

Framing in times of crisis: Responses to COVID-19 amongst Far Right movements and organisations

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This paper examines various framing processes have been developed by Far Right groups specifically in response to the global health crisis brought about by the spread of COVID-19. Through an examination of statements by six Identitarian and National Socialist movement organisations issued over a two month period from late February to late April 2020 on the open source platform Telegram, six ‘crisis frames’ were identified which extended central Far Right ideological ideas and cast COVID-19 as directly linked to concepts of migration, globalisation, governance, liberty, resilience and conspiracy. As well as identifying the crisis frames used by Far Right, this paper found that these Far Right groups emphasised engagement in activity designed to develop community resilience and – in contrast to initial commentary by analysts – conspiracy theories and practices of misinformation were largely not used. These findings suggest that the early stages of the COVID crisis has seen a shift by certain Far Right groups not towards practices of encouraging violent contention but rather using propaganda to emphasise their contribution in supporting the family unit, communities and the nation, against the failures of authorities in dealing with the virus. This paper represents an early foray into understanding the development of contemporary ‘crisis frames’ within the Far Right, highlighting the interactive processes that take place between Far Right groups, global events and authorities.

Introduction

The sudden rise of COVID-19 has created, if not a new paradigm, certainly a need to reassess assumptions and practices in understanding movements operating on societal extremes. The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, was confirmed as reaching Europe by 25 January 2020 (although reports suggest earlier transmission) and by 22 February 2020—where this paper begins its empirical research—60 cases were officially recorded in Europe. COVID-19 since spread throughout the continent and, by the close of the study period on 22 April 2020, Europe had recorded 1,197,272 official cases, resulting in 116,279 confirmed deaths by 24 April 2020.¹ By this point, most European countries had implemented partial or complete lockdowns—closing workplaces, schools, and businesses, as well as severely restricting international and internal travel.

The political and economic fallout created by these events will have significant ramifications across Europe, and concern has been raised about groups across the Far Right who, it has been suggested, have been attempting to exploit the health crisis and the resultant insecurity to advance their narratives, propaganda, and activism. Some commentators, for instance, have suggested that such organisations have been using misinformation and conspiracy theories to aid recruitment, encourage wider engagement, and induce violence and radicalisation.² As such, there is an immediate need to develop a rigorous understanding of how such international crises have and will change activism by Far Right groups, not least to assess the evidence base of potential policy-responses.

This study examined Telegram statements released by six Far Right groups across a two-month period from 22 February 2020 to 22 April 2020, during the most significant rise of the COVID-19 crisis in Europe, using an approach which draws from social movement approaches of framing, resource mobilisation, and political opportunity structures to consider how public Far Right language has developed to account for the health crisis. As a result of the study, six ‘crisis frames’ were found to be used across statements from the six organisations under study: three frames examined the causes of the spread of the virus (COVID-19 as a result of migration, Globalisation, and poor national governance); one frame examined the impact of the virus on potential activism (COVID-19 as leading to a diminishing of civil liberties); one supported activist response to the virus (Resilience-building against COVID-19); and coalesced around misinformation about the virus, authorities or other activist groups.

This paper develops a basic foundation for approaching ‘crisis framing’ to better understand responsiveness to international crisis events amongst so-called ‘extremist’

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¹ Conor Steward, 2020, ‘Cumulative number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in Europe 2020’, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1102896/coronavirus-cases-development-europe/>.

² Lizzie Dearden, ‘Coronavirus: Terror threat to hospitals as extremists call for attacks during lockdown’, Independent, 21 April 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/uk-news/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-5g-extremism-sara-khan-a9528806.html>; Nikita Malik, 2020, ‘Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism’, *Foreign Policy*, 26th March, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Blyth Crawford, 2020, ‘5G and the Far Right: How Extremists Capitalise on Coronavirus Conspiracies’, *Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET)*, 21st April 2020; Lizzie Dearden, 2020a, ‘Coronavirus conspiracy theories must be taken seriously to avoid ‘serious consequences’, extremism chief warns’, *The Independent* 23 May 2020.

milieus, as well as questioning contemporary counter-extremist analysis which has seemed to misinterpret the way in which the Far Right uses crises in recruitment, ideological dissemination, and activism, including violence. Crucially, the findings suggest that, despite contemporary commentary by analysts which link Far Right groups to conspiracy theories, these made up a relatively insignificant framing in study of these Far Right groups, and no reference was made to '5G'-related in any of the official communications by the groups under investigation. Furthermore, these were often outweighed by statements encouraging or documenting 'pro-social', resilience-building activities in communities. Such findings suggest that more reflection is needed on the role that 'crisis frames' play amongst Far Right groups in emphasising community support and deemphasising contention—a conclusion that has implications for future research and policy.

Research Questions

To understand how the Far Right have framed and responded to COVID-19 and the implications this might have for future research and response, this paper takes the following research questions:

- i. *What frames have the Far Right social movement organisations studied here sought to emphasise (or de-emphasise) in their activism and material in response to the COVID-19 health crisis?*

Analysis of 209 official statements, taken from Far Right groups under study between 22 February 2020 and 22 April 2020, were found to be placed into six key framing devices, which link COVID-19 to (F): Migration (F1); Globalisation (F2); Governance (F3); Liberty (F4); Resilience (F5); and Conspiracy (F6). These six frames aimed to provide a diagnosis of what led to the spread of COVID-19 across Europe (F1-3), the need for an immediate response (F4), a different prognoses for response (F5-6).

The second research question looks at the implications of this frame coding, asking:

- ii. *What does this show us about how Far Right activism is changing in response to crisis, to what extent can we talk about 'crisis frames' developing, and what are the implications for future Far Right activism and the study thereof?*

The development of these frames helps us to analyse how quickly Far Right groups respond to global issues such as COVID-19, as well as considering the role that current events play in the spreading of group ideology, recruitment, and activism. It also helps us to consider how Far Right activism may change in coming years and the implications this has for research and approaches to the Far Right in Europe. The findings suggest that these Far Right groups have been highly responsive to the development of COVID-19 in ways that are significant: [1] they have focussed most of their frame response on authorities, stressing activism which is implied as creating a better response to those enacted by authorities, and has, in some ways, been; [2] pro-social, building resilience in communities against the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown; and [3] that such pro-social responses significantly outweigh conspiracy-based framing or attempts at spreading misinformation or encouraging violence.

The findings have implications that suggest that, whilst 'crisis frames' have developed, such responses by activists represent a form of adaptation to the political context that stresses existing elements of their work supporting the family, community, and the

nation whilst downplaying contention and violence. This is manifested in significant propaganda against minorities or global migration, attacks against the existing political order and mainstream politicians, an embedding and enhancement of their work and role in local communities, and a significantly downplaying of conspiracy theories and violence.

Having outlined the two main research questions and some of the broader discussions and findings, this paper will explore theories of framing and social movements, as well as providing an overview of the case study organisations. This will be developed into a methodology and applied to the dataset to identify the relevant frames used. These frames are then further explored, using discourse from the dataset, before the detailed frames are used to further explore the research findings and implications for future study.

Theory and Methodology

The paper uses social movement facets to build an analysis of the language used by Far Right groups. It places the theory of framing at its centre, using it as a means for examining the ways in which COVID-19, and discussions thereof, have been presented by Far Right groups. The author takes as a guide Entman's definition of framing as the deliberate stressing of certain aspects of reality and the neglect of others, as well as Snow and Bedford's work which delineate a collective action frame as comprising diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements.³

Diagnostic framing, as with medical diagnosis, presents an interpretation of what is wrong and what has caused the problem; prognostic framing suggests a solution to the problem identified by the diagnosis, a means of response; and motivational framing aims to encourage individuals to take part in the collective action suggested in the prognosis, convincing others that action is both possible and necessary.⁴ Ensconcing this process is often a master frame, a broader narrative that is threaded throughout, along with action frames, or 'hot cognition', to spur activists into action.⁵

To identify frames, Charlotte Ryan develops a four-step process through the study of media rhetoric and grassroots organising in qualitative research, enabling the researcher to thematically dissect discourse: What is the key issue in the frame? What is the responsibility/solution proposed in the frame, or its diagnosis and prognosis? What are the symbols used, especially visual images, metaphors, historical examples, stereotypes, and catch phrases? And what are the supporting arguments, especially in terms of

³ Robert M. Entman, 1993, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, 43: 51-58; David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, 1992, 'Master frames and cycles of protest.' in C.M. Mueller A.D. Morris (ed.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT).

⁴ Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, 2005, 'Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective.' in Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes (eds.), *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield Oxford); Charlotte Ryan. 1991. *Prime Time Activism* (South End Press: Boston); William A. Gamson, 1988, 'Political Discourse and Collective Action', *International Journal of Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 1: 219-44; William A. Gamson, 1992a. 'The Social Psychology of Collective Action.' in Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT); William A Gamson, 1992b. *Talking Politics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

⁵ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford. 1992. 'Master frames and cycles of protest.' in C.M. Mueller A.D. Morris (ed.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT); Patrick H. Mooney and Scott A. Hunt. 1996. 'A Repertoire of Interpretations: Master Frames and Ideological Continuity in U.S. Agrarian Mobilisation', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37: 177-97; William J. Swart, 2016, 'The League of Nations and the Irish Question: Master Frames, Cycles of Protest and 'Master Frame Alignment'', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36: 465-81.

historical roots of the grievance, consequences of the frame's success, and appeals and links to broader cultural values? This four-step process provided a basic framework for the author to identify the frames, as well as to consider the potential processes of their development and utility to Far Right groups.

