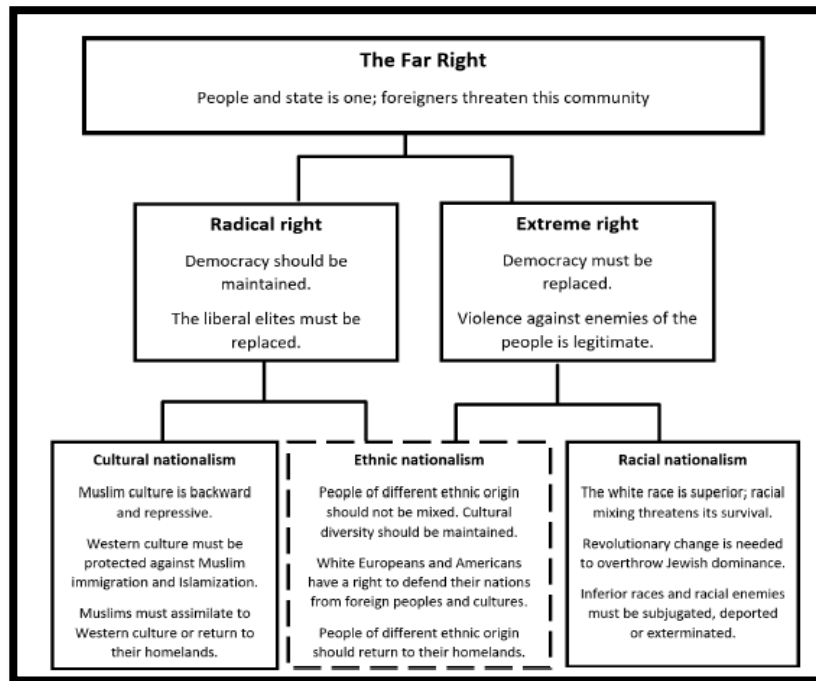
## PART ONE: Literature Review

### Defining Violent Right Wing Extremism

The taxonomy of VRWE belief systems must be carefully evaluated to demonstrate its presence within the State. In an effort to classify and define the extremist far right Mudde (2000) argues that right wing extremism “describes primarily an ideology in one form or other” (p.10). The willingness to apply violence or violent means however to achieve their stated aims as described by Von Beyme (1988, cited in Mudde, 2000) is a critical element for others in defining extremist right wing entities. Bjørge and Ravndal (2019) support this concept of a violence justifying narrative in their proposal to conceptualising the extreme right to that of the radical right, outlining that:

We can also distinguish between radical and extreme versions of both the far left and far right, where radical movements work for change within the framework of democracy whereas extremists reject democracy and are willing to use violence or other non-conventional means to achieve their goals (p.2)

In the definition above and as detailed in the chart below, Bjørge and Ravndal (2019) further contrast the definition of radical right versus that of the extreme right with either the approval or rejection of democracy. It is this combination of both the rejection of democracy and the legitimisation of violence as the key differentiating factors between both. This conceptual framework in figure 2 is very applicable to initiate research in the evaluation of VRWE in Ireland.



**Figure 2** Definitions of The Far Right, Radical and Extreme Right as developed by Brentzen (2018) and revised in collaboration with Bjørge and Ravndal and conceptually based on Mudde (2002) and Teitelbaum (2017)

**Source:** International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) (2019, p. 3)

In a contrasting view, Carthy (2020) argues, however, that although violence and extremism are inextricably linked “the two are not synonymous” (p.4). Interestingly Carthy further contends that extremist ideologies can exist at times without violence. Carthy points out that “an extremist belief system becomes a violent one when one perceives violence, or hostile action, against an out-group<sup>1</sup> to be conducive to the goals (or even the existence) of one’s in-group<sup>2</sup>” (p.4). Berger (2017, cited by Carthy, 2020) defines violent extremism as “The belief that an in-group’s success is inseparable from violence against an out-group”.

A violent extremist ideology may subjectively characterise this violence as defensive, offensive, or pre-emptive” (p.4). Presence of violence therefore is assessed as a significant factor in the determination of extremist ideology, and this will be utilised in further analysis. Schmid (2013 cited in Bak *et al.*, 2019) also contend that violence is a central tenet within violent extremism and state that:

Extremists frequently work towards collective goals that are often identified by ideological dogmas; however, they conversely tend to downgrade or deny individual liberties. For this reason, violence, subjugation and suppression is

<sup>1</sup> Out-group as defined by U.S sociologist William G. Sumner (American Psychological Association) is in general, any group to which one does not belong, or with which one does not identify.

<sup>2</sup> In-Group as defined by U.S sociologist William G. Sumner (American Psychological Association) is in general any group to which one belongs, or with which one identifies but particularly a group judged to be different from other group.

often permitted towards individuals whose ideologies are perceived to diverge from the collective belief system (p.11).

In an attempt to classify the component of violence, The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry (2020) into the right-wing extremist terrorist attack on 15 March 2019 in Christchurch expanded known definitions and have attempted to define and articulate a spectrum of harmful behaviours which describes behaviours of a violent extremist nature, pertaining to right wing extremism as depicted in figure 3 below:

<b>Racism and Micro Aggressions</b>	<b>Religiously and/or ethnically motivated harassment and abuse.</b>	<b>Hateful Extremism</b>	<b>Violent Extremism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Biased or belittling jokes</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Physical abuse</b>- women having their religious attire pulled off in public</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Coordinated online or offline campaigns</b> aimed to convince their audience to adopt hateful or discriminatory attitudes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Terrorism</b>- Advocating for planning, materially supporting or carrying out terrorist attacks.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Stereotyping</b> - Muslim students being asked to explain and account for the behaviour of Islamist extremists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Verbal abuse</b> – people being told in aggressive and threatening ways to “go back to where they come from”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Protests</b> that promote white identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Assault</b> – serious physical violence committed by members of a white supremacist group at a protest.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Micro Aggressions</b> Someone not from the majority group being told they speak English well, which sends a message that they are a foreigner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Online harassment</b> – Facebook messages making derogatory remarks about a person’s religion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Distributing pamphlets</b> denigrating certain or ethnic or religious communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Vandalism</b>, property damage and arson – setting fire to a masjid.</li> </ul>

**Figure 3** A Spectrum of Harmful Behaviours as developed by The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch 2020

**Source:** Report of the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch (2020, p.102). Adapted by Author.

A lack of clarity however can lead to difficulty in the definition, classification and indeed interpretation of VRWE when comparing radical extremism or other overarching definitions of

the far-right belief systems. Many of these ideologies have similar core tenets and share some if not many overlapping characteristics. In the case of the UK, the inability to clarify a statutory definition of extremism itself has led to difficulties in both drafting and implementing policy to develop effective counter extremism protocols (Allen, 2021).

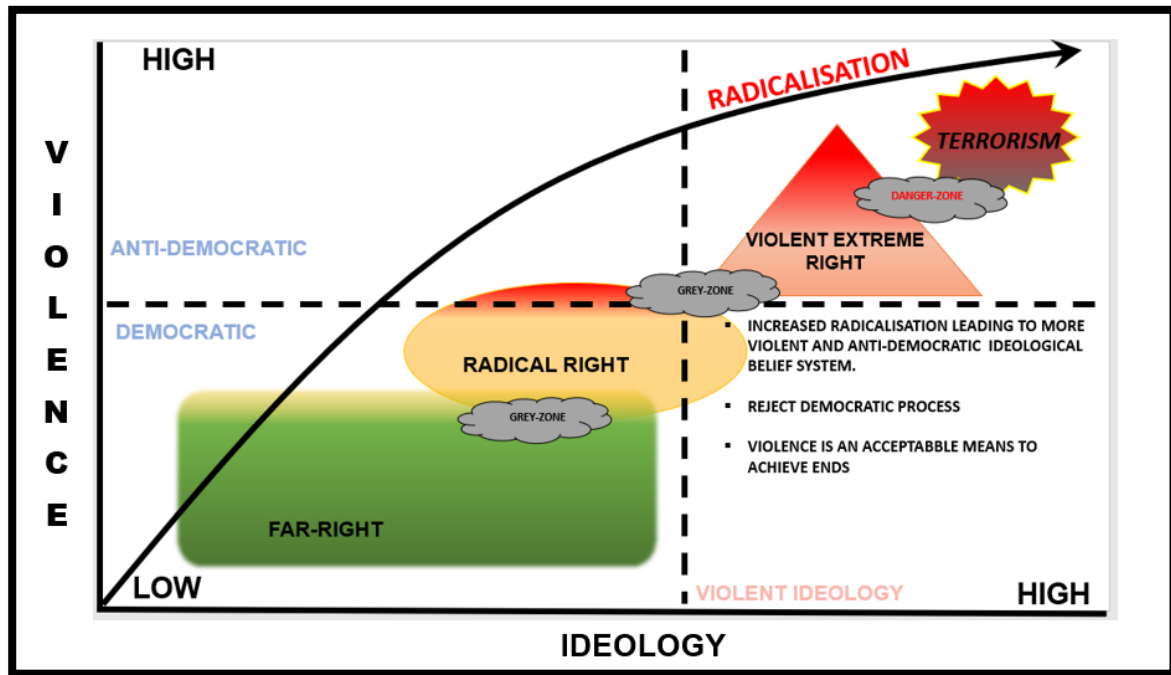
This area of contestation of extremist definition has appeared in much of the literature in researching the topic of VRWE and the search for a singular definition of same. In a similar vein, Ireland at this time has not pursued legislation to define or classify extremism. In contrast however, Ireland has a comprehensive legal framework and definitions of “terrorist-linked activity” and “terrorist groups” in the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005 (DOJ, 2005) or indeed what constitutes as an “unlawful organisation” or what activity is classified as “offences against the State” (DOJ, 1939).

