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SPECIAL SECTION: ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM

Breaking (with) the System: Exodus as Resistance?

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Anti-government extremism is frequently characterised by its violent potential such as harassment and violence against politicians, government officials, experts, and journalists. Although understandable from the perspective of radicalisation and terrorism scholars, another tendency within the fluid anti-government movements is sometimes overlooked: 'internal migration', in which parallel enclaves are created in order to escape the perceived repressive order of the system. It signals attempts to build 'free zones' within society on the base of a discourse denying the legitimacy of the political order. In this article the author will assess whether or not exodus as a distinctive, usually nonviolent form of anti-government politics should be understood as relatively harmless or as the forerunners of more confrontational practices, such as deliberately undermining the liberal order by fuelling anti-system sentiments or preparing for resistance in a later stage, that in the long term could have security implications. This article will propose an initial, tentative analytical model to answer these questions, and then the Dutch political party Forum for Democracy will be used as a case to demonstrate the argument and explore the strengths and limitations of the proposed model.

Keywords: prefigurative politics, anti-systemness, anti-government extremism, conspiracy theories, sovereign citizens

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Introduction

In 2016, sociologist Majken Jul Sørensen stated that “surprisingly little” had been written about exodus as resistance; in his analysis, practices of withdrawal are “widely practiced, yet hardly any theory exists in this area.”¹ In the academic field of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, the study of exodus indeed has little prominence. Of course, that is understandable, as direct political confrontations and political violence are at the heart of the discipline. However, although the strategy of withdrawal (for example, as witnessed in the Netherlands) may currently represent nothing more than weak signals, one could argue that focusing only on violent means runs the risk of missing phenomena that potentially could undermine democratic order. This question fits the current debate on the threat emerging from radical right (and other) movements. Is it the violent potential that is at the heart of the threat, or should the nonviolent hollowing out of democratic order or democratic core values be of greater concern?²

This article will briefly describe the phenomenon of exodus and its different manifestations, illustrating how it is not a new phenomenon and can be part of strategies of different political affiliations. Then an initial, tentative analytical model will be proposed that can be used to assess whether or not manifestations of exodus could have ramifications for democratic order. The Dutch political party Forum for Democracy (FvD) will serve as a case study to demonstrate the use of the model. This is a uniquely relevant case since its leader, Thierry Baudet, recently and very explicitly announced a strategy of exodus as the new political objective of the party. Further, FvD has emphasised that creating a bottom-up political movement is more important than parliamentary work. And the party played an important role in the coronavirus protests in the Netherlands, in which strong anti-government sentiments were evident. Finally, the article will conclude with a review of the current debate within the Netherlands about whether FvD should be considered a threat to democracy and should be banned.³

Desired Futures

Strategies of ‘exodus’ and strategies of ‘withdrawal’ are not new phenomena. Sørensen refers to these strategies as ‘constructive resistance’: initiatives in which people start to build the society they desire independently of the dominant structures already in place. A variety of practices all try to construct “the desired future within the shell of old society.”⁴ Vinthagen describes constructive resistance as resistance that can “transcend the whole phenomenon of being-against-something, turning into the proactive form of constructing ‘alternative’ or ‘pre-figurative’ social institutions which facilitate resistance...”⁵

Strategies of exodus, for instance, have a long tradition in radical left movements in Europe.⁶ The strategy reflected the leftist notion that changing social relations was a premise of political change, instead of the other way around. It also reflected political impatience: as a form of practice, it refused to wait for the ‘right class conditions’ or taking over political institutions before experimenting with new forms of community or utopia.⁷ By refusing to speak the ‘language of power’ and engage in political experimentation, the concept of exodus should unleash the “desire for freedom” and open up fields of innovation and creativity.⁸ Desertion, a “mass defection from existing institutional arrangements,” should open the route to develop alternative

arrangements.⁹ In the 1980s, variations of the same discourse were articulated in an influential essay by Hakim Bey, who conceptualised “temporary autonomous zones” as a “perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful.” A temporary autonomous zone was thought of as a “microcosm of the anarchist dream of a free culture.” Bey argued that “disappearance” formed an “always-ongoing revolution of everyday life” in which some of the benefits of free culture could be experienced “here and now.”¹⁰