Framing provides an important means of dissecting language and symbolism used by groups and has, according to Gatterina and Pirro, 'proven useful to addressing fundamental questions underlying Far Right emergence and success'.⁶ Such an approach has already been applied to Identitarian and neo-fascist organisations by other researchers to understand and interpret activist discourse⁷ and important frames have been identified among the Far Right on issues such as identity, migration, traditional values and self-portrayal.⁸ Whilst this provides a useful foundation for identifying Far Right responses to the health crisis, it is useful to also consider how these frames operate in a wider political and organisational context.

A strength of using social movement approaches is the palette of tools they offer and, as such, other concepts of Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) and Political Process Theories (PPT) will be used as a reference to explain the context of these framing decisions. Theories of resource mobilisation focus on the type and nature of the resources available to explain the tactical choices made by social movement organisations.⁹ The limited resources held by an organisation—of economic, structural, social or cultural capital—are utilised through an attempt at resource maximisation, with the implication that actors try to discern (with at least some degree of accuracy) the political relief of their environment, and use the resources available to them in their favour.¹⁰ Political Process Modelling furthers this discussion by explaining how social movement organisations make sense of and interact with the political context within which they operate, and how it shapes activist decisions.¹¹ Different political opportunity structures—in this case the extent to which Far Right groups conceive the political context to be threatening or inviting—impact on the tactical choices made by these groups. Bringing together these theoretical facets, we are able to present a theoretical foundation for understanding the way in which COVID-19 is being framed by Far Right movement organisations and employed within wider tactics of contention—such as encouraging recruitment (RMT) or presenting a challenge to authorities (PPT).

Methodologically, the researcher has chosen to focus on Telegram as a means of gathering data. Telegram was chosen due to it being a relatively open source, accessible with an account, and not requiring any 'dark web' programmes. It is also one of the more secure platforms, making it impossible to trace users, which suggests that organisations will be sharing information more representative frames. More mainstream channels like Facebook and Twitter were deemed inappropriate due to Far Right groups often being banned or having pages consistently removed by social media companies, whilst other

⁶ Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Andrea L. P. Pirro, 2019, 'The far right as social movement', *European Studies*, 21: 447-62.

⁷ Christoffer Kølvrå, 2019, 'Embodying 'the Nordic race': imaginaries of Viking heritage in the online communications of the Nordic Resistance Movement', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 53: 270-84.

⁸ Lars Guenther, Georg Ruhrmann, Jenny Bischoff, Tessa Penzel, and Antonia Weber, 2020, 'Strategic Framing and Social Media Engagement: Analysing Memes Posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook', *social media + society (SM+S)*: 1-13.

⁹ Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, 2006, *Social Movements: an Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford), p.15.

¹⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre, 1986, 'The Forms of Capital', in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research on the Sociology of Education* (Greenwood: New York).

¹¹ Della Porta and Diani, 2006, 'Social movements', p.122.

platforms associated with the Far Right were either more unverifiable (such as Gab accounts) or less secure (such as VK.com).¹²

Initial research involved monitoring the activities of a series of Far Right movement organisations on Telegram to scope early findings and identify suitable movement organisations/¹³ Aside from adherence to an identifiable ideological strand within the Far Right and engaging in activism beyond social media, potential case study organisations were identified based on a requirement to engage in regular posting during recent months across the period of the developing COVID-19 health crisis. Some potential case study organisations were excluded because they were not responsive to current events (simply posting pictures or videos glorifying National Socialist history, for instance), because they did not have an 'activist' or offline element, or due to eclectic posting in which ideological affiliation was too difficult to positively identify. Other Far Right groups, such as Britain First or the English Defence League, were not studied here because they presented a far wider set of ideological framings on Telegram, but study into such other groups may be a means of advancing the findings presented here.

The movement organisations identified roughly adhere to what is often termed in literature and policy as 'extremist organisations' on the Far Right.¹⁴ This paper focuses solely on case study organisations that are shown to have been [1] engaging in forms of public activism (organising events or meetings, distributing leaflets, making podcasts and online material, or actively recruiting a formal or semi-formal network) and; [2] holding views that are generally understood to be 'extreme' within a variety of national contexts, to such an extent that they; [3] have faced organisational proscription or activist harassment or arrest by state authorities as a result. This aims to sidestep at least some of the terminological fog that hangs over the field and allows a short study such as this to draw—if not generalisable conclusions, due to limitations in case selection and data—a few broader, empirically-grounded hypotheses as to the direction of the elements of the Far Right in a post-COVID landscape.

After examining potential candidates for study, the following organisations were identified as relevant to the study purpose and research commenced through an examination of posts released on telegram by six organisations: **Génération Identitaire**, the French national branch of General Identity (or *GIF*); the German national branch of Generation Identity, **Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland** (or *IBD*); the **Hundred Handers** (or *HH*), a loose-movement organisation largely focused on Britain; as well as the neo-fascist **Nordic Resistance Movement** (or *NRM*); **CasaPound Italia** (or *CPI*); and the **British National Socialist Movement** ('British Movement' or *BNSM/BM*). These represent a selection of national European case studies that have some international links, designed to give an indication of how the Far Right framing are developing across the continent, and represent two broad but significant thrusts within a widening constellation of Far Right movements.¹⁵

¹² Simon Murdoch and Joe Mulhall, 2019, "From Banners to Bullets: The International Identitarian Movement." In. London: Hope Not Hate.

¹³ Lorenzo Bosi and Lorenzo Zamponi, 2020, 'Paths toward the Same Form of Collective Action: Direct Social Action in Times of Crisis in Italy.' in, *Special Forces* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

¹⁴ It is important to be aware that terms such as extremism have 'a normative, relational and context-specific value: one is judged radical or extremist against culturally specific benchmarks, and this label is dependent on who is doing the labelling' (See: McNeil-Willson et al. 2019, p.5). As such, the term 'extremism' is highly politicised and can be problematic.

¹⁵ Manuela Caiani and Rossella Borri, 2016, 'Beyond Party Politics: The Search for a Unified Approach to Research on Radical Right-Wing Movement in Europe' in Olivier Fillieule and Guya Accornero (eds.), *Social Movement Sutides in Europe: The State of the Art* (Berghahn Books: New York).

Whilst there is some ‘terminology chaos’ that surrounds discussions on the Far Right¹⁶, these six Identitarian and National Socialist movements adhere significantly to ideological tenets and aims that have been widely defined as Far Right—although most of the groups under study in this paper reject the term. These include the myth of a racially homogenous nation, a romanticised notion of national culture and people, and a concept of values constructed as conflicting with principles of individualism and universalism¹⁷, along with the aims of diffusing and enshrining xenophobic values within society through action and activism.¹⁸

Case Study: Identitarian Organisations

The Identitarian Movement originated with the French *Génération Identitaire*¹⁹ which, when launched in the Autumn of 2012, immediately attacked concepts of multiculturalism by drawing on neo-fascist frames of ‘land’, ‘blood’, and ‘identity’, whilst encouraging irregular forms of street activism.²⁰ Since its launch, Identitarian movement organisations have been established in countries including Germany, Austria, the Nordic states, Britain, and Ireland, as well as North America, Russia, South America, and Australia.²¹ Identitarian groups now operate in at least 23 countries, with *Generation Identity* (one of the largest Identitarian street movements) active in nine countries in Europe and with 63 regional branches across the continent by the end of 2019.²²

Identitarian ideology is built around the construction of a ‘threat’ that is seen as being posed by external immigration to European countries through the ‘replacement’ of a White majority, especially singling out Muslim minorities.²³ Core Identitarian tenets have appeared in statements and manifestos linked to several acts of Far Right violence. This has included: the Christchurch attacker’s reference to ‘The Great Replacement’ and donation of funds to a European Generation Identity branch prior to the shooting; Anders Breivik’s demonisation of multiculturalism, Muslims, and Eurabia as moral justification for his 2011 attacks; Patrick Crusius’ shooting in El Paso to prevent a so-called ‘Hispanic invasion’ of Texas; and statements by Robert Bowers, the Pittsburgh shooter, who claimed that Jewish communities ‘were committing a genocide against his people’.²⁴ Claiming to be neither politically Left nor Right—even going so far as to deliberately create confusion about their political stance—Identitarian groups generally tend to emphasise frames such as democracy, patriotism and essentialist ‘Western

16 Cas Mudde, 2007, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), p. 11–12.

17 Minkenberg, M, 2002, ‘The Radical Right in Postcolonial Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 16: 335–62.

18 Rydgren, Jens, 2005, ‘Is Extreme Right-Wing Populism Contagious? Explaining the Emergence of a New Party Family’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 44: 413–37.