Again the fundamental right to freedom of expression enshrined in both the Irish Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights pose difficulties in establishing legislation that proportionally balances these fundamental rights of the citizen to that of countering the risks posed by extremist narratives and ideologies. However in April 2021 the Government have proposed the Criminal Justice (Hate Crime) Bill 2021, which if passed (currently at Dáil second stage), will be the Irish States specific legislation for countering hate crime. Although published to counter the problems of racism and associated hate crimes, the bill’s implementation may facilitate the State to counter elements of extremism, including incitement.

Fig 4 the illustrates the progression and taxonomy of the right-wing ideology and its association with violence. As the ideological influence increases within individual(s) there is a greater potential for an adherent to be radicalised or drawn towards a trajectory of more extreme versions, and consequently may develop a propensity to embrace violent means and in some cases at an individual or group level, terroristic acts. As cited by Neumann (2013) “radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists”(p.874). Defining the factors which cause the radicalisation process or growth of extremism however are complex and pin-pointing a right-wing group on a scale system can be problematic.

For instance, the position of being democratic versus that of an anti-democratic stance can occupy ‘a grey zone’ or ‘fuziness’ as individuals or groups that may identify as radical right (and in principle adhere to democratic means) may actually harbour and condone what are unquestionably anti-democratic or extreme right views. Klandermans and Mayer (2006 cited in Jupskas, 2020) highlight this in their description of the radical and the extreme right:

the concept is controversial, partly because very few political parties, groups, or activists use it to describe their own position, and partly because it is associated with attitudes and actions that are highly stigmatized and, in some countries, even illegal.



**Figure 4:** The relationship between Violence and Ideology, Right Wing Extremist Taxonomy

**Source:** Author

This paper did not set out initially to focus on defining VRWE but to apply it in the Irish context and the manifestation of this ideology within the State. However, what is clear and as articulated by Van Rij, A & Wilkinson, B. (2019) is that “the boundaries of extremism remain a difficult and contested area”. This paper therefore will use a classification of VRWE as cited by Ahmed and Lynch (2021) who classify far right extremists (and far right terrorists) as “those movements, groups or individuals who support, threaten or perpetrate violence in furtherance of their ideological position” (p.3).

What is abundantly clear is the historical nature of this particular ideology. In the midst of these waves of right wing influence to further understand the Irish context in the next section we will briefly examine Ireland’s encounters with right wing ideologies to date.

### **Historical Background**

In order to develop the rationale as outlined in the introduction, this section will tentatively examine an abridgement of the historical development of VRWE, owing to the breadth of this academic topic. The rise of Nazism in Europe of the 1930’s (Lewis 1991), is a frame perhaps for many with regard to the ideological origins of right wing extremism. In the view of some academics however, the advent of right wing extremism made its appearance in the nineteenth century with the emergence of “reactionaries” (Von Beyme, 2016, p.1). The emergence of the nativist and violently disposed Ku Klux Klan (KKK) post the United States Civil War of 1861-1865 (Ware, 2008, Pitcavage, 2019) heralded the onset of a visceral “ideological strain” (Pitcavage, 2019, p.2) of right wing extremism. From these origins, ‘waves’ of right wing extremism have subsequently evolved.

## **The Cyclical Character of Far Right Ideologies**

The growth of VRWE is not a new spectre either globally or throughout Europe and as suggested by Rapoport (2012) right wing extremism and terrorism can be categorised into distinctive cycles or “waves”. Rapoport contends that these extremist waves are animated by a common issue and could merge with overlapping waves, however nationalism features as a persistent tenant throughout each wave (Hart, 2021, p.3). This periodic process is further supported by Hart (2021) who argues that this four waves theory can be utilised to describe the evolution of the extreme right over the past seventy years” (p.1). David Rapoport's concept of Four Waves of terrorism, from Anarchist terrorism in the 1880s, through Nationalist and Marxist waves in the early and mid-twentieth century, to the present Religious Wave, is one of the most influential concepts in terrorism studies (Parker and Sitter, 2016).

In the same vein to that of Rapoport, Collins (2021) observes VRWE as a cyclical phenomenon “With spurts of violence in the 1930s and 1980s stemming from issues related to the economy and immigration respectively, we could observe similar upward trends in extremism at the present time” (p.4). The next section probes Irelands perceived immunity to right wing influences and if it too is potentially leaning into this upward trend.

### **Irelands Relative Immunity to the Right Wing ideology**

Ireland has remained somewhat immune throughout the twentieth century in contrast to other European states in the surge wave periods of political far right growth or that of right wing extremism. Even whilst Europe started to succumb to a wave of fascism and Nazism in the 1930's, Ireland remained relatively unscathed aside from the emergence of an extra-parliamentary movement named the Blueshirts or Army Comrades Association (ACA) who had a limited existence of three years and a membership of only 48,000, led by the former Irish Free State Army General and inaugural Garda Siochana (Civic Guard) commissioner Eoin O'Duffy. Cronin (1995, p.312) argues that the Blueshirts did possess certain fascist traits. Cronin also posits that elements of the group espoused violence as a means to achieve their politically motivated ends and that : “the Blueshirts did not shy away from using and espousing the use of violence to achieve their aims” (Cronin, 1995, p.321).

Commenting on a more contemporary analysis of Ireland's relative immunity to any significant feature of any far-right or radical right wing political party, Garner (2007) observed that even with increased discourse and politicisation of immigration since 1996:

Ireland presents itself as something of a counter case, in that increasing hostility toward others has been identified in the midst of rapid economic growth and political stability, and that the parties manifestly opposed to immigration have accumulated less than 1 percent of votes whenever they have stood for election. (p.1)

It is evidenced in the consistent poor support for any far-right entity participating in any recent Irish general election to date that leads Garner to determine that “Far-right political activity has never been more than a tiny minority interest in Ireland” (p.4). Garner furthermore claims that Ireland is somewhat unique in the wider context of Europe with this absence of right-wing support in that:

Far-right parties in Ireland have had virtually no electoral support. They are merely the exceptions that prove the rule that in Ireland, the nationalist



populist mainstream is more than equipped to perform the ideological labour elsewhere undertaken by the Far-right. (p.13)

Garner however does caution that “Irish far-right thought is stronger on the internet than on the ground” (p.4) with the visible online presence of nationalist, white supremacist, and anti-Semitic commentary of Irish provenance on various websites.

However, in a contrasting view McGuigan (2014) suggests that should Ireland witness a convergence of the main political parties towards the centre of the political spectrum it risks creating a situation whereby “the electorate can get a feeling that all of the parties “are the same” and therefore will look for an alternative. Accordingly, there becomes a space on the political scale which a radical-right party could fill” (p.16).

### **Ireland’s Interaction with Contemporary Right Wing Movements**

A German, Islamophobic and contemporary right wing populist protest movement named PEGIDA<sup>3</sup> however made an attempt to gain support in Ireland in 2016. The group whose main ideology centred on preventing the “Islamification of the West” and anti-mass migration (Vorlander *et al.*, 2018) harboured a distinct pan-European agenda. The group received considerable support through regular protests in Eastern Germany. Consequently, PEGIDA received considerable national and international media attention in this period due to the ongoing humanitarian migrant crisis occurring in Europe arising primarily from the Syrian conflict. Employing this Islamophobic narrative of the threat posed by an overwhelming refugee crisis, (Bitschnau, 2021), branches of PEGIDA movements were founded in many European States including Ireland.

The group attempted to formally promote itself by organising a march in Dublin in February 2016 (Irish Times, 2016) in line with the German movement’s foundational *modus operandi*. This march due to its projected propensity to incite violence, received considerable attention by An Garda Síochána and was unsuccessful after violence did transpire between the PEGIDA and anti-PEGIDA counter protestors who were in attendance. PEGIDA failed to achieve any discernible following within the State as with previous attempts by Irish right wing groupings and instead focussed on maintaining an online presence on various prominent social media platforms.