In 2000, the strategy of exodus was revitalised by Negri and Hardt in their influential book *Empire*.¹¹ According to the authors, the ‘enemy’ had become invisible and all known resistance strategies could no longer be viewed as a critical ‘outside position’. “If we cannot recognize any position as being in opposition to the system, we have to be against everything, everywhere, all the time, and abide to the oldest republican principles: desertion, exodus and nomadism. As in the disciplinary area, sabotage constituted the elementary notion of resistance, in the area of imperial control probably it has to be desertion.”¹²

Elements of desertion as a strategy emerged in social movements like the Five Star Movement in Italy (2009), Occupy (2011), or the Indignados movement in Spain (2011). In social movement literature these movements and their activities are dubbed ‘prefigurative politics’. Prefigurative politics replace conventional politics with direct social action addressed to society rather than the state or power holders.¹³ The objective is to craft alternatives in the here and now, circumventing relations of domination. Instead of proclaiming a political program, or fostering alliances with potential allies or institutionalised actors, activists tried to build an alternative and better society as a work in progress.

Sometimes the predicted total collapse of society is the driving force for building free zones. ‘Collapsologists’ are nicknamed ‘survivalists of the left’.¹⁴ They believe that a range of environmental crises will lead to a breakdown of society’s institutions, production, and services and destroy social and political structures. ‘Self-sufficient’ communities are being organised on small plots of land, fostering an eco-conscious lifestyle and advocating an ‘internal journey’ away from mass consumption. In the words of Paul Charbonnier, “Like born-again Christians racked by guilt, belatedly reconciled with Christ, collapsologists are shepherded through the universe of Mad Max to that of Little House on the Prairie.”¹⁵

Ford pointed at the similarities in apocalyptic perspectives that can be found between survivalists from the left and the right. The source of the apocalypse as such differs. For progressive ‘self-sufficient’ citizens, climate change is the most important horseman of the apocalypse, and therefore they drop out of systems believed to be unjust, unsustainable, or ineffective. For conservative self-sufficient citizens, the inevitable collapse of society is the result of policies of the climate change hoax, mass migration, and the totalitarian aspirations of the globalist elite. Regardless of these different views, however, survivalists from the left and the right engage in a form of ‘purifying disintegration’ from the system, and participate in “subcultural practices organised around the ideal of self-sufficiency, a state of individual or household independence from the institutions that otherwise organise modern material life.”¹⁶

Sovereign Citizens and the Cultic Milieu

The strategy of exodus can also be witnessed in the sovereign citizens movement. In its essence, sovereign citizens (a.k.a. Freemen) reject the authority of the state and its institutions, as well as the financial system. A belief that the state is illegitimate, based on alternative readings of history, leads sovereign citizens to argue that it has no legal authority over them. For example, sovereign citizens in the United States believe that the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 introduced a second-class citizenship compared to the original form of citizenship as written down in the Constitution. As a result, sovereign citizens believe that the US in fact ceased to be a democratic republic that reflects the will of the people. It has been estimated that the US has some 300,000 sovereign citizens.¹⁷

Certain countries in Europe have comparable movements denying the legitimacy of the state, claiming their independent sovereignty and creating parallel societies. All these movements refer to various kinds of 'pseudo law' that shifts the balance of authority and obligation in favour of individuals and away from government and institutional actors.¹⁸ In France, for instance, the movement One Nation, led by Alice Pazalmar, tried (but failed) to buy a village in the Lot (in southwest France). One Nation has more than 32,000 social media followers and some 3,000 members who refuse all 'illegitimate authority' and are distancing themselves from the legal and administrative structures of society. A 200-hectare estate was meant to be the "perfect place for deconstructing old structures, for being born and reborn, for blooming and growing old together," according to their YouTube video.¹⁹ One Nation is considered to be a cult by the French authorities.

The French sovereign citizens movement is also interwoven with militant extreme-right activists. Eric Fiorile, a self-proclaimed 'natural healer', called for a coup d'état and was later arrested for his involvement in the 'Barjols', an extremist identitarian group planning a violent attack on President Macron.²⁰ Another extremist involved in the French sovereign citizens movement, Rémy Daillet, was arrested and accused of plotting a series of attacks against COVID-19 vaccination centres, a masonic lodge, and journalists, as well as planning to overthrow the French government.²¹