19 *Génération Identitaire* was formerly the youth section of the anti-immigrant *Bloc Identitaire*, the successor organisation of *Unité Radicale* (Handler 2019).

20 Simon Murdoch and Joe Mulhall, 2019, “From Banners to Bullets: The International Identitarian Movement.” In. London: Hope Not Hate.

21 Murdoch and Mulhall, 2019, “From Banners to Bullets”, p.6.; Jose Pedro Zuquete, 2018, ‘Introduction.’ in, *The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe* (University of Notre Dame Press: Indiana).

22 Ibid; Although January 2020 saw the internal collapse and demise of the fractious British branches.

23 Aristotle Kallis, 2018, ‘The Radical Right and Islamophobia’ in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford University Press: Oxford); Zuquete, 2018, ‘Introduction.’ in, *The Identitarians*.

24 Murdoch and Mulhall, 2019, “From Banners to Bullets”; Siri Erika Gullestad, 2017, ‘Anders Behring Breivik, master of life and death: Psychodynamics and political ideology in an act of terrorism’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 26: 207–16; Ed Lavandera and Jason Hanna, 2019, ‘El Paso suspect told police he was targeting Mexicans, affidavit says’, *CNN*, 9th August; Lois Beckett, 2018, ‘Pittsburgh shooter was fringe figure in online world of white supremacist rage’, *The Guardian*, 30th October, section US News.

values'.²⁵ They also tend to eschew both revolutionary and parliamentary tactics to achieve change, privileging a highly mediated form of intellectual activism aimed at shaping ideas through media, expressive culture, and online propaganda.²⁶ In contrast to neo-fascist organisations, they do not publicly claim superiority of one race over another²⁷ and have tended to avoid openly violent language.²⁸

Generation Identity and spin-off Identitarian groups have also prioritised highly visible, irregular forms of activism (leafleting, sticker campaigns, 'flash mobs' or pop-up protests) coupled with decentralised organisational structures, copying tactics more traditionally associated by activists on the political Left.²⁹ Recent manifestations of Identitarian organisations include the use of boats to harass migrant flows in the Mediterranean, such as the 'Defend Europe' campaign which involved a strategic partnering of several Generation Identity branches.³⁰ Whilst British Identitarianism has struggled to gain traction—the British Generation Identity branch disintegrating in January 2020 under pressure from left-wing activism, increasing scrutiny over potential proscription, and internal schisms, their activists ingloriously described as 'truly the runts of the litter'³¹—several small Identitarian movement organisations have appeared in their place. This includes the *Hundred Handers*, a diffuse network of young activists largely based in the UK (although with some activity in the US and Germany) which aims to encourage the mainstreaming of core Identitarian tenets through guerrilla sticker campaigns.³²

National Socialist Case Study Organisations

The second set of Far Right movement organisations studied here are neofascist organisations. Neofascism has seen a rise in recent years with the development of organisations such as *Golden Dawn* in Greece, *CasaPound* in Italy, and the *Nordic Resistance Movement* in Sweden.

The *Nordiska Motståndsrörelsens* (Nordic Resistance Movement, or NRM) is a National Socialist organisation of less than 1,000 active members, which sprung from earlier Swedish neo-Nazi movements.³³ NRM currently operates officially in Sweden, Finland, and Norway and is active in Denmark and Iceland. It is described as openly racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and pro-Hitler—and has carried out violence targeting LGBTQ

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²⁵ Lars Guenther, Georg Ruhrmann, Jenny Bischoff, Tessa Penzel, and Antonia Weber, 2020, 'Strategic Framing and Social Media Engagement: Analysing Memes Posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook', *social media + society* (SM+S): 1-13; Zuquete, 2018, 'Introduction.' in, *The Identitarians*".

²⁶ Gattinara and Pirro, 2019, 'The far right as social movement', *European Studies*, 21:452.

²⁷ Pfeiffer, Thomas, 2016, 'Gegenöffentlichkeit und Aufbruch im Netz. Welche strategischen Funktionen erfüllen Websites und Angebote im Web 2.0 für den deutschen Rechtsextremismus?' [Counter-publicity and new beginnings on the Internet. What are the strategic functions of websites and offers in Web 2.0 for German right-wing extremism?] in Braun, Stephan, Geisler, Alexander, Gerster, Martin (eds.), *Strategien der extremen Rechten: Hintergründe, Analysen, Antworten* [Extreme right strategies: Backgrounds, analyses, responses] (Springer: New York & Berlin) (pp. 259–286)

²⁸ Guenther, et al., 2020, 'Strategic Framing and Social Media Engagement', 2.

²⁹ Zuquete, Jose Period, 2018, "The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe"

³⁰ Murdoch and Mulhall, 2019, "From Banners to Bullets".

³¹ Ibid.

³² BBC, 2020, 'Coronavirus: Arrests over 'disgusting' racist COVID-19 stickers', *BBC*, [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-52314222](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-52314222).

³³ It was founded in Sweden in 1997 by Klas Lund and other former members of the Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (White Aryan Resistance, or VAM), a militant neo-Nazi network active in Sweden in the early 1990s. Its connections link back to 20th Century articulations of fascism such as the Nordiska rikspartiet (Nordic Reich Party), 'the major and most influential actor on the Swedish extreme right since it was founded in 1956', and the Swedish Nationalsocialistiska abetarepartiet (National Socialist Workers' Party) of the 1930s (Kølvraa 2019: 272); Blomberg, Helena, and Jonas Stier. 2019. 'Flashback as a Rhetorical Online Battleground: Debating the (Dis)guise of the Nordic Resistance Movement', *social media + society* (SM+S): 1.

people, ideological opponents and, more recently, Muslim refugees. Its goals or 'path' is outlined in their nine political points, including the cessation of "mass migration" and the "[r]epatriation of the majority of all who are not northern European or of closely related descent... in the most humane way possible" along with the unification of the Nordic states into "a self-sufficient Nordic Nation with a joint military, currency, and central bank, and universal laws and rules".³⁴ To achieve these aims, it often engages in highly visible forms of street activism, such as leafletting, banners, demonstrations, or the use of 'flash mobs'. It has some significant links with other international national socialist movements, including the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), an organisation which recently became the first White Supremacist group to be labelled as global terrorists by US authorities.³⁵

Another significant European neo-fascist groups is that of CasaPound Italia (the House of Ezra Pound, or CPI), a movement organisation founded in Esquilino, Rome, on 26 December 2003 which focussed on organising demonstrations and activist events.³⁶ Built initially on the practice of squatting, public demonstrations, and social initiatives, it has a strong activist component, something that has been renewed since its leader Gianluca Iannone ended its role as an official Italian political party on 26 June 2019.³⁷ It maintains central themes of housing and social support, as well as emphasising the traditional nuclear family and an aggressively anti-EU stance. As such, like other movement organisations explored in this paper, it is often engaged in public activism.

In the UK, there are examples of smaller contemporary bodies of National Socialism, such as the British National Socialist Movement included here (sometimes shortened to the 'British Movement'). This is a diffuse set of activists run by a small network based in Lincoln, England's East Midlands, who create podcasts ('Under the Sunwheel') and blogs, write newsletters ('The Emblem'), and engage in public activism such as leafletting and stickering.

Organisations from both the Identitarian and neo-fascist movements have significant overlap, including in their ideological rejection of current processes of parliamentary democracy, dislike of international structures such as the European Union, and strong critique of migration and multiculturalism, as well as a focus on irregular forms of activism as a means of sharing ideological tenets and recruiting support. Despite being distinct separate trends, online channels by the case study groups occasionally distributed material from both National Socialist and Identitarian communities, suggesting a broad overlapping appeal.

Analysis and Findings

In the first step of analysis of the six relevant case studies identified, the initial data gathered examined the reach of each Far Right channel, the number of followers of, and posts made by each movement organisation, and the number of posts that were COVID-19 related. A two-month period was chosen to examine the posts that were being released, from 22 February to 22 April 2020. This was done to cover the initial

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³⁴ Nordic Resistance Movement, 2018, 'Our Nine Political Points', Nordic Resistance Movement, Accessed 24 April. <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/our-nine-political-points/>.

³⁵ Ezel Sahinkaya and Danila Galperovich. 2020. 'Radical Russian Imperial Movement Expanding Global Outreach', *voanews*, 9th May; Donati, Jessica. 2020. 'U.S. Labels Russian White Supremacist Group as Global Terrorist', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6th April, section Russia.

³⁶ Bartlett, Jamie, Jonathan Birdwell, and Caterina Froio, 2012, "Populism in Europe: CasaPound." In *"The rise of populism in Europe can be traced through online behaviour..."*, DEMOS.

³⁷ Ibid., p.23.

development of the outbreak and framing responses in full, with none of the six organisations releasing posts or statements about the virus prior to 22 February 2020, as well as taking the research as close as possible to the time of writing (April/May 2020).