Of note with the PEGIDA movement’s case however was the group’s again overt and publicised transnational linkages, a German populist right wing protest grouping in Ireland whose establishment and launch in Ireland was itself advocated for by a former leader of English based right wing group, the English Defence League (EDL) (The Times, 2016). The Irish branch of PEGIDA had again attempted to utilise and leverage the movements relative success in Europe to advocate and promote it within Ireland utilising its core narratives. Although unsuccessful in Ireland, this case again demonstrates the continued theme of the influence of the transnational character of the right wing and as posited by Rapoport the simultaneous activities in other States merging with a common local aim (Rapoport, 2002). On this occasion the application of the alleged threat posed by immigration did not resonate with the Irish public.

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<sup>3</sup> Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the Occident (PEGIDA): An anti-Islamic, populist and right wing group founded in 2014 Dresden Germany by a Lutz Bachmann. (Vorlander *et al.*, 2018)

Many academics (O'Malley, 2008; Garner, 2007) have argued that Ireland may not have a significant history of any political far-right presence or as a State encouraged or established the conditions for the successful development of any right-wing movement. In the contemporary Irish context, however, concern remains that any such resilience may be eroding and in turn the potential for the growth of a radical or right wing extremist ideology remains (RTE, 2021, Margna, 2020). This concern has been voiced additionally by the current Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris (Irish Independent, 2019). So is it truthful to state that Ireland is a bastion of resilience to such hateful ideologies? This author argues, that to say Ireland has never encountered a far right presence or extremist right political groupings would be problematic and in-accurate as political parties and movements have existed that supported such ideological leanings.

A number of small politically motivated groupings, who espoused ideologies that were of a far right or even extremist right-wing position, did “spark for a couple of years” (Kinsella, 2020) (see Fig 2.4) within the State. The Irish political party best recognised for its extreme right-wing views were that of the *Lia Fáil*, political party who existed between 1957 to 1960. As cited by Healy (2022), “*Lia Fáil* was a political party, that espoused a far-right ideology of the most extremist hue”. It formed from a basis of populist agrarian policy but had a significant blend of nationalist Gaelic culture, anti-government, antisemitic, anti-immigrant and condoned the use of violence. The party also had a significant devout religious influence and harboured misogynistic tendencies in circulated narratives (Kinsella, 2020). The party attempted to field a candidate in the 1960 local elections but without success. (Kinsella, 2020).

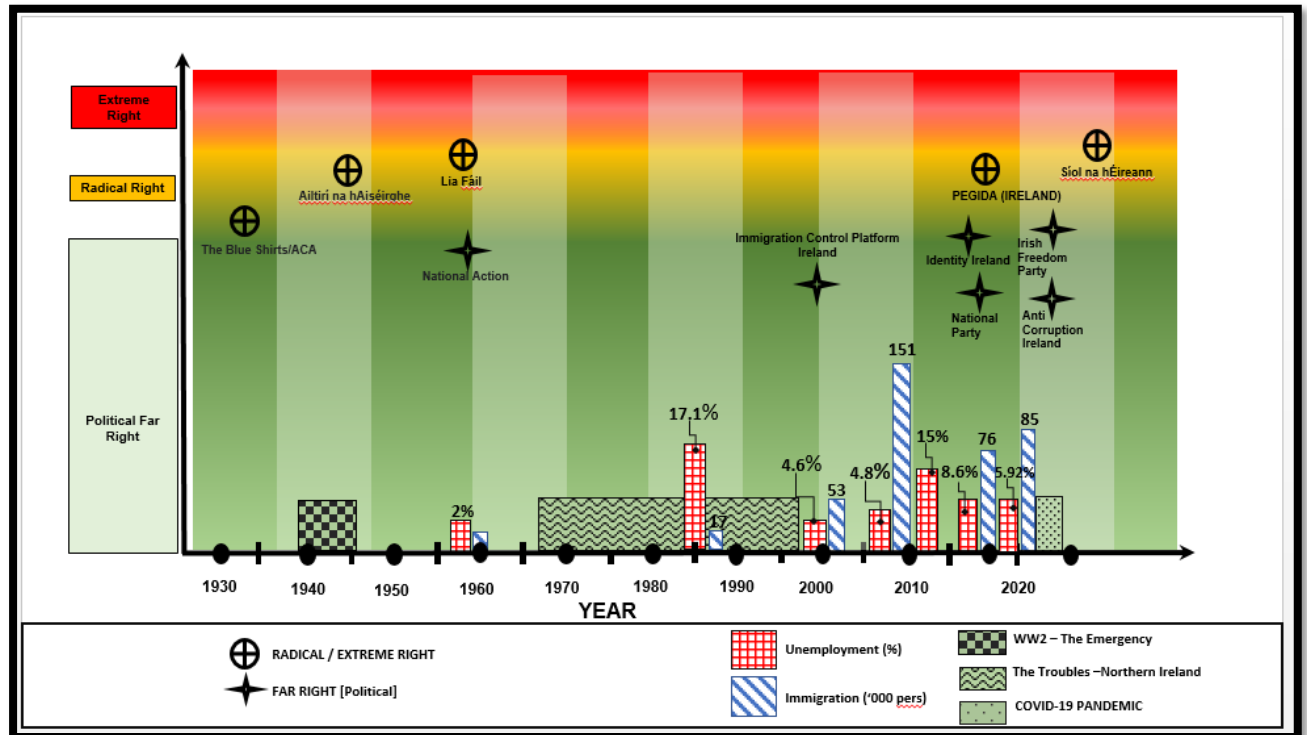
This deeply religious influence was a theme also shared with another grouping, *Ailtirí na hAiséirghe* – Architects of the Resurrection: Irish Monetary Reform Association who formed in 1942. As described by Douglas (2012) the party was: “the most important fascist party to arise in Ireland” (p.1). Again, the party shared similar ideologies to that of *Lia Fáil* but had more success politically. In 1945 the party won nine seats in local elections and is estimated to have held a membership of over two thousand at its peak (Fanning, 2021). Although perhaps not comparable with mainland Europe, it would be again problematic to claim Ireland has been free from any presence of extremist right wing ideologies and the emergence of such was an outlier of sorts. The emergence of these parties was both influenced from transnational trends whilst again finding a “local” narrative that could be used to influence and entice.

The growth of the transnational extremist brands of right-wing ideologies, within a highly digitised and liberal Irish society, is somewhat reflective of the pre-war and inter-world war period (see Fig 5). The factors of this nascent right awakening however, are somewhat multifaceted. O'Malley (2008) suggests that there is somewhat of a contradicting dichotomy in the absence of any such radical or extremist right-wing party in Ireland in that “Ireland’s political and social structure makes it conducive to the presence of a reasonably successful RR (radical right) party. Yet Ireland has none according to conventional classifications” (p.17).

It is suggested, however, that the assessed VRWE threat in the State is symptomatic of a wider evolving transnational threat of right wing extremism. As evidenced in examining some of the previous fragmented iterations of the right-wing ideology in Ireland, in all cases each movement had associations to wider global or European waves of right-wing ideological influence.

Carter (2018) contends that in relation to the prevalence of VRWE, there is a variance of opinion in the definition of this brand of extremism as its classification can be dependent broadly on the experiences of the ideology on a country by country basis or a countries political

history. Having examined some of the historical presence or manifestation of far-right belief systems in Ireland to further determine its prevalence, the transnational character of VRWE must therefore be evaluated in order to understand the vectors contributing to the wider manifestation of violent extremism.



**Figure 5: Ireland and the Right Wing : A historical Reference – Contrasting Social factors and Events.** Source: Author

### The Transnational Expansion of VRWE

The global transnational connectivity of VRWE is identified as a key security challenge with regard to VRWE. Although violent right wing extremist groups exhibit staunch nationalist or nativist views, this insular mind-set might in theory make them opposed to any transnational behaviours or outreach. Evidence presented however shows the opposite is occurring. These movements have demonstrated a shared and trans-national understanding amongst a myriad of issues and grievances as cited by a recent New Zealand Governmental briefing paper which stated that VRWE groupings were “Although increasingly transnational in nature, movements differ depending on national context (e.g., target groups, particular grievances)” (New Zealand Government, 2021). In the UK the threat posed by transnational VRWE groupings has resulted in the UK Home Office (2016) proscribing five different violent right wing extremist groupings commencing in 2016, all of which were evaluated to have foreign origins and wider trans-Atlantic and trans-European international connectivity.

The heightened transnational development of VRWE was again emphasised in the United Nations, Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, CTED (2020) Trends Alert document which stated:

There has been a recent increase in its frequency and lethality, with some individuals, groups and movements pursuing transnational aims in a national context, drawing on international networks, ideas and

personalities and seeking to mobilize others, often using the Internet. This has led to multiple large-scale terrorist attacks targeting minorities, including in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 2019), El Paso, United States (August 2019), and Halle (October 2019) and Hanau (February 2020) in Germany. (p.2)

Although there is growing research and evidence to demonstrate that various VRWE groups and networks are interconnected, these groupings and networks are generally based on a leaderless resistance model with predominately no expressively identifiable organisational model<sup>4</sup>, structure or leadership. This leaderless resistance model is derived from a US military intelligence concept from the 1960s re-popularised by white nationalist Louis Beam in the 1980s (CRIS, 2021). In contrast, Some newly emergent online based right wing extremist organisations have however displayed varying levels of organisation and coordination such as Atomwaffen Division, Feuerkrieg Division (ICCT, 2019). This “strategy of leaderless resistance” (Ravndal, 2021, p.2) can present a difficulty in the confirmation and identification of such an ideology particularly in terms of its actual presence, direction or objective which some would contend requires an actual physical manifestation.