In Germany, the so-called *Reichsbürger* claim the Federal German Republic is not legitimate, as in their view the old German Empire never ceased to exist. They try to separate themselves from official structures by not paying taxes or not carrying government-issued identification, and have declared their own small 'national territories', which they call the 'Second German Empire', the 'Free State of Prussia' or the 'Principality of Germania'. There is a nexus between the Reichsbürger movement, the *Querdenken* anti-lockdown movement, QAnon adherents, and right-wing extremist organisations. Germany's domestic intelligence agency estimates that there are some 21,000 Reichsbürger in Germany, and that the movement is growing.²² On December 7, 2022, German police arrested 25 persons accused of plotting to overthrow the German government. The group apparently was closely associated with parts of the Reichsbürger movement.²³

The overlap between sovereign citizens, right-wing organisations, and spiritual communities in a 'cultic milieu' is nowadays a common experience. The spiritual New Age communities, empha-

sising alternative lifestyles and health practices as alternatives to the existing institutions, resemble (in both a progressive and a conservative way) ideas about ‘awakening’, transformation and a longing for alternative knowledge, truth, community, and practices. According to Baker, the milieu has “a common ideology and distrust of institutional authority – the government, the pharmaceutical and vaccine industry – which they see as promoting compliance, obedience and surveillance. Their subject matter may vary, but the underlying logic of constructing an evil enemy and heroically seeking to restore truth, freedom and justice is remarkably similar.”²⁴ No matter the differences in political orientation, the conclusion is the same: one must prepare for exodus and build a parallel society, free from state control.

Of course, there are some important differences between strategies of exodus based on right-wing or left-wing affiliations, but key similarities include the belief that there exists an ‘omnipotent and all-powerful state’ that is difficult to confront. Also, political impatience is common across the ideological spectrum, the core idea being “don’t wait for political solutions, start today.” The idea that changing cultural values is essential for provoking real, revolutionary change—‘meta politics’ in the lexicon of the conservative nationalists—mirrors earlier Gramscian notions of hegemony.

Anti-Government Extremism?

Can building parallel societies be considered a threat to democratic order, or maybe even a security threat? In other words, is it a dangerous form of extremism—running against the core of the democratic order and democratic values—in terms of means, objectives, or outcomes? Bötticher argued that radicals can withdraw from mainstream society into a niche culture, co-existing with plural societies and not seeking confrontation with mainstream society.²⁵ One could even argue that the strategy of exodus has little transformative potential and is in itself a form of depoliticisation that sustains the current order, as it more or less surrenders the ambition to “collectively mobilise for large-scale societal change in the public space.”²⁶ From a principled point of view, one could argue that an ‘anti-government’ stance reflects legitimate and critical questions about the limits of state intervention in daily life and how much free space individuals and communities are entitled to in democratic societies—including the option to not participate in the political system, or to seek other ways of participation. Being critical of conventional ways of political participation and representation should therefore not be considered *a priori* the same as promoting extreme agendas.

While the literature on strategies of withdrawal does not offer clear insights about the question of potential threat, it gives some pointers to work with. Further, we can gain some clarity by looking at select (current) practical examples of individuals and organisations that withdraw from the system, as well as assessments made by security organisations. Based on these insights, what follows is a proposed initial, tentative analytical model enabling an analysis of the anti-government extremist threat emerging from strategies of withdrawal. In this way, perhaps we can elaborate on the work of Vinthagen and Johansson, who stated that it will depend on “context, the way the escape is done and the particular power relation that is (un)affected, whether or not democratic power is undermined or attacked.”²⁷

Delegitimising Democratic Order

Sørensen argues that one must look at the delegitimising narratives and practices in order to decide whether or not ‘strategies of exodus’ can be considered to be a potential threat. If resistance is merely inspiring others, or functions as a “supplement to the dominant way of doing things,” there is hardly a threat; however, if initiatives “replace parts of what is undesired,” and the constructive alternative becomes the norm, this can ultimately lead to a “complete collapse of the previous dominant structure.”²⁸ Vinthagen and Johansson argued that avoiding or escaping power relations might be a form of active resistance, since avoidance makes the “exercise of power on that specific individual or group (temporarily) impossible,” and through that, it is undermining power; especially, if individuals are needed for the power exercise, then escape does indeed undermine in itself.²⁹