As of 22 April 2020, Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (IBD) had 5,808 followers on their official Telegram channel, whilst Génération Identitaire (GIF) had 1,888 members. An additional channel, an international Generation Identity account, had 1,003 members but was not studied here because it acted to disseminate content already released by national GI branches. The Hundred Handers (HH), a looser collection of activists, comprised 4,238 members on Telegram. In terms of National Socialist organisations, CasaPound had the most significant Telegram presence, with 4,710 followers, whilst Nordic Resistance Movement had 1,117 followers and The British National Socialist Movement channel was the smallest presence with 825 members.

Amongst the Identitarian organisations, the Hundred Handers were the most prolific of those under study, releasing 135 posts between 22 February 2020 and 22 April 2020. Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland and Génération Identitaire released a similar number of posts each, at 60 and 54 respectively across the 60-day period. In examining Telegram activity of National Socialist groups, the British National Socialist Movement was most active, with 422 posts released in the 60 days under study, although it also was more prone to reposting existing posts by other National Socialist and Identitarian organisations (duplicates that were cleaned from the study). CasaPound Italy released 173 posts between 22nd February and 22nd April 2020, whilst the Nordic Resistance Movement released 81 posts.

22/02 - 22/04	IBD	GIF	HH	CPI	NRM	BNSM
followers	5808	1888	4238	4710	1117	825
posts	60	54	135	173	81	422
COVID-posts	13	12	35	82	20	47
Percentage COVID	21.7%	22.2%	25.9%	47.4%	24.7%	11.1%
First COVID post	13/03	26/03	21/03	24/02	25/02	25/02

Fig.1: No. of followers by 22/04 and posts between 22/02 and 22/04 per Far Right group

In terms of when the first mention of COVID-19 appears, all National Socialist examples issued their first statement earlier than the Identitarian movements, although this may be partly due to localised factors (such as the virus taking greater hold in Italy at an earlier stage) or due to the greater abundance of posts from National Socialist groups, most notably the British National Socialist Movement.

The posts examined as part of this paper, once cleaned of duplicates, were $n=209$, representing the total number of singular posts released by the six channels which specifically referred to 'COVID-19'/'coronavirus', or linked terms such as 'health crisis', 'health emergency', or 'lockdown', between mid-February and April 2020. This n was comprised of standalone statements, posters, articles published by the organisations, videos, and official podcasts produced by activists. These were coded and an initial set of 22 framing devices identified. The 22 frames were then re-coded, with overlapping frames absorbed into a singular frame. For instance: frames such as *border control* and *illegal migration* became classed as the one frame of *migration*; several frames that

blamed processes such as *international economy*, *liberalism*, and *multicultural values* became the one frame of *Globalisation*. The process was then repeated until it was deemed problematic to refine the frames further, resulting in six final frames.

The content underwent several external coding checks to examine these six frames through practices in which data was checked by academic peers to ensure that the discourse was not being misinterpreted or misrepresented.³⁸ This checking process—along with the publisher’s peer review process—lead to the final development of six frames: migration, globalisation, governance, liberty, resilience, and conspiracy.

Far Right COVID-19 Frames

From the $n=209$ posts released on Telegram, as well as their linked content (articles, videos, podcasts, audio snippets, and posters produced by members and activists of the groups), the following six frames were discerned as being widely used by the Far Right activist groups under study:

1. *Migration*: The spread of COVID-19 as a result of migration through porous borders
2. *Globalisation*: The spread of COVID-19 as a result of Globalisation and Multiculturalism
3. *Governance*: The impact of COVID-19 as the result of bad governance
4. *Liberty*: COVID-19 as leading to the expansion of a security state
5. *Resilience*: Far Right groups creating resilience to COVID-19
6. *Conspiracy*: COVID-19 as a deliberate distraction, encouraging misinformation around the virus, and general reflexion on conspiracy theories (both for and against).

Once the data was coded by examining the numbers of posts that contained at least one reference to a frame (F), the following results were found for the use of the six frames across the movement organisations. This resulted in some posts containing multiple F orientations (for instance, certain posts may contain reference to the frames of blaming both migration and globalisation, or the need to conduct resilience-building activities in response to bad governance) and therefore the total posts attributed to having an F-reference is greater than the number of posts (n).

³⁸ All coding, although initially conducted and overseen by the author, was enhanced by an external checking process which involved the support of several colleagues at the *European University Institute* and *Scuola Normale Superiore* (Florence), to check for inconsistencies in the frames and data, and to support greater coding accuracy. This not only helped in frame identification but was particularly important because the text under analysis is in four European languages: English (BNSM, HH and NRM), French (GIF), German (IBD) and Italian (CPI) – all languages that the author has at least a working knowledge of but required external checks by native-speaking colleagues to ensure accurate translations and the accounting for essential nuances.

<i>Movement Organisation</i>	<i>F1 (n) Migration</i>	<i>F2 (n) Globalisation</i>	<i>F3 (n) Governance</i>	<i>F4 (n) Liberty</i>	<i>F5 (n) Resilience</i>	<i>F6 (n) Conspiracy</i>	<i>TOTAL (n) COVID</i>
IBD	3	2	3	1	3	5	13
GIF	2	4	0	0	2	1	12
HH	23	8	9	5	0	5	35
CPI	3	20	28	5	64	3	82
NRM	2	3	5	4	3	1	20
BNSM	15	17	6	7	11	5	47
TOTAL F	48	54	51	22	83	20	209

Fig. 2: *No. of times each of the six frames were used*

The same data is expressed below in terms of the percentage of total posts per movement organisation that used a certain frame:

<i>Movement Organisation</i>	<i>F1 (%) Migration</i>	<i>F2 (%) Globalisation</i>	<i>F3 (%) Governance</i>	<i>F4 (%) Liberty</i>	<i>F5 (%) Resilience</i>	<i>F6 (%) Conspiracy</i>	<i>TOTAL (n) COVID</i>
IBD	23.1	15.4	23.1	7.7	23.1	38.5	13
GIF	16.7	33.3	0	0	16.7	8.3	12
HH	65.7	22.9	25.7	14.3	0	14.3	35
CPI	3.7	24.4	34.1	6.1	78	3.7	82
NRM	10	15	25	20	15	5	20
BNSM	31.9	36.2	12.8	14.9	23.4	10.6	47
TOTAL/F	23	25.8	24.4	10.5	39.7	9.6	209

Fig. 3: *Percentage of times each of the six frames were used*

Overall, it was found that these Far Right organisations used several frames in COVID-19 material, although these were used differently by different organisations, stressing certain concepts and framing devices, and excluding others. As an example of these divergences, the Hundred Handers strongly stressed migration as a cause for the spread of COVID-19, whilst other Identitarian groups were more likely to focus on globalisation and multiculturalism. One particularly intriguing frame is that of resilience, used greatly by CasaPound Italia—in keeping with their traditional focus on community support—but also by most other activist organisations. This is also balanced by a surprisingly limited employing of the frame involving conspiracy and misinformation, which had the least use and traction amongst many of the Far Right groups under study. These frames are further examined in the following sections.

Frame 1: Migration

Many of the Far Right groups examined here have stated or suggested that the spread of COVID-19 was caused by what is perceived to be porous national or European borders and movement of significant numbers of individuals through migration. This framing was found to be strongly prevalent in Identitarian statements, evident on average 35.1% of material released across the period, and in 65.7% of material released by the Hundred Handers. The scapegoating of migration for the spreading of the virus was less evident in National Socialist communication, making up on average less than half the amount

than in Identitarian statements, or 15.2% of statements released by the three groups studied here.

Identitarian groups framed a supposed lack of border control as primarily responsible for the spread of COVID-19. For instance, the British-based Hundred Handers called for the closing of national borders, with material stating, 'No Borders, No Defence' framing a stylised image of a Coronavirus, as well as 'open borders spread disease'. This focus on migration is also seen in HH statements such as, 'migrants accepted, now we are infected' and 'Closed Borders: The Best Vaccine'. However, whilst Identitarian groups were likely to frame migration as responsible for the spread of COVID-19 and the closing of borders as the best means of response, the delineation of these borders differed, with divergence found between Identitarian organisations in mainland Europe and the UK-based Hundred Handers. In the communications released by the IBD (Germany) and GIF (France) groups, emphasis was placed on hardening the borders of Europe as a defence against COVID-19, rather than national borders.

Another divergence within the Identitarian data is the extent to which the language is racialised. Generation Identity in Germany and France were more likely to emphasise the explicitly racial elements within their discourse—particularly refashioning overt Islamophobic tropes and anti-minority language into the context of COVID-19. For example, French *Génération Identitaire* produced a series of anti-minority and anti-Islamic posters which repeat the French Government statement 'sauvez des vies: restez chez vous', whereby it was recast against minority communities and showcased alongside pictures of minority groups, migrant crossings, and Islamic State soldiers.