However, as will be discussed further in the paper, much of this presence and associated extremist interconnectivity and networking is established and propagated online within the ungoverned medium of the internet. As evidence suggests that VRWE is inherently transnational can the same influencing factors inciting its ideological growth globally impact what many assess as the relatively right wing resilient state of Ireland? The next section will evaluate variables which may however accelerate the VRWE following in Ireland.

### **Contributing Factors of Perceived VRWE Growth**

To understand the development of VRWE, the contributing factors or social ingredients enabling the growth of VRWE in Ireland also must be examined in order to define the nature of the threat. Again a formal analysis of these aggravating factors driving the VRWE ideology within Ireland is quite limited. In the DF Review of 2020, Margna (2020) examines some of the “factors fuelling the contemporary surge of right wing extremism in the Western world and their occurrence in Ireland” (p.84). These effects include “economic and cultural grievances, the current socio-political discourse and the internet’s role as a force-multiplier”. (Margna, 2020, p.90). It is a confluence of these contributing factors which lead Margna to assert that “Ireland is therefore assessed as providing a fertile ground to the current worldwide surge in right-wing extremism” (Margna, 2020, p.90).

Contrastingly, however, Bowman Grieve, (2021) argues that although conducive conditions may exist within the State “such as economic change, fluctuating employment levels, a housing crisis, and continued emigration and immigration), it (far right ideologies) has remained the less popular option” (p.22).

The synergy of these national internal and external factors are also common to that experienced in other countries experiencing growth in VRWE. It is therefore not unforeseen that these common to all baseline grievances and other current events<sup>5</sup> would therefore add

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<sup>10</sup> Other current events include and are not limited to : COVID-19, 5G, QAnon, Incel (Involuntary Celibate), Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Pantucci and Ong, 2021).

to the transnational growth of VRWE in a “spectrum of ideologies that makes up the modern extreme right wing” (Pantucci and Ong, 2021, p.118). Drawing on these perceptions this will be developed throughout the research in order to develop insights in defining the threat of VRWE in Ireland.

### **The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic and VRWE**

The impact of the Covid-19 is assessed to have had an energising effect on both the visibility and dissemination of VRWE narratives. National level crisis such as the pandemic have a mobilising effect on right wing extremist groupings such as witnessed with migration and the rise of PEGIDA in Germany and Europe. Davies *et al.* (2021) draws on the historical nature of pandemics and in role of the propagating extremist agendas:

Historically, pandemics had inevitably produced demonization and scapegoating, and the COVID-19 pandemic has been no exception....individuals and groups have attempted to weaponise and exploit the pandemic, to use it as a means of spreading their extremist ideologies and to radicalize others to their causes. (p.1)

The COVID-19 pandemic itself has provided a medium and catalyst for conspiracy theories to flourish (EU RAN, 2021). One of the central tenets for the right-wing ideology and right wing extremists is a distrust of government, and as Davies *et al.* (2021) again further contends “in a climate of fear and distrust, the far-right is in the best position to harness anti-government resentment” (p.6).

Specific to the Irish context, a report published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (2021) highlighted that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Irish based right wing groups had: “spread their messaging not only bringing people to the streets under an anti-lockdown banner, but also successfully gathering support for smear campaigns and disinformation campaigns aimed at people within minority communities” (p.3).

In promoting the December publication, ISD (2021) highlighted the nexus of the anti-lockdown movement generated through COVID-19 and that of right wing extremists: “the overlaps between these narratives and right-wing extremism have not disappeared, and the far-right have used the pandemic to spread their own hateful ideologies”. Although there has been overlap with anti-lockdown protests and entities or indeed individuals who adhere to VRWE ideologies, the internet is playing an under-lying pivotal role. In the midst of COVID-19 lockdown measures and reduced physical interactions, the online domain adopts a very powerful and influential space.

These online social interactions can be operationalised for hateful or violent extremist purposes. Grossman (2021) cautions that “Europol has warned that COVID-19 will continue to escalate violent extremist threats in various countries, increasing tolerance for violence in response to pandemic-induced stressors” (p.5). However again in the Irish context, participating in a STOPFARRIGHT (2021) seminar by Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute, Worth<sup>6</sup> counters the assertion that right wing in Ireland has gained any notable foothold and that Ireland asserts that it “Generally has a collection of mavericks and individuals, and that they haven’t gained any background momentum”.

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<sup>6</sup> Owen Worth, author of *Morbid Symptoms: The Global Rise of The Far Right* (Worth, 2019).

Having reviewed some of the influences including the ongoing factor of COVID-19, of considerable importance is the role of the internet and social media, the next section explores the role on the online presence in VRWE.

### **The Online Presence**

One constant key theme that has emerged in this preliminary research and which is widely acknowledged as a significant factor in the propagation of VRWE ideology is the role of the internet and the wider social media. The online domain serves as a defining centre of gravity in the proliferation of VRWE growth within the past decade in particular (ICCT, 2019). Ongoing research has acknowledged (ICCT, 2019; Margna, 2020; Liang & Cross, 2020, EU RAN, 2020) VRWE's use of the internet utilising its broad range of mediums including mainstream internet forums, chat groups, social media apps, messaging apps, memes, and gaming platforms (gamification)<sup>7</sup> (EU; 2020)).

The internet has been recognised as the most effective tool for the delivery of VRWE material and utilised in the recruitment, inspiration and the support (to include financing) of VRWE. Recent research (ISD, 2021) on the specific utilisation of online activity of the Irish based right wing on the Telegram messaging application has identified exponential growth in its use for dissemination of VRWE content. The research by the ISD noted that "Compared to 2019, when a handful of Irish far-right channels posted just over 800 messages, 60,377 messages were posted by 34 channels in 2020" (p.7). This again evidences both the power of the internet as a medium for VRWE and also the noted rise in the promulgation of extremist activity and content specifically in Ireland.

The EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020 published in June of that year also referred to the international links of VRWE citing the inter-connectedness of Irish adherents of VRWE ideology to that of the wider extremist milieus: "Ireland reported a strong international network involving right-wing extremists from Ireland, other European countries and the USA. ...These relations enable right-wing extremists to learn new modi operandi and adapt to new national legislation" (p.68).

Based on a review of this recent research and analysis by EUROPOL and the ISD, the role of the internet and online activity is therefore evaluated as a key contributing factor which will necessitate further investigation in the research element of this paper.

### **Conclusion**

The above review examined the key literature relevant to the topic of extremism and the factors which promote and contribute to the growth of VRWE within the State. The literature review yielded a number of key themes relevant to the reserach:

- The predominant theme that has emerged is that although there is an expanse of international literature with regard to the origins and development of right-wing extremism, definition of same widely varies, with no national level definition on same in Ireland.

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<sup>7</sup> Gamification is a powerful motivational tool, and extremism is no exception. It is the use of design elements of existing games in a nongaming context, aimed at behavioural change (EU RAN, 2020, p.6).

- Although not far right ideologies are historically synonymous or successful to date in Ireland, modern transnational influencing factors such as the impact of COVID-19 and related pandemic related conspiracies, are amplifying core VRWE narratives within the State in line with other countries.
- Of particular importance in the Irish context where a growth of this violent right wing ideology has been acknowledged is that of the online domain, and most- notably through the COVID-19 pandemic period<sup>8</sup>.
- Utilising the Spectrum of Harmful Behaviours as developed by The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry (Fig 2.2), integrating national media reporting of far right incidents (Irish Times, 2020, RTE, 2021) and analysis by EUPOL (2020) and ISD (2021) points to the reported direct presence of VRWE related activity in Ireland.
- The presence of an opinion exists that although acknowledging the existence of VRWE ideologies it is not seen as a critical State level issue as it is believed its influence exists only at a perceived low level.

The literature review also identified two short comings in two main areas. Firstly, an examination of the definition of extremism itself is valuable within the literature review in order to enable a greater understanding of VRWE but Irish-centric research on this is scant. Furthermore, an examination of how VRWE influences military personnel (Koehler, 2019) as evidenced in the US, UK and European militaries is again a trend noted in VRWE literature. Contributory factors energising this issue in military environments which has impacted other European militaries may also have been relevant research for the Defence Forces when examining the wider threat of VRWE however could not be incorporated owing to the scope of this paper.