Further, as Gest argues, if actors withdraw from the system, but use “tactics that circumvent the system’s established channels for influence,” they undermine its capacity to reflect popular will. Campaigning for civic abstention, intimidation, or spreading disinformation can be examples of the “active anti-system individual or group” trying to undermine or topple the democratic system; the crucial distinction is engagement in movements, clubs, or other political efforts that become “substitutes for the democratic political system or are detrimental to it.”³⁰ Capocchia refers to this as “ideological anti-systemness: whether or not the ideological foundation of a party or movement includes an agenda to alter or destroy the system as it does not share the values of the political order.”³¹

In other words, it matters only if alternatives are being constructed, or that established structures are also actively being challenged, and how: for instance, denying essential elements of the constitution, sabotaging the functioning of state institutions, denigrating the democratic decision-making process, denying the legitimacy of the state, and advocating that people ignore laws and rules.³² Of course, the act of constructing alternatives also has a delegitimising effect in itself—for instance, if the message between the lines reads that alternatives have to be constructed because the current political order is corrupt, responsible for the ‘Great Replacement’ or white genocide, or plans to enslave the population. One could argue that denying the legitimacy of the current political order and depicting the system as a dictatorship creates a sense of urgency and indirectly legitimises more extreme political actions to ‘rescue’ freedom.

From Defensive to Offensive Social Practices

There is also another reason not to dismiss the possible consequences of exodus strategies in terms of undermining democracy or security challenges. Vinthagen and Johansson, who refer to exodus as ‘avoidance’, argue that ‘avoidance’ can be understood as preparing for resistance at a later stage. It has generally been accepted that ‘free spaces’ are important to foster shared collective identities and provide activists autonomy from dominant groups where they can nurture oppositional movement identities.³³ Alex Schmid, for instance, argues that the absence of violence might be only a “temporal tactical consideration,”; the nonuse of violence can be based on merely pragmatic, tactical, or temporal considerations, “not on a principled political philosophy that seeks to hold the moral high ground.”³⁴

Further, experience shows that there is a fine line between retreating from the system—as a defensive move—and attacking the system, especially its institutions and representatives. In the earlier discussion on ‘sovereign citizens and the cultic milieu’, some examples have been provided. In the United States and other countries, sovereign citizens today are considered to be an extremist and sometimes terrorist threat.³⁵ The German security service stated that encounters with *Reichsbürger* have a “high potential for escalation.” The German security services consider them to be ‘extremists’ and ‘enemies of the state’. Part of the movement is believed to be willing to use violence to defend their ideas and practices, convinced that they are entitled to self-defence.³⁶

Therefore, it does matter if calls for exodus also refer to the necessity and legitimacy of self-defence against authorities, the legitimacy of acquiring weapons, and whether nonviolent action repertoires are based on a principled democratic stance or framed as a more pragmatic consideration.

Democratic Norms and Governance Inside the Free Spaces

Finally, even without the direct use of violence or offensive actions against state authorities, disruptive and sometimes violent repertoires have been connected with individuals and groups that have isolated themselves from the system, such as child kidnapping, extortion, sexual abuse, fraud, money laundering, and tax evasion. In particular, the well-being of children is frequently mentioned as a risk of cult-like movements that isolate themselves from society. Even when ‘free spaces’ are not meant to be a base for actively confronting the system, there can still be democratic risks in terms of violation of essential democratic norms, such as inclusion, diversity, protection of minority rights, and the democratic quality of its governance structures.

With these complexities in mind, it is useful to apply the proposed model to a specific example—in this case, the Forum for Democracy—in order to demonstrate the argument and explore its strengths and limitations.

‘Forumland’: A Nation-in-Diaspora

Forum for Democracy (FvD) was founded in 2017 as a political party that combined a radical democratic agenda with conservative-liberal and nationalist ideas. At the beginning of 2022, FvD had nearly 60,000 members, making it the biggest party of the Netherlands in terms of membership, and won 8 out of 150 parliamentary seats during the 2021 general elections. FvD describes itself as the “largest political and cultural movement” in the Netherlands, with a strong emphasis on the values of conservatism and nationalism. “It is the belief in the possibility of a European Renaissance that drives us.”³⁷ Political scientists frequently characterise FvD as a populist, radical-right party. FvD has been accused of tolerating antisemitism and Islamophobia, and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories inside and outside Parliament.³⁸ FvD positioned itself in the front line of the movement in the Netherlands against the coronavirus policies, integrated conspiracy theories about the Great Reset launched by the World Economic

Forum in its narratives, and sided with the position of Russia's President Putin in the Ukraine war.