Image 1. Génération Identitaire post

The framing of migrants as particular carriers of disease was often placed in contrast to [white] European citizens, with groups stressing what they saw as hypocritically implemented laws regarding migration and movement in response to COVID-19.³⁹ For instance, grievances were raised over laws that supposedly blocked EU citizens from moving between countries (or, in many cases, between local regions) during the simultaneous continuation of asylum application processes:

“Während EU-Bürger ohne triftigen Einreisegrund an den deutschen Grenzen abgewiesen werden, läuft die Asyl-Migration ungehindert weiter” [“While EU citizens are rejected at

³⁹ Einprozent, 2020, 'Einwanderungsstopp dank einer Pandemie?', <https://www.einprozent.de/blog/asylfakten/einwanderungsstopp-dank-einer-pandemie/2630>

the German borders without a valid reason for entry, asylum migration continues unhindered”] (20 March 2020)

Whilst the Migration was more likely to be present in Identitarian (rather than neo-fascist) frames, National Socialist material did highlight migrants as potential vectors of COVID-19, with groups such as CasaPound speaking of the “problem of migrants who have tested positive to the virus” arriving in Italy through migratory routes (18 April 2020). However, this was placed in a much less central position in discourse and not highlighted as such a significant cause of the spread of COVID-19 as within Identitarian groups. This perhaps shows a pragmatic use of political events by National Socialist groups. As migration slipped down national news agenda during this period, and a sort of consensus of support for lockdown procedures in many European countries appeared, the use of migration framing became less strategically important. Rather, political capital could be better accrued through the use of more resonant frames which attacked national governments over lockdown responses or poor social support towards certain vulnerable communities. Identitarian movements seemed less willing to shift laterally away from migration as a key frame, perhaps because of the more centralised role borders play in their ideological framing but also because their activism had focussed significantly on providing a response to the news in late February 2020 that Turkey had indicated that it would no longer block the passage of refugees fleeing Syria into Europe.⁴⁰ This led to renewed focus and activism from Identitarian groups on “defending the European borders”, including stories of activism and solidarity expressed towards border guards on the Greco-Turkish border.

Whilst the extent to which migration was used as a key diagnostic frame differed between the Identitarian and National Socialist movement organisations studied here, there was convergence that a general hardening of national or European borders against migration would be a means of preventing the spread of COVID-19 and further pandemics.

“Il Covid-19 ha smascherato i fautori delle porte aperte a tutti i costi, per i quali persino i controlli di fronte a un'epidemia di portata mondiale sono ormai una forma di fascismo.”
[“Covid-19 has unmasked the advocates of open doors at all costs, for which even controls in the face of a worldwide epidemic are now a form of fascism.”] (5 March 2020)

One sub-framing that was identified in Far Right material within the Migration frame was some element of blame towards the Chinese state. For instance, material from the Hundred Handers reads ‘a virus from China would have been stopped by a closed border’ (17 April 2020). There was also a direct problematising of China’s response as either botched or deliberately obfuscated, with material highlighting that, ‘COVID-19 comes from China’ and framing the Chinese government response as integral in the global spread of the disease in statements such as, ‘China Lied, People Died’. Statements issued by the British National Socialist Movement tended to be more simplistic in their framing, playing off stereotypes of Chinese food, indulging in racial stereotypes and encouraging Western states to sabre-rattle against the Chinese Government in response to the

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⁴⁰ Bethan McKernan and Daniel Boffey, 2020, ‘Greece and Bulgaria crack down on Turkish borders as refugees arrive’, *The Guardian*, 28th February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/28/tensions-rise-between-turkey-and-russia-after-killing-of-troops-in-syria>

spread of the virus. CasaPound's statements on COVID-19 regarding China were few and highlighted the risk that virus had spread in Italy through Chinese communities.⁴¹

Frame 2: Globalisation

The second frame identified is that of Globalisation, which contains the sub-frames of multiculturalism and liberal values. A strong criticism against lax border control as part of a 'globalist' agenda to encourage multiculturalism in Europe forms an overlap between central Identitarian and neo-fascist ideological tenets.⁴² It was a frame that was found consistently within material from the six groups studied here, appearing in 54 instances of material (or 25.8% of *n*), and found in between 15% and 36.2% of material on a group-by-group basis.

The German IBD, for instance, linked globalisation to the spread of the virus in Europe, stating:

"Das Problem heißt Globalisierung und es ist klar, dass die Corona-Krise nicht die letzte Krise dieser Art in diesem Zeitalter gewesen sein wird." ["The problem is called globalisation and it seems clear that the Corona crisis will not be the last of its kind in this era"] (20 March 2020)

Generation Identity groups highlighted what they called a perceived malaise within prevailing European ideologies that led to a false sense of security. As GIF stated:

*"The health crisis caused by the Coronavirus strikes a Europe that thought it was out of history. Faced with a serious situation, the state of preparation of our political elites is obvious. As if the worst was no longer possible. As if the life of European societies was only a long, calm river... The problem is not institutional but ideological."*⁴³

A critique of international political systems was also found within material released by National Socialist groups. The Nordic Resistance Movement, for instance, stated that:

every country that relies on the free market has failed [in response to COVID-19, as the free market] doesn't work in times of crisis; you can have all this trading over the borders and all over the world when everything is going just fine and dandy but if other countries are all sick with Coronavirus and all in lockdown... they're going to take care of themselves in a time of crisis' (NRM: 7 April 2020).

It is important to point out that critiques of Globalisation and Globalism, when used by Far Right groups, have often acted as a cover for antisemitism. The interlinking of global capital and peoples is often cited in Far Right discourse as beneficial for the envisaged monolithic interests of Jewish communities around the world, whilst Jewish individuals are often singled out using highly racialised and violent language. The NRM, for instance, offered discussion in one podcast entitled 'Live from the Corona Bunker', which disparagingly discussed the financial implications of the virus for Jewish communities whilst, in one agitated post released by HH following the arrest of two activists in

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⁴¹ CasaPoundItalia, 2020, 'CORONAVIRUS, STRISCIONI DI CASAPOUND: "ENRICO ROSSI, I VIRUS NON HANNO COLORI. LA PERICOLOSITÀ SÌ: IL TUO"'. <https://www.casapounditalia.org/coronavirus-striscioni-di-casapound-enrico-rossi-i-virus-non-hanno-colori-la-pericolosita-si-il-tuo/>.

⁴² Zuquete, 2018, 'Introduction.' in, *The Identitarians*

⁴³ Les-identitaires, 2020, 'L'histoire n'en a pas fini avec nous', <https://www.les-identitaires.com/2020/03/30/lhistoire-nen-a-pas-fini-avec-nous/>.

Sheffield, ‘Globalism’ as linked to Antisemitism was strongly implied in a statement bemoaning:

“... the tranny freaks acting as stasi for this globalist oppression, to the liberal councillors (who holiday in Israel) that pressure corrupt police into action. Lairs and cowards all!” (HH, 17 April 2020)

A sub-frame within Globalisation was multiculturalism, and particularly, the idea that multiculturalism as a practice has failed. This was used to express racist sentiments, particularly that minorities were more likely to break lockdown rules or contribute to the spread of the virus. This was found amongst Hundred Handers material, with statements such as ‘multiculturalism kills’ next to COVID-19 designs. NRM, as another example, suggested that minority groups were over-represented in COVID-19 deaths because “when they get sick and go to the hospital, their whole family wants to come and visit them”.

Instances in which minorities were cited as breaking lockdown rules were also highlighted by groups—such as clashes in Paris during the lockdown period (BNSM: 20 April 2020)—along with a critique of structural factors as responsible for greater minority deaths:

“As soon as it’s foreigners or refugees that are affected by anything, all of a sudden, they’re really hard done by. And whose fault is it that they are getting more sick? It’s obviously our white privilege that is the cause of it” (NRM: 7 April 2020)

Nationalism was described by both Identitarian and National Socialist groups as the best response to crises within international political systems. For example, HH material stated, ‘Nationalism would have prevented this’, whilst the Nordic Resistance Movement stated that “[nationalism] is what I’m hoping for again” following a systemic failure to adequately respond to the COVID-19 crisis.



Image 2. Hundred handers post (a)

Frame 3: Governance

The third frame that was identified was that of poor governance as causing the extensiveness of the COVID-19 health crisis. This included criticism in the implementation of lockdowns—such as calls for earlier implementation—the hypocritical implementation of lockdowns, as well as the lack of support provided by

governments towards those who were most vulnerable to being negatively impacted by the lockdown. The case study organisation most likely to employ this frame was CasaPound (found to be used as a framing device in 34.1% of their statements), as well as by Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland (23.1% of statements), the Hundred Handers (25.7% of statements), and the Nordic Resistance Movement (25% of statements).

CPI were particularly strong in criticising the Italian Government and municipal responses to COVID-19, citing lack of an early lockdown, lack of adequate provisions, and an overly ideological response to the pandemic that fails to account of scientific evidence. Even at an early stage of the virus spread in Europe, on 24 February 2020, CPI attacked Enrico Rossi (the President of Tuscany) in a statement that criticised his response to COVID-19 as “amateurish and partisan”, which “underestimated the problem” and failed to put in place “important preventative measures and quarantine”. As CPI concluded in their attack on the approaches taken by the Italian Government to COVID-19:

“... there is only hope that the situation will be managed by expert and competent technicians and not by politicians imbued with ideological dogmas” (casapounditalia.org 2020).