## **PART TWO: Research Findings And Analysis**

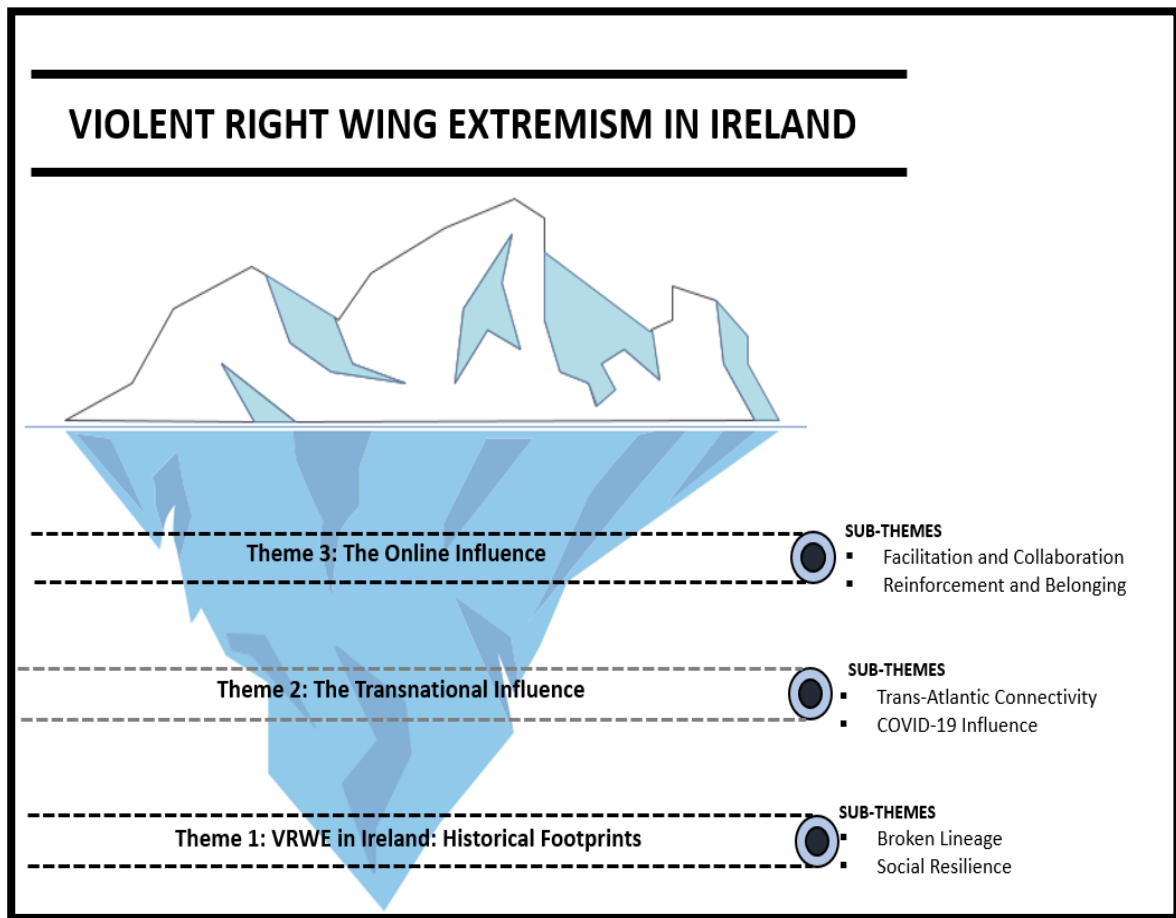
The intent of this paper is to explore the question “Ireland and Transnational Right-Wing Extremism: Steadfast Resilience or Blind Vulnerability?”. The purpose of this element is to set forth the research findings and analysis, to confirm existing knowledge and examine Ireland’s vulnerability to VRWE. In order to further refine the analysis and evaluate if the research departs from current existing knowledge, the findings will be presented using a thematic analysis. This analysis is famed around deductive themes which were uncovered during the literature review and sub-themes arising from semi-structured interviews which allows a more thorough assessment of the research questions initially posed. The interviewees selected for the research included Senior Lecturers in Irish Universities with expertise in the areas of psychology, criminality, radicalisation, terrorism and extremism. An experienced security practitioner working within in the field of countering right wing extremism was also interviewed for a strategic perspective and an analyst writing for an international think-tank with expertise in the area of Irish based right wing extremism and disinformation who has followed closely the growth of recent right wing movements within the State.

Gill & Johnson (2002) contend that that the deductive approach represents the part of the cycle where formation of abstract concepts leads to ‘concrete experience’ through empirical testing or observations. The incorporation of both deductive and inductive themes allows the application of qualitative data to present and demonstrate findings in consideration of the core question and the outlined research questions identified in the first section. The

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<sup>8</sup> First confirmed case of COVID-19 in Ireland by Health Service Executive (HSE) on 29 Feb 20.

thematic analysis framework in this section will analyse three key thematic areas as described in Fig 6.



**Fig 6: Thematic Analysis**

**Source: Author – Image Adapted from the “Iceberg Theory of terrorism” UK Government, Dept of Education publication.**

### **Theme One: VRWE Lineage in Ireland: Historical Footprints**

Ireland’s assessed ‘blind vulnerability’ to the influence of right wing or extremist right wing influences has been a relevant theme throughout the interviews and furthermore in some of the documentary analysis as observed in the literature review. However, in contrast to what may be observed and experienced in other European countries and the United States it would appear there is a prevailing sense that Ireland has not reached a point of concern. It appears that such ideologies cannot gain traction in Ireland socially or politically. It has been suggested that the Right wing or extremist right wing presence in Ireland could be best described as “...a collection of mavericks... and individuals...that haven’t gained any background momentum” (Worth, 2021 ).

There have been however machinations of radical and fringe extremist groupings in the past as evidenced in the literature review, Figure 5, Ireland and the Right Wing : A historical Reference – Contrasting Social factors and Events (p.19). Ireland therefore may not be as immune, or as resilient to VRWE as it may appear. As visually depicted in Fig 6 thematic analysis, a closer focus beneath the waterline is necessary, where Margna (2020) argues that Ireland is



“assessed as providing a fertile ground to the current worldwide surge in right-wing extremism” (p.90).

### **A Broken Lineage**

The longevity or presence of any right wing radical or extremist groups has been small in Ireland, although a number of unstructured movements did appear through the period from 1930 to 1960. None of these movements or groupings has any significant impact on the Irish social or political scene at a national level, with relatively minor success at a local level. These groups could be classified as primarily radical right wing in their outlook as they did attempt to engage with the political and democratic process, however they harboured and espoused rhetoric aligned with extremist narratives specifically in the condoning of violence.

Of note is the observed absence of any form of right wing extremist movement or group during the period of ‘The Troubles’ from 1966 to 1998 manifesting itself within Ireland with any form of political or indeed social agitation. Irelands exposure to any political grouping or movement that would espouse any such narrative aligned with that of conventional far right themes such as: ‘foreigners threaten this community’ would not manifest until post the year 2000 which also corresponded with the rise of Irelands ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy and consequential growth in Irelands immigration.

The data which has been collected throughout the elite semi-structured interviews as to the impact of Ireland’s history with right wing ideologies explores potential factors where Ireland has largely (but not entirely) as cited by O’Leary (2020) “skipped the trend seen in much of Europe of a rise in anti-immigration, radical right wing politics”.

Interviewee No.1 discussed the lineage of the right wing ideology in Ireland as a variable which potentially is non-linear and can be influenced by external events rather than any historical relationships:

....are we talking about the same thing I wonder, can we trace the lineage of the far right in Ireland in a clean way from the [1940] 40’s to now....is there a break somewhere ....the manifestation currently is certainly an online phenomenon, led by influencers led by social media, led by a contagion from predominantly the US. Is that something new?

This again can be correlated with the documentary analysis outlined in the literature review, Fig 5 where a distinguishable ‘break’ is observed during the period of the Troubles where no recognisable extremist right wing or indeed far right movement, or political entity are distinguishable in this period. This is in contrast with the period of the Emergency (1939-45) in Ireland where an observed manifestation of a number of radical-extremist right wing ideologically aligned parties occurs as a result of a transnational fascist influence and contagion from Europe.

Although there has been no enduring or eminently successful political, radical or extremist right wing movement or group in Ireland, these ideologies have resonated within certain elements of Irish society and therefore raises questions on modern Ireland’s social resilience to such ideologies in a more digitised and interconnected society.

### **Social Resilience**

Although the themes and narratives synonymous with extreme right ideologies such as nationalism, racism, xenophobia, call for a strong state and an anti-democratic attitude (RAN factbook, 2019). may be enduring, the medium that socially instigates the presence of this ideology continuously evolves.

Interviewee No. 2 supported the viewpoint that Ireland displays some of the social conditions which may be conducive to VRWE growth :

we have various times, probably even in the last whatever 30-40 years ..., between recession, economic crisis, housing crisis, health crisis, all the risk factors maybe that, from a sociological perspective might identify as being conducive to us this time when a right wing party might find their footing.

This concurs with the observations of Margna (2020) as indicated in the literature review who posits that “economic and cultural grievances, the current socio-political discourse and the internet’s role as a force-multiplier” are the factors principally fuelling the ‘surge’ of right wing extremism worldwide but also as a catalyst here in Ireland. Interviewee 2 however also asserts that the presence of such ambient social conditions, that are ordinarily conducive to promoting right wing ideological influence, may not in itself directly translate to increased VRWE growth. Referencing the Irish general elections in 2020:

People did not vote for the Irish National Party or whoever the options were, they got less than 1% in the vote...racism exists in Ireland and race issues, there's anti-immigration and all of those kind of things are at play, but there seems to just be little palette for it [far right] right now, in the general population... This is no taste for it, for that kind of political representation.