In the first edition of 'Dissident' (December 2021), the glossy magazine of the youth movement of *Forum for Democracy*, political leader and member of Dutch Parliament Thierry Baudet stated that "becoming a strong minority" was his new political objective.³⁹ Trying to get a majority position (or coalition) in Parliament, in order to change the political course of the Netherlands, was no longer an option, according to Baudet, as this would never be accepted by the "real globalist powers that pull the strings behind the screens." If FvD would triumph in elections, these globalist forces would invade the Netherlands, impose financial sanctions or falsify the next elections, and install a 'deep state puppet'. "We have to become a nation-in-diaspora that is able to operate completely autonomous, like the Amish in the United States, so to speak. It is about pure survival. So, currently I'm foremost preparing for the exodus."⁴⁰

Baudet therefore propagates the foundation of 'Forumland', a (mainly) digital connected parallel society with its own rules, schools, (dating) apps, cryptocurrency, QR-free zones, housing departments, businesses, and entertainment sector. By now, the first concrete proposals for establishing 'Renaissance schools' have been launched. "Education is being disturbed by fashion whims like iPad-schools, untimely sexual education, climate hysteria and coronavirus panic (...) Indoctrination with a one-sided worldview as advocated by the government and the EU blocks critical thinking."⁴¹

Delegitimising Democratic Order

Forum for Democracy participates in elections and is represented in Parliament. However, at the same time they are delegitimising the political order in a systematic manner. The arguments used by Baudet and other FvD representatives to articulate the need for exodus reflect a fundamental delegitimation of the current Dutch political order: the real political power is said to be in the hands of 'globalist powers' and the outcome of elections will not be accepted by the globalists. FvD representatives structurally delegitimise the democratic order by stating that it has become a 'tyranny' in which an "anti-democratic wind is blowing" and opposition is banned; the Netherlands is the 'new Weimar'.⁴²

Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren explained in an interview that the main objective of FvD is not to become stronger in Parliament, but to build a bottom-up political movement. He added that history showed that when regimes became tyrannies, they were toppled by the population. "We have the numbers and if the movement becomes so strong that it transcends into a revolutionary movement, I can imagine that the population will move to the parliament and will not leave before the government has resigned. That is what I hope for."⁴³

Within Parliament, FvD representatives are using disruptive techniques to attack their political opponents and the parliamentary system. One member, for instance, accused the government of being criminal and totalitarian, and promised that in the future they will be held accountable during special tribunals. FvD leader Baudet suggested that Finance Minister Kaag was recruited by foreign secret services during her study at St. Antony's College in Oxford. This fits the idea

discussed during a FvD meeting in April 2022 on ‘Plan B for a Parallel Society’, in which electoral policies were redefined as a tactic to “battle against the system and the state.”⁴⁴

FvD also delegitimises other institutions, such as the ‘mainstream media’. Reporters of ‘mainstream media’ are depicted as ‘sewer rats’. Their own media ecology of alternative media platforms provides their public with a continuing stream of (dis)information and opinions about COVID-19, 5G-technology, the World Economic Forum, Ukraine, trans-humanism, and other (often conspiracy-related) narratives. Medical professionals critical of the coronavirus policies have founded their own professional organisations, and networks of ‘free’ business initiatives are being formed. The launch of ‘Forumland’ seems to be an initiative to connect this variety of parallel structures under the political lead of FvD.

Further, FvD also advocates escaping power relations. During the same meeting in April 2022, attendees were encouraged to pay only with cash, in order to obstruct the future cashless society, and learn how to technologically bypass the coming European digital identity card. “That way we can reduce the power of the state. Don’t wait for a political solution, solve it yourself, rather yesterday than today.”⁴⁵ QR-free zones in Forumland are deliberate initiatives to escape the regulations of the government to protect public health in a crisis situation such as the coronavirus pandemic.

It shows that FvD is not just trying to survive in a ‘niche culture’ without seeking confrontation with mainstream society and the political system. Instead, it is looking for ways to escape, undermine, or disrupt power relations. It shows, in other words, the ideological anti-systemness of FvD.

From Defensive to Offensive Social Practices

In the same interview in which Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren explained that the objective is not to become stronger in Parliament, but to build a bottom-up political movement, he called for civil disobedience. “We really are dealing with a tyrannical government that opposes the population and only serves the interest of