The Hundred Handers pointed criticism at the British Government response, articulating it in a way that drew together Far Right, populist, and anti-capitalist critiques. They problematised what they saw as approaches which removed certain vectors (such as shops and businesses), whilst supposedly keeping ‘open’ national borders, with statements such as: “Pubs Closed, Borders Open” and “shops closed, borders open”. This is framed as a deliberate tactic by the UK Government, with material that explicitly highlighted governmental tactics whilst stating that “they could have prevented this”.

Such posts are also infused with counter-capitalist themes which are more traditionally linked to the political Left: statements criticise the prioritising of big business over worker health and wellbeing during the pandemic, decrying that “our Government valued the economy more than they valued our lives” (HH). CasaPound, for instance, criticised of the working conditions of Amazon employees in Italy during COVID-19, even offering public solidarity for unions during an 11-day strike by workers to campaign for greater safety procedures. Far Right groups also attacked supply and demand processes in contemporary capitalism that fails to ensure enough provisions for the vulnerable. The NRM, for instance, argues that the Nordic states needed “... more stocks than just in time”, “relocation, even for strategic companies”, and that poor governance had led to “insufficient hospital, police and military resources. If to govern is to foresee, we can consider that we are no longer governed...”. As such, we can see some criticism against austerity-led politics, cuts against the welfare state and inadequate emergency provisions—all themes more traditionally associated with Left-wing politics.

Statements within this frame also suggested that the Far Right groups under study were fairly or strongly supportive of lockdown measures and were quick to criticise governments that were reported as not applying the restrictions accordingly or setting a poor example. Statements that encouraged more stringent measures were found to exist within examples from all the organisational case studies, suggesting that Far Right groups were attempting to position themselves as advocating for more responsible approaches to COVID-19, rather than using more contention tactics, such as the breaking of lockdowns or the encouraging of violence.

Frame 4: Liberty

Whilst most groups were broadly supportive of the concept of national lockdowns, the fourth frame identified saw a questioning of the specific extent or nature of certain powers that were implemented in response to COVID-19.

The British National Socialist Movement expressed concern that lockdowns were being used as a means of exercising control over populations, asking “Are we witnessing the slow death of liberal democracy in Britain and Western Europe?” and suggesting that “enforced population lock-downs across Western Europe and the United Kingdom have led to an entirely new system of population control”. Particular concern was raised over the time limitations of these new emergency measures, BNSM questioning whether the new measures will be removed after the decline of the health crisis or “will the Home Office and the police decide to hold onto their new powers for an 'unlimited period' just in case?...” (15 April 2020).

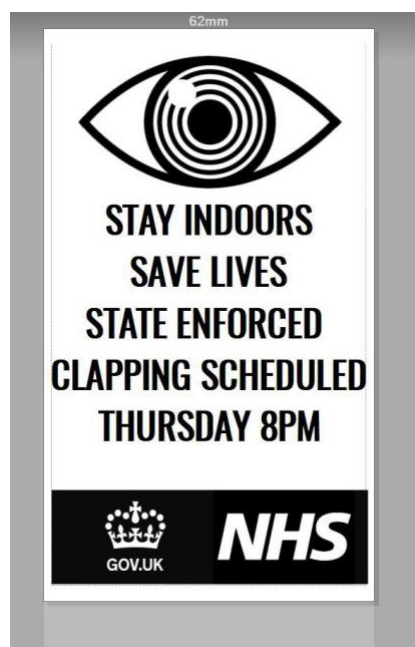


Image 3. Hundred handers post (b)

The Hundred Handers, meanwhile, framed some UK governmental responses to COVID-19 as overly expansive, with the Hundred Handers using ‘Big Brother’ themes and symbolism attached to material, whilst #ClapforNHS (a weekly showing of support for UK health workers) was framed as the scheduling of ‘State Enforced Clapping’. HH also warned against the danger of the increased power of state security during lockdown and the individual risks that activists face, stating:

“At a time of peak government control, [suppression of] dissident voices will be a top priority” (14 April 2020).

Particular ire was directed towards the actions of police and authorities during this period, comparing them to ‘the Stasi’ (17 April 2020) after two activists distributing Hundred Handers material were arrested⁴⁴:

⁴⁴ BBC, 2020, ‘Coronavirus: Arrests over ‘disgusting’ racist COVID-19 stickers’.

“These cowards won’t even let their failing system be criticised because they’re so scared. Police are patrolling more than usual at the moment, there’s no point getting snatched up with material on you.” (17 April 2020)

The Nordic Resistance Movement also suggested that the responses to COVID-19 over-extended the centralisation of state power and that national governments are “using this virus to invade your privacy” and expressing concern that long-term measures, such as the tracking of individuals who have the virus or are at risk, represent a significant risk to privacy:

“I don’t want to be a corona minimiser... I know people have died and I don’t want to take away from that, but it’s the hysteria where people are mixing in surveillance and QR codes and where you have to be vaccinated to get a pass.” (NRM: 7 April 2020)

Whilst groups like CasaPound did not raise any concerns about the scope of authority powers in response to COVID-19, they were concerned that the virus was being used as a means by which the European Union could advance its power over Italy, taking strong issue with the *Meccanismo Europeo di Stabilità* (European Stability Mechanism, or ESM) designed to provide financial assistance and recovery support to Eurozone states impacted by national lockdowns.

Frame 5: Resilience

One of the most unexpected frames found within the data was that of ‘Resilience’. Resilience is defined here as “the ability of people to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength (individual or social) to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma”.⁴⁵ Whilst it was used as a frame in 39.7% of COVID-19 related statements across this period—making it the most used frame identified—this was skewed by its central use in CPI statements. However, a still significant use of resilience frames was found in five out of the six Far Right groups analysed here.

Within the dataset, instances of resilience include: the care of vulnerable groups (such as the elderly or economically-disadvantaged); the supporting of local businesses or workers’ rights; the support of healthcare professionals and volunteering with groups such as the Red Cross; as well as the sharing of important information about lockdown restrictions or official scientific advice.

In CasaPound material, many statements detailed the activities of members as providing an active response to the spread of COVID-19. This included an official statement on 29th March 2020 that “the entire leadership of the [CasaPound] leadership has joined the Red Cross in responses to the health crisis”, along with several pictures of CPI taking part in Red Cross activities.⁴⁶ CPI members and supporters were also encouraged to volunteer with the Red Cross, or to engage in other exercises that support healthcare, such as the donating of money or blood to hospitals. CPI also conducted fundraising activities in

⁴⁵ Richard McNeil-Willson, Vivian Gerrand, Francesca Scrinzi, and Anna Triandafyllidou, 2019, “Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: An analytical framework for the BRaVE project (Concept Paper).” In. Florence: European University Institute; Laurence Kirmayer, M. Sedhev, Rob Whitley, Stéphane Dandeneau, and C. Isaac, 2009, *Community Resilience: Models, Metaphors and Measures*.

⁴⁶ For example, ‘I militanti di CasaPound Italia hanno aderito ai volontari temporanei della Croce Rossa Italiana per l'emergenza Coronavirus’ (8 April 2020).

support hospitals struggling with COVID-19, raising money as part of a drive to establish a COVID ward in Cardarelli, Naples.⁴⁷



Image 4. CasaPound Post

Another activity highlighted consistently by CPI was the delivery of care packages to elderly residents or poor families. This involved the delivery of food packages, as well as masks and gloves:

“Oggi ad #Ostia consegna porta a porta di generi alimentari a decine di famiglie italiane in difficoltà.” [“Today in #Ostia are door-to-door deliveries of groceries to dozens of Italian families in difficulty”]. (30 March 2020)

Numerous pictures were recorded of deliveries taking place to vulnerable families and individuals throughout the period under study, and CPI stressed that deliveries were made in compliance with national lockdown regulations and restrictions.⁴⁸ Other resilience responses by CPI included the establishment of a new radio station, Radio Bandiera Nera, in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This comprised analysis of current affairs and music, and included interviews with frontline medical staff, such as that broadcast on 14:00 CET on 26 March 2020:

“Coronavirus, parla un medico Milanese: La verità sulla situazione in Lombardia raccontata da chi sta lottando in prima linea.” [“Coronavirus, a Milanese doctor speaks: The truth about the situation in Lombardy told by those who are fighting on the front lines.”] (26 March 2020)

As such, there was a wide range of community-focussed activities recorded and disseminated by CPI during the period, with CPI activism used as a means of responding to problems caused in certain vulnerable communities by the lockdown, particularly where government support was unavailable or lacking.

Resilience-building frames were also used by other Far Right groups. Examples of this included non-partisan support for healthcare professionals, information about how to

⁴⁷ La Vedetta D'Italia, 2020, 'Covid19, aperto nuovo reparto con l'aiuto di Solid Onlus al Cardarelli di Napoli', <http://www.lavedettaditaliabz.it/2020/03/31/covid19-aperto-nuovo-reparto-con-laiuto-di-solid-onlus-al-cardarelli-di-napoli/>.