This view correlates with the minimal current and historical political success of far right wing ideological parties or movements in Ireland who ‘appear’ to subscribe or recognise democratic means as described in the literature review. Political far right ideologies have not gained traction in mainstream Irish politics or indeed garner any semblance of significant popular support.

In the main, any movement with populist, radical or extremist right wing political or ideological objectives have not made any salient influence within the Irish population. Interviewee 4 also argues that in general, Ireland’s ethnonationalist rhetoric has been “primarily absorbed by Irish nationalist groups politically however aligned with a more socialist republican agenda ...which also accounted for extremist elements who condoned the use of violence” which in turn possibly negated the presence of domestic right wing groupings.

Ireland in some respects therefore, by default, has been possibly somewhat steadfast in its resilience to extreme right. As identified by Margna (2020) “most of the republic’s post-war era, homegrown right-wing extremism has been negligible”(p.84).

However, Interviewee 3, who has had extensive experience in the research of online based right wing extremism, cautioned against any complacency with an observation on Irelands historical resilience and opines that in the Irish context:

That there is a growing right wing, that is not political party oriented. They are anti system... And, for me, I think a lot of these organisations, a lot of the ideas are directly taken from the internet....there's a separate issue now, which is a post organisational movement politics... and it has a massive online-offline connection.... And it's not about party politics. There's no question that there

are absolutely ideas circulating now in an Irish context that are they're totally outside of Irish party politics.

This alters the assumption that far right ideologies, from an Irish perspective, are purely a political 'orientated' or motivated phenomenon and that there is an observed transition from an Irish perspective which aligns with global observations regarding right-wing extremism. Ireland is seeing a shift in this domain away from a party political motivation to a one centred perhaps in social agitation. Ireland may be an outlier of sorts, in contrast to some other European countries and displays a degree of latent social resilience in the main to right wing or extreme right influence, but not immunity.

However historical associations are not completely non-existent, Interviewee 5 who is familiar with research into the Irish online far and extremist right community, asserts that there are correlations and even direct references between former Irish right wing extremist groups and what appears in the rhetoric of contemporary Irish groups and movements, in particular to Ailtirí na hAiséirghe as mentioned in the literature review. Interviewee 5 states that in cases, "Ailtirí na hAiséirghe are seen by elements of the [Irish] far right today as a movement to aspire to", the group as referenced in chapter that had an extremist mindset "of the most extremist hue".

### **Summary**

A perceived growing normalisation of hate speech in society plus a framing of narratives away from a routine party politic motivated agenda may alter Ireland's perceived resilience to that of a society susceptible to orientate towards extremes. As argued by Margna (2020), "The gradual normalisation and mainstreaming of antagonistic worldviews, immigration anxiety and xenophobic views has created a socio-political climate – in Ireland as in other Western countries – that is increasingly accepting of extremism"(p.88). The role of historical association does not emerge as a significant factor in the emergence of right wing or VRWE ideologies in the State, however it is argued that some retrospective comparisons of aspirational ideals are made between some contemporary Irish groupings to that of former historical groups. One of the most important influences observed through the semi elite interviews has been that of the role of the transnational influence which is covered in the next thematic area.

### **Theme Two: The Transnational Influence**

The influence of the transnational influence has emerged as a constant theme throughout the research interviews with regard to Ireland and the influence and emergence of an ideology of right wing extremism.

#### **Trans-Atlantic Connectivity**

As already illustrated in theme one, the international influence appeared as a recurrent trend during the semi-structured elite interviews, in particular the role of trans-Atlantic connectivity regarding right wing influences in Ireland. Interviewee 1 posits that the current presence of right wing/extreme right wing ideology within Ireland : "is certainly an online phenomenon, led by influencers led by social media, led by a contagion from predominantly the US".

This point of view regarding a specific US orientated influence is echoed by Interviewee 3: "I do think it's important and I would say broadly that it's very, very clear that concepts and ideas are the traveling, transatlantic". Interviewee 2, who also supported the hypothesis of a transnational influence in Ireland increasing right wing rhetoric (mainly US based), and in particular listed its prominence during the COVID-19 period in 2020-2021 states:

We do have to be aware that this could be a potential issue, and I think COVID lead again, this space where, there's this crossover, you could see some of the rhetoric was crossing the pond.... at protests [in Ireland] they were very American based ideas and slogans.

Interviewee 1 also emphasised that the transnational influence “gives opportunity, capacity and experience.... it raises the stakes for sure. To what degree the ideological component is relevant there is hard to determine”. The majority of participants agreed that the Trans-Atlantic influence has a significant impact here in Ireland on individuals and groups who would endorse far-right or extreme right ideologies.

The ‘accessibility’ or shared ideologies is increased between Ireland and across the Atlantic to the US due to a common language and cultural similarities, the online domain again facilitating this connectivity far more than previously experienced in the past. But this does not exclusively restrict associations, access or networking to other regions such as the UK, (which also shares a common language and culture), but also in EUROPE where like-minded groupings have had reported associations (EUROPOL, 2020).

### **COVID-19 Influence**

As described by Interviewee 2, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic did serve to energise some of the extreme right wing narratives as previously highlighted in the literature review. The publication of the ISD(2021) Anti-Lockdown research study: *Anti Lockdown Activity: Ireland Profile* reinforces this assertion and highlighted that although :

Ireland had a number of small, but often loud, fringe groups that pushed a range of ideologies and beliefs, from ethnonationalist groups, to QAnon and 5G conspiracy theorists, and New Age health movements” prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and that those: “narratives rarely made it outside of their own online echo chamber “(p.3).

COVID-19 however afforded a platform for right wing extremists in Ireland to consolidate and grow their online environment to energise the offline environment, this is an important aspect. From the online environment a narrative to resist COVID-19 restrictions expanded to ‘calls to action’ which resulted in mass protests and directed protest campaigns aimed at politicians and members of the medical profession.

From an ‘opportunity and capacity’ perspective and referring to the ISD (2021) study, COVID-19 enabled a significant growth and network development opportunity for Irish based individuals in the far-right spectrum with followership on online forums “increasing by 90% between July 2020 and February 2021” and “individuals who had little influence before the pandemic were able to reach international fame through Facebook and other platforms” (p.3).

Interviewee 3 supports the hypothesis that the social engagement or outreach opportunity afforded by COVID-19 was consequently exploited by the right wing milieus is in itself, a default right wing tactic utilised internationally:

I think that right wing extremists the world over, one of their tactics is definitely always to piggyback on real world events, events that are happening in some

local or indeed national jurisdiction... I think in respect of COVID - they piggybacked on it.

In a similar vein, Interviewee 2 discussed the ability of the right wing to transition to a current local or global impactful event and utilise it as a medium to impose their ideologies and rhetoric: “they're quick so quick to jump on to from bandwagons..... the trigger is there are other things that become the focus like the pandemic and the restrictions”.

Interviewee 3 offered an additional perspective regarding tactically ‘band-wagoning’ and ‘piggybacking’ to gain followership observing that , “in terms of COVID, about any kind of restrictions on freedom... they [right wing extremists] hold themselves off as people who are principled defenders of freedom, whether it's freedom to act or free to free speech”. This also correlates with recent research on the impact of COVID-19 and right wing extremism and its manipulation to further its hateful ideologies. As cited by Davies *et al.*(2021):

at the heart of the discourse surrounding COVID-19 are a number of issues that are well treaded territory for the right. For example, distrust of government has been a central tenet of right-wing extremists. A novel virus is fertile ground for speculation regarding sinister governmental motives, including government overreach. (p.5)

These findings indicate that there is an association between both the Trans-Atlantic influence and the impact of COVID-19 and how it energised the visibility and reach of extremist right wing ideologies and widened a potential recruitment base and audience within Ireland. Interviewee 4 describes that:

If we're looking at Ireland, I would say that COVID was probably the perfect platform for the ‘right wing scene’.... There was a strong government mandate in respect of a reaction to COVID and the measures that were introduced, things like mask wearing lockdowns, restriction of movement, vaccines, and this allowed the right wing extremist factions at all scales... on all the right spectrum to come over and protest under this title.

Again Interviewee 4, whose perspective is from a practitioner in the field of extremism, echoes the unanimous view by all participants that COVID-19 was harnessed by Irish far-right and extremist elements and has brought their espoused ideologies “into a more mainstream space and the emergence of new influencers has given these theories some credibility among people who had never been exposed to them previously.” (ISD, 2021,p.13). Interviewee 5 also asserts that COVID-19 has evolved and galvanised the Irish right wing milieus internationally: “since the pandemic we've had this pit of ‘hybridised’ force... communities and elements that weren't necessarily linked before the pandemic or not at all, like anti vaccine activists using sovereign citizen tactics...all there to help each other and you have this new kind of global hybrid force”.

## **Summary**

Overall, the transnational influence has been identified as an important factor in the growth and influence of VRWE in Ireland as evidenced in EUROPOL 2020 annual report, and even prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The EUROPOL (2020) report stated that: “Ireland

reported a strong international network involving right-wing extremists from Ireland, other European countries and the USA" (p.68). In conjunction with the galvanising factor which the transnational influence provides, COVID-19 is observed as having provided an energising stimulus to the Irish based right extremist agenda with tactics (online and offline) used worldwide being adopted and used here in Ireland. Mostly however, this has taken the form of an online interaction, and this leads to the next emergent theme as that of the online influence.

### **Theme Three: The Online Influence and Impact**

One of the most prominent themes which emerged throughout the course of the research component, and that has been unanimously emphasised by all interviewees, has been the role of the internet and the online environment. In particular the role of social media and how it has been a significant factor in enabling the influence and potential growth of right wing and extremist right wing development here in Ireland.

The role of the online environment was prevalent in the responses provided to the majority of the questions posed in the interview, even when not directly presented in some of the provided questions. The internet and in particular the now daily integration of social media into people's lives, clearly acts as a key medium where right wing narratives and ideology are promulgated, as clearly articulated by Interviewee 4: "I think because we are in the age of the internet, we'd be naive to think that it's not that is not having an influence". A number of significant sub-themes also emerged from within the theme of the online influence and its impact.

#### **Facilitation and Collaboration**

One of the most prominent sub-themes that emerged during the course of the semi-elite interviews is how the internet has created a space where extremist ideologies are now easily shared and conversely discovered. Margna (2020) cites that with the emergence of the internet a "vast transnational online network has been established, consisting of discussion forums, chat groups, imageboards, gaming and social media platforms aiming to disseminating ideas, radicalising, mobilising and connecting individuals, while providing social, material and tactical support"(p.88). This in turn has served to both amplify and act as a force multiplier for right wing extremists who exploit its capabilities.

Discussing the collaborative function of the internet and how it enables , Interviewee 4 posits that:

One of the things that the internet allows people to do is to find other likeminded people...whereas in Ireland once upon a time it would have been quite difficult to find people, others of an extreme right orientation.....you would have been faced with quite significant difficulty. That's no longer the case...it sounds really basic, but it's actually really important...within your locality, further afield, but still within the jurisdiction... so in Ireland you can also make international connections.

This strongly links back to the theme two of the transnational influences and its bearing in its influence of Irish based right wing extremism. Interviewee 1 concurs with Interviewee 3 regarding the internet's role in enabling easier facilitation and that it allows access to potential pathways that otherwise may not available offline:

Is it just making it quicker, easier? Or is it doing something in a kind of controlling manner, it is of course in some shape or form...my opinion would be that social media is a facilitator. I wouldn't say it's an instigator. But it makes things quicker and easier and accessible.

Interviewee 1 however contends that while the internet and social media may facilitate, it is not the leading variable to instigate extremism. Interviewee 1 validates this statement by stating that "I think it's more nuanced, than we give it credit for because how people consume and it's so different".

Interviewee 1 also developed this point in that social media is consumed in different ways from a generational perspective and in some cases "there may be an element of contagion if you engage with it" and whether the internet, by its design "is it doing something in a controlling manner?" The viewpoint of the controlling and influence capability of social media and its use of algorithmically tailored user content has been widely argued in particular regarding the growth of right wing extremism.

Schori Lang (2022) cites the concept of "technological seduction and bottom-up seduction" whereby a seemingly innocuous search online e.g., "alternative energy" can be correlated by an algorithmic inference of an online search engine to 'alt-right' and can lead to and "subsequently enter an exploration of white extremism content". This in turn can be a gateway or 'rabbit hole' effect to potential echo chambers whereby "belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (Schori Lang, 2022).

Consequently, Schori Lang asserts, the potential for individual or group polarisation increases, in that "through repeated interactions, members of a group are more likely to adopt more extreme views than they had prior to engaging and joining the group". Margna (2020) also supports the assertion of algorithmic influence, in that "Carefully tailored messages resonating with as many people as possible maximise both impact and reach of online indoctrination" (p.88).

This point links with the previously outlined theme of COVID-19, and how, because of considerable online discourse, some extreme right rhetoric and narratives have been consumed by those that ordinarily may not 'seek out' this type of content online. In circumstances it may energise an individual from an online, 'bar-stool' participant to one that is engaged in violent rhetoric or even physically "bringing people to the streets" (ISD,2021, p.3) or in extremis more violent and targeted behaviours. This in turn illuminates the reinforcement capacity which will be analysed within the next sub-theme.

### **Reinforcement and Belonging**

Arising from the internet and social media's ability to generate both increased facilitation and collaboration of like-minded individuals in radical or extremist networks a sub-theme of reinforcement emerges. Interviewee 3 posits that, arising as a result of increased facilitation and collaboration:

that this causes many people to believe that there is, (and increasingly factually it is the case) that there are very large amounts of people who share their perspective. So, you've gone then from being somebody who has a really side-

lined view amongst your peers, to be able to connect with tens, hundreds, thousands of people who share those views, and that's a very compelling thing.

Reinforcement through online networking is also highlighted by Interviewee 3, who with over twenty years' experience evaluating the impact of the internet on extremism, through social media, virtual communities and online discussion forums contends that:

These ideas of like-minded people are people who are on the fence or don't really know much about something can go talk to people, be introduced to concepts, ideas, be kind of brought into the fold, ...and they are really important spaces, they create that sense of a community of people who share again, share these ideas ....

You have people who just seem to spend a lot of time in them [online communities] .....and willing to promote their views and talk to other people and try and encourage them to think the same way that they do....I think they have a really important function.

This sense of positive reinforcement, which the online space and social media environment creates can therefore generate that sense of belonging which is a critical catalyst.

This view is supported by Interviewee 4 who states the internet enables:

those who participate or who want to participate in extremist activity, and probably most forms[of extremism], but in the right wing as well. It's not much different to deal with because they're looking for a sense of belonging. And I think that the social element actually shapes the ideology. It's not the other way around. It's the looking for something and then finding, whatever it is, and that actually goes on to share the ideology.

A number of reports (ISD, 2021, EUROPOL, 2020, Margna, 2020) have indicated the significant growth of the Irish extremist right wing discourse and online extreme right wing milieu. Therefore, the online spaces are conducive to an Irish domiciled audience who are engaging, sharing and generating right wing extremist content. Additionally, this social media is used to propagate online violent racial attacks or doxxing<sup>9</sup>.

The internet as a hub for reinforcement is further echoed by an observation made by ISD(2021) report who again cite specific instances of increased violent extremist rhetoric which resulted in increased online extreme right wing orientated smear and disinformation at minority communities (in Ireland) and also physical violence which manifested within anti-lockdown marches:

As 2021 progressed and Irish society began to open up after one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in Europe, some of the individuals involved with these groups doubled down and became more extreme in their tactics

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<sup>9</sup> Doxxing' is the internet-based practice of finding and posting online private or identifying information about an individual or organisation oftentimes accompanied by implicit or explicit requests to the use the information for online and/or 'real world' harassment purposes.(Conway *et al.*, 2019).



and rhetoric, resulting in increased Gardaí protection for politicians and other public officials (p.3).

This example demonstrates convergence across the COVID-19 and the online influence themes once again and crosscutting the sub thematic areas of facilitation and reinforcement. Further convergence is evidenced in the consistent agreement of all interviewees who fundamentally agree that VRWE is present within the State and the online environment will continue to influence and a significant factor in the trajectory of VRWE in Ireland.

### **Summary**

As outlined at the commencement of this thematic section, the online influence and its impact emerged as a crucial research finding but also one that cross-cut all of the other thematic areas outlined in this part. The results in this section provide important insights into the role that the online environment is facilitating right wing extremists in Ireland and acts as a significant enabler for amplification of their violent rhetoric and narratives whilst also serving as a means of recruitment. The emergence of prominent Irish based online right wing extremist influencers, and as cited by interviewees, have been directly enabled by the influence capacity created through the online space harnessing this capability.

Although the online space is seen as one the most important sources of influence for VRWE, a number of participants highlighted that the 'offline factors' do still have a significant role to play. As cited by Interviewee 2: "it's usually not the internet alone" and echoed by Interviewee 3 in that we must "we need to talk to people about how they came to what beliefs they have, how they came to those beliefs, ... what kind of activity they're engaged in... not asking the internet, asking the actual humans".