⁴⁸ 'Le consegne sono state effettuate rispettando le norme riportate nel decreto Covid-19' / 'Deliveries were made in compliance with the rules set out in the COVID-19 decree' (8th April 2020).

stop the spread of COVID-19 through social distancing and observing the lockdown, as well as specific information about lockdown regulations (what was and was not permissible). Educational materials were also released, to support parents struggling with activities during extended periods of home-schooling. Within the 'Women's Division' of the British National Socialist Movement, school activities were created for "building a strong community... [whilst] we support our men in the constant fight to protect our race, heritage and lands" (1 April 2020). This comprised an Educational Resource Page for home schooling, with activities that drew on a Smorgasbord of national heritages, including how to make a cardboard Viking helmet or drinking horn, a recipe for baking Welsh cakes, 'Chakras for Kids', and a wordsearch of Aztec deities. Such activities tied into Far Right support of the 'traditional' family unit as a form of resilience, as seen in this statement by the BID:

"Was auch immer dieses Jahr noch für uns bereithält – die Krise bringt uns den Wert der Familie und der größeren Solidargemeinschaft, in die wir eingebettet sind, neu zu Bewusstsein" ["Whatever this year has in store for us, the crisis brings us to new awareness of the value of the family and the larger community of solidarity in which we are embedded."] (BID: 12 April 2020)

Frame 6: Conspiracy

The final frame that was identified was that which used or referred to conspiracy theories or misinformation. 20 posts out of the total of 209 were found to reference or about COVID-19 in the context of conspiracy or misinformation, or 9.6% of all posts. Identitarian groups were more relatively likely to engage in discussions over conspiracy and it represented the most significant frame for the Germany Identitarian group IBD, appearing in just over a third of their posts (38.5%). However, for other groups, it was consistently one of the least used frames, making up only between 5% and 14.3% of the posts by the five other Far Right groups.

A further surprising aspect to this was that this frame was one of the most difficult to identify. It was found to contain a wide variety of different approaches to conspiracy theories or the spread of misinformation, including: the suggestion that COVID-19 was a man-made virus; the idea that fear about the virus was being used to distract from other—"more important"—events such as mass migration; or posts that attempted to used COVID-19 to spread misinformation about hostile groups or left-wing actors. In no posts by these six prominent was there any reference to the virus as being linked to the communication technology 5G, although this is prevalent in much of the commentary on Far Right and extremist responses to COVID-19.⁴⁹

One of the most prominent ideas that came through in this frame was the suggestion that the threat from COVID-19 (and the subsequent lockdown) was being deliberately over-exaggerated by authorities to distract from more important issues. This included the suggestion that COVID-19 is being used to deflect from criticism about the real problem of 'defending' European borders against migrants, a frame that was found in Identitarian material on COVID-19.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Dearden, 2020a, "Coronavirus conspiracy theories must be taken seriously to avoid 'serious consequences'", *The Independent*; Meleagrou-Hitchens and Crawford, 2020, '5G and the Far Right: How Extremists Capitalise on Coronavirus Conspiracies', *Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET)*, 21st April 2020, section Coronavirus;

⁵⁰ *Die vorherrschende Panik über den Coronavirus lenkt uns zunehmend von den großen Problemen an der griechischen Grenze ab. Wir sagen: das griechische Volk steht nicht alleine da! Seine Heimat verteidigen heißt auch Europa verteidigen* [The prevailing panic about the corona virus is increasingly distracting us from the

“Im Schatten der Corona-Krise karrt die Türkei wieder tausende Migranten an die griechische Grenze” [“In the shadow of the Corona crisis, Turkey is again carting thousands of migrants to the Greek border”] (21 April 2020).

Other material questioned about the origins of COVID-19, particularly whether it was a man-made or naturally occurring virus. However, whilst such a conspiracy has been linked to discussion over Far Right responses to the virus⁵¹, questions over its origin only appeared in two posts in the dataset of 209, both in statements by the British National Socialist Movement (15 April 2020):

*“There are numerous theories circulating the globe as to where Covid-19 came into existence and as to how the international medical crisis has developed. Without doubt the starting point was mainland China, but many questions are unanswered as to the origins...” (BNSM: 15 April 2020).*⁵²

Other statements released in this frame attempted to spread deliberate misinformation; however, some of this wasn't aimed at creating confusion around the virus but instead at attacking groups considered as posing a threat. Several posts by the Hundred Handers, for instance, created falsified misinformation about Extinction Rebellion, using XR logos to create material that advocated for eco-fascism.⁵³ Other statements launched attacks against Left or Liberal individuals, particularly encouraging a narrative that those on the political centre or left were more likely to deliberately flout lockdown rules.

It's important to consider here that not all posts that fell within the Conspiracy frame were pro-conspiracy or misinformation, as some posts attempted to create debate around conspiracies by presenting different arguments both in favour and against the idea that COVID-19 was a manmade virus, or raise questions without necessarily encouraging the reader to come to a singular conclusion.

Implications of Findings

Having detailed the six frames that were found in the dataset, some key points arise about how Far Right groups are responding to COVID-19. The following findings suggest that: [1] Far Right responses have focussed most of their frame response on authorities, stressing forms of activism in which it is implied that Far Groups would be able to create a more responsible approach to the virus than that which was enacted by authorities. This included, in many ways, [2] a pro-social approach, in which the building of resilience

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major problems at the Greek border. We say: the Greek people are not alone! Defending his homeland also means defending Europe.]

⁵¹ Steven Zhou, 2020, 'Coronavirus Conspiracies Give Boost to Canada's Far Right', *Foreign Policy*, 18th May.

⁵² 'There are numerous theories circulating the globe as to where Covid-19 came into existence and as to how the international medical crisis has developed. Without doubt the starting point was mainland China, but many questions are unanswered as to the origins; was it contracted naturally from eating bats or other wild animals? was it generated artificially at a Chinese military research establishment outside Wuhan? Was this a serious attempt at social-engineering by the Chinese to reduce their overall civilian population? Is this part of a greater strategy by the Chinese government in response to civil unrest in Hong Kong? Or a strategic, non-military strike at the global economies outside China? Or are the Chinese operating in collaboration with other globalist interests? Is United Nations agenda 21 part of the unanswered question? SO MANY THEORIES AND SO FEW 'OFFICIAL' ANSWERS' BNSM, 15th April 2020

⁵³ Erica Roffe, 2020, 'Far-right group posts fake Extinction Rebellion stickers around Bedford', *The Bedford Independent*, 29th March, <https://www.bedfordindependent.co.uk/far-right-group-posts-fake-extinction-rebellion-stickers-around-bedford/>.

in communities against the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown was stressed; and [3] that whilst conspiracy-based framing or attempts at spreading misinformation was used, it was relatively sparse and was outweighed in real terms by resilience-building frames.

This has the following implications: [1] that research and (policy) response into the Far Right has to be highly contextualised in political events and authority actions; [2] that resilience has to be better understood as something undertaken by Far Right groups as well as something that is used to build community cohesion as part of a 'countering violent extremism' agenda; and [3] that we need to be cautious in the over-ascribing of conspiracy theories based on mixed evidence, or else need to complexify some of the existing commentary. These three implications, in turn, help us to consider how we can construct 'crisis frames' in understanding the response by Far Right groups to global events such as COVID-19.

Firstly, actions by Far Right groups, in this study, were found to be highly responsive to their political surroundings. This is not just shown in the case studies' adaption of frames to the new situation created by the rise of COVID-19 in Europe. It is critical to note that much of the frames were directly or indirectly aimed at critiquing national governments and practice—the direct challenging of authorities through frames such as F3 (Governance) and F4 (Liberty) but also indirect challenges through frames such as F1 (Immigration), F2 (Migration), and F5 (Resilience). These frames took government actions and, from them, created a narrative more likely to stress that authorities were being irresponsible in, for instance, not enforcing a stricter lockdown or challenging those that flouted lockdown rules—not always along partisan lines. Such framing inherently cast Far Right groups as offering solutions that were more responsible, more caring or providing better support, or better grounded in scientific reasoning and less in ideological or political posturing.

Secondly, from this came the use of resilience as a means of articulating the responsibility of Far Right groups measured against the ineptitude of European governments. Resilience as a term has gained popularity in policy and research circles in recent years as a means of understanding why more people *aren't* engaging in violence⁵⁴ and has increasingly come to be seen as a means of building community strength against polarisation and extremism through the allocation and negotiation of intersecting contextual factors and social resources.⁵⁵ However, this study highlights that mechanisms of resilience are not just activated by 'pro-social' groups but have become a central component of social movements with more 'anti-social' goals, such as the Far Right under study here, to support and enhance core functioning of communities when met with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma—such as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁶ Resilience is particularly important in cases where state power or ability has reached its limitations, therefore underlining the limitations of current state power and

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⁵⁴ Grossman, et al., 2017, "Final Research Report for Understanding Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism".

⁵⁵ Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar, 2017 'Psychological resilience: a conceptual review of theory and research.' in Updesh Kumar (ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience* (Routledge: London); Michael Ungar, 2013. 'Resilience, Trauma, Context and Culture', *Trauma, Violence and Abuse (TVA)*, 14: 255-66; Billie Hunter and Lucie Warren, 2013, "Final Report: Investigating Resilience in Midwifery." In: Cardiff: Cardiff University; Sippel, Lauren, Robert Pietrzak, Dennis Charney, Linda Mayes, and Steven Southwick. 2015. *How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual?*; Michael Ungar, 2008. *Resilience across Cultures*.

⁵⁶ Michael Ungar, 2011, *The Social Ecology of Resilience: A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (Springer: New York); Michael Ungar, M. Brown, L. Liebenberg, R. Othman, W.M. Kwong, and M. Armstrong. 2007. 'Unique pathways to resilience across cultures', *Adolescence*, 42: 287-310; Masten, A.S., and M.O. Wright. 2010. 'Resilience over the lifespan: Developmental perspectives on resistance, recovery and transformation.' in J.W. Reich, A.J. Zautra and J.S. Hall (eds.), *Handbook of adult resilience* (The Guilford Press: New York).

governmental care of its citizens.⁵⁷ As such, we need to ensure we are orientating discussion over resilience to account for the central role it has shown to play here in the way that these Far Right groups responded to and utilised resources in times of international crisis.

Thirdly, the findings from this study suggest that we need to avoid generalisations with regards to the use of conspiracy theories. The organisations under study here—a limited subsection of Far Right groups but still representing a fairly significant chunk of European activism—generally avoided engagement in conspiracy theories, or utilised discussions over conspiracy and misinformation in quite sophisticated ways. These groups conspicuously made no statements about 5G technology, engaged in only very limited discussions on the suggestion that the virus may be man-made, and not only generally avoided the downplaying the virus’ threat but criticised authorities when they were seen as not taking the threat seriously enough—findings that conflict with some of the narratives that have surfaced in commentary of Far Right responses to COVID-19.

This also potentially draws into question the empirical grounding of policy approaches. Statements by significant actors in, for instance, the UK counterterror response, including PREVENT National Coordinator Chief Superintendent Nik Adams and the Head of the UK Commission for Countering Extremism Sara Khan, have centred in on conspiracy theories as providing a ‘hook’ for Far Right groups to develop support, or described them as ‘the way they radicalise people’, ‘the way they attempt to normalise extremist narratives’, and ‘a clear tactic of extremist groups’.⁵⁸ The findings of this paper undermine these statements. This is not to say that their analysis is wrong, so much as to suggest that we need to be aware that (at the very least) it doesn’t seem to be universally applicable to Far Right groups and is certainly not reflected in empirical data, in certain contexts.

Conclusions

This study has sought to identify the different framing practices that have been developed by Far Right groups in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Taking a two-month period between 22 February and 22 April 2020 and examining Telegram statements (as well as their associated links, articles, podcasts and videos) of six prominent Far Right movement organisations across Europe, it has found six broad ‘crisis frames’ that have been developed in response in response to the crisis: migration, globalisation, governance, liberty, resilience, and conspiracy.

These frames, whilst representing specific configurations of responses to the COVID-19 international crisis, do not represent a wholly new paradigm in terms of the framing of activism—the ‘crisis frames’ largely stress existing aspects of Far Right discourse and activism. The medicalisation of migration (F1), for instance, has a long history in Right and Far Right framing, in which the international movement of peoples becomes

⁵⁷ Jeroen Gunning, 2007, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (Columbia University Press: Columbia); Nancy J. Davis and Robert V Robinson, 2012, *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare: Egypt, Israel, Italy and the United States* (Indiana University Press: Indiana).

⁵⁸ ‘[Conspiracy theories are] being pushed out by extreme right-wing groups as a hook to get people onto chat forums, where they can then talk about other hate-related conspiracy theories and draw people into their narratives... From that, they can pick up those individuals who are most vulnerable to encourage them, radicalise them and take them towards terrorism’ Nik Adams (Dearden 2020b); ‘Conspiracy theories are the bread and butter tactics of extremist groups. It’s the way they radicalise people, it’s the way they attempt to normalise extremist narratives and cross over into the mainstream. It’s a clear tactic of extremist groups, which is why as an organisation we are deeply concerned.’ Sara Khan (Dearden 2020a).

synonymous with disease, and cleanliness of the body politic linked to tighter border controls.⁵⁹ Globalisation and 'Globalism' (F2), meanwhile, has long been used as a central trope by the Far Right.⁶⁰ The focus of the Far Right frames on challenging governmental decisions (F3) builds on historical contentious activism but, that these Far Right groups have chosen to present the Government less as attacking liberty (F4:Liberty identified only in 10.5% of the posts) and more as not responsible enough actions in response to the virus (F3:Governance identified in 24.4% of the posts) is significant. It strongly suggests that these Far Right groups have responded in the creation of propaganda designed less to cause contention through defying national lockdowns or minimising the threat of COVID-19, and more focussed on framing governments and authorities as the ones that are irresponsible or failing to heed medical advice. This finding is backed up by the two final frames, in which resilience-building (F5) was more than four times more likely to be used by these Far Right groups (identified in 39.7% of the posts), than conspiracy theories and misinformation (identified in 9.6% of the posts).

Resilience-building has a long documented history of being used by 'extremist' and contentious groups and has been flagged as potential concern in regards to the COVID-19 outbreak.⁶¹ But the use of it in propaganda which stresses a narrative of the European Far Right providing responsible care against an uncaring state, coupled with a relative hesitancy to use conspiracy framing, suggests that 'crisis frames' are largely not about creating chaos (as with ideas linked to accelerationism or misinformation) but rather about building support through filling in the gaps left by the state during times of crisis. Of course, these come with a heavy dose of traditional Far Right tropes about migration, national purity, and xenophobia. Yet, it suggests that such groups are not always the agents of chaos some commentary suggests, and that crises may actually mitigate forms of contention rather than exacerbate them. The COVID-19 crisis, at least in the early stages, seems to have led these Far Right groups to display their desired role as one that provides support for families, local communities and nations—albeit in a way highly coloured by propaganda—rather than necessarily attempting to use the virus for encouraging acts of violence, sabotage or hate crimes.

Whether we can determine that such 'crisis frames' represent a long-term shift replicated in future crises that will no doubt befall Europe in what looks to be a turbulent coming decade is difficult to tell. This study only studies the first stage of the outbreak, in which the severity of the COVID-19 crisis continued to escalate. Frustrations borne out over many months of disruption, coupled with political currents blown in from across the Atlantic, may lead to greater alignment with groups that have sought to challenge lockdowns and the threat of the virus more vociferously. However, the development of 'crisis frames' in response to COVID-19 by European Far Right groups have so far prioritised resilience and responsible governance over contention.

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⁵⁹ Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern, 2002, 'The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrations and Disease in American Society', *The Milbank Quarterly: a multidisciplinary journal of population health and health policy*, 80: 757-88; Alan M. Kraut, 1994, *Silent Travellers: Germs, Genes and the 'Immigrant Menace'* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London).

⁶⁰ Jonathon O'Donnell, 2019, 'Antisemitism under erasure: Christian Zionist anti-globalism and the refusal of cohabitation', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

⁶¹ Gunning, 2007, *Hamas in Politics*; Nancy J. Davis and Robert V Robinson, 2012, *Claiming Society for God: Religious Movements and Social Welfare: Egypt, Israel, Italy and the United States* (Indiana University Press: Indiana); Colin P. Clarke, 2020, 'Yesterday's Terrorists Are Today's Public Health Providers', *Foreign Policy*, 8th April, section Argument; Mia Bloom, 2020, 'How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis', *Just Security*, 3rd April.

This urgently needs to be reflected in policy and programmatic responses which, to date, have tended to make assumptions on the role of conspiracies that are generally contradictory to the findings of this study. Countering the Far Right would be better served by not only in recognising the current limitations in the CVE response, but by considering the driving forces behind the ‘crisis framing’—particularly the resilience-building narratives that were found to be so prevalent. Issues of inequality and the lack of social support from state and local structures, therefore, should take central stage in positing a response to combatting the Far Right in the post-COVID landscape. This can be achieved partly by the implementation of pro-social resilience programmes to build community support networks⁶² but more crucially through programmes that directly address the gaps in state provision that have, in some cases, provided fertile ground for building resonant Far Right frames. This includes concepts such as universal basic income, which shift away from security-led countering violent extremism (CVE) narratives towards addressing the societal inequalities that seem to drive much of the Far Right framing here. Whilst this study only represents an early exploration of ‘crisis framing’, it suggests that a current discussions and responses to the Far Right may perhaps be, in some significant cases, misaligned in their efforts to counter them.

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⁶² Wignaraja, Kanni, and Balazs Horvath. 2020. ‘Universal basic income is the answer to the inequalities exposed by COVID-19’, *World Economic Forum*, 17th April; Grossman et al, 2017. “Final Research Report for Understanding Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: A Standardised Research Measure”.

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Framing in times of crisis: Responses to COVID-19 amongst Far Right movements and organisations

Richard McNeil-Willson

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