### **Conclusion**

This Part has presented the findings from the data collection process under the framework of thematic analysis. The employment of thematic analysis has assisted in the developing our current understanding of VRWE in Ireland and expanding our understanding in order to generate latent theme to examine the underlying assumptions, and conceptualisations. The key research findings are as follows:

- The role of historical association does not emerge as a significant factor in the emergence of right wing or VRWE ideologies in the State. This has not however been a dissuading factor in the presence of individuals and groups within Ireland, whose ideologies resonate with that of international VRWE and other right wing extremist conspiracy movements and narratives. Ireland's vulnerability to the susceptibility of right wing extremism is equal to that of any other State, regardless of any significant historical association with these ideologies.
- The transnational influence has been identified as an important factor in the growth and influence of VRWE in Ireland. VRWE is increasingly transnational in nature, there is a perceived considerable amount of influence from transatlantic based sources and ideological influences in particular from the US but also from the UK, and Australia facilitated by a common language but there are European influences through shared ideologies and beliefs.

- The COVID-19 pandemic is observed as having provided a significant energising stimulus to the Irish based right extremist agenda. Predominantly this has taken the form of increased online interaction in circulating violent anti-authority rhetoric in reaction to public health measures and conspiracy and extremist narratives. Again, this was re-enforced through transnational influences with the utilisation of similar anti-authoritarian narratives used as catalysts for mobilisation and action.
- It is evaluated throughout the research process that the internet, social media and its consequential influence capacity has provided the primary catalyst for significant growth and network development of Irish VRWE. The online environment of the internet and social media have provided the offline Irish based extremist milieus with a significant boost. The VRWE presence in Ireland does include a physical and non-digital presence and as emphasised by Interviewee 4: “There is a discernible presence (within the State)”.

### **PART THREE: Conclusions And Recommendations**

The aim of this study was to evaluate if VRWE is prevalent within Ireland and thus if it presents a threat. Based on the findings arising from the literature review evaluations were then linked to the analysis set forth in the research. It appears that although the State may not have a significant history or presence of right wing extremism, it does pose a threat and it has gained considerable presence in the online environment. This Part will summarise the conclusions through a synthesis of the key research findings, identifies the strengths and limitations of the research, provides some recommendations regarding the research topic and suggests further research.

#### **Past Performance does not guarantee the future**

The literature review identified that although Ireland may not have experienced a significant presence of VRWE in any discernible strength, Ireland remains susceptible and therefore cannot claim to be immune. Results within the political spectrum evidence that far right ideologies have consistently failed to take hold in the political realm and voters remain (to date) resilient to right wing political manifestoes. The research has demonstrated however that at certain junctures within Irish history, particularly during potential societal ‘pressure points’ such as The Emergency or more recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions for the receptiveness of certain elements of the population to more extreme narratives, as espoused by right wing extremist entities, may develop or find some resonance, particularly when any ‘local’ concern can be exploited, (Rapoport, 2002), as highlighted in the literature review.

Furthermore, the research identified that although no significant lineage of any extremist right wing group has endured through the course of recent Irish history some of the radical ideologies have persisted. Through the feedback provided by interviewees, it is observed that certain ideals, including narratives and ideals of historic Irish extremist right wing groupings such as Ailtirí na hAiséirghe, do linger and endure within certain elements of contemporary or ‘nascent’ Irish radical and extremist right wing groupings. Therefore, although Ireland’s resilience to the influence of right wing ideologies has been steadfast when compared to the rest of Europe, we again cannot classify ourselves as immune. Fringe elements who are sympathetic and receptive to right wing extremist rhetoric reside within the State and they ‘recycle’ and sustain previous groupings extremist aspirations.

### **Transnational Effects: “Weaponisation of Globalisation”**

The literature review established the effect which the transnational influence is having at a global level with regard to the propagation on VRWE but also how Ireland has not been completely immune and remains exposed to machinations of this ideology. As Kremidas-Courtney (2022) points out in describing the threat of hybrid warfare, new vulnerabilities presented by a globalised world interconnected by instant global communications present a medium by which in turn may be exploited by the far right extremist milieus. Musharbash (2021) highlights “that right-wing extremists are cooperating internationally more than ever today is a reality recognised by most researchers and government officials” (p.39).

Throughout the course of all of the interviews it was apparent that the theme of the influence of transnational right wing extremism upon Ireland was apparent. Although the most significant influential factor assisting this growth is a flourishing online environment with no online ‘borders’ or enforcement. All interviewees have highlighted the role of the internet and social media which underpins the themes of facilitation and collaboration and its creation of reinforcement and belonging. The internet has enabled reach to a far broader audience and acts as a catalyst to both share and spread ideologies, communicate and recruit new members.

Although efforts to combat spread of such ideologies are at EU and a national level, further efforts to control and regulate violent discourse and hate speech online are necessary. This transnational mobilisation of the right was in evidence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and as cited by EU RAN(2021): “conspiracy beliefs flourished, as in every period of crisis” and this results in “narratives used to mobilise extremist action and violence and conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism” (p.4). Ireland has, during the COVID-19 pandemic, observed the mobilisation of fringe elements and mass protests, some of which turned violent, arising from online “calls to action” generated by both internally (domestic) and externally (international-transnational) influences. The online and physical intimidation of government officials and representatives during the COVID-19 pandemic is consistent with “weaponisation” methods pressed for and employed by radical and VRWE movements worldwide (Campion *et al.*, 2021, p.26).

### **The Digital and Physical Threat**

The threats facing Ireland from VRWE are not just virtual in nature however, and adherents to the ideologies of right wing extremism are willing to conduct harmful acts. Although a large proportion within this extremist milieus may choose a ‘non-violent’ approach, elements in Ireland have displayed a propensity to both instigate and carry out violent acts as described in the spectrum of harmful behaviours as developed by The New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry (see Figure 3).

As highlighted in the last section on transnational influence, Ireland has witnessed a number of acts, alleged to have been conducted by individuals associated with what could be classified as either hateful or violent extremism. Additionally, Ireland has seen the translation of online hateful discourse translate and manifest into the presence of hateful and violent mobilisation.

All of the interviewees who participated in this research, although emphasising that the physical manifestation of the right wing threat in Ireland may not be as grave as seen in other countries, have cautioned against underestimating these groups and movements who are adherents to right wing extremist narratives. As stated by Interviewee 3: “we don't know what individuals or micro groups may be thinking about believing and have the potential to act upon”.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This paper did encounter some limitations throughout the course of this research. The main challenge that was encountered was the dearth of information and in particular academic research with regard to right wing ideology across the spectrum and in particular radical and extremist right wing presence in Ireland. The majority of research heretofore has been focussed on the presence of a political right wing movement or party within the State. In particular there is a lack of focussed research and empirical data on extremism in an Irish context, this was highlighted in the literature review and research.

The main strength of this paper is that it is a topic that garnered a lot of interest and willingness to participate from practitioners to academic researchers alike. This paper also conducts one of the only academic reviews of the extreme right wing within the State and therefore begins to fill the academic void experienced by this author.

### **Recommendations**

This study recommends the following recommendations with respect to the threat posed by VRWE in Ireland:

- The transnational threat from VRWE can pose a threat to Irish security owing to its capacity to activate and mobilise violent political and social actions both in the physical and virtual environments, as witnessed throughout the COVID-19. Formulating a holistic, national level, whole of government approach in both raising awareness of and tackling the physical and virtual influences of VRWE is required.
- VRWE groupings are increasingly transnational in nature and although they may adjust their narratives based on a national context, influences propagated by external groupings in other jurisdictions contributes in efforts to recruit, support (such as financing) and disseminate extremist material and ideologies. Furthermore, VRWE groupings can provide a vector for influence or interference nationally that may be deliberately and intentionally exploited by external entities, as witnessed in other jurisdictions. Raising awareness on the full spectrum threat posed by VRWE can only be addressed by the implementation of both a domestic and internationally focussed strategy in countering violent extremism.
- Both the internet and social media play a pivotal role and facilitates in the growth VRWE internationally. Ireland is not an exception to the wider international trends of extremism. Research has indicated that a core of engaged adherents in the State are ‘plugged into’ and actively engage within the wider international VRWE networks and online communities. National policy makers must consider strategies on countering hateful and extremist online discourse and placing increased responsibility on social media platform providers with regard to social media policy enforcement and regulation.

- Additionally, improved policies and resourcing to what can be delivered to protect and improve online media literacy, responsible digital citizenship and resilience within a volatile online information environment should be considered at a national level.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

This work has been driven by observations on the lack of academic research on all areas of extremism within the State and in particular the more nascent growth of ideologies which are transnational in nature. This research in particular has highlighted a requirement for a more detailed and empirical study on the social factors which propagate hateful ideologies such as that observed within VRWE.

The research completed has indicated that Ireland cannot be naïve or discount the potential risks posed by groups or individuals that are susceptible or indeed adherents to VRWE ideologies. Although in general Ireland's security to a great degree is protected by a kind act of geography and a notion of steadfast resilience, this paper however highlights the transnational threats operating both in plain sight and covertly online and has gained an influence within elements of Irish society.

The State must take a cohesive and whole of government approach in analysing and addressing threats posed by ideologies such VRWE, to ignore the prevalence of extremism in any form amounts to a policy of blind vulnerability, as Helen Keller described : "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision".

*Please note that the views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Irish Defence Forces, the Command and Staff School or any other group or organisation.*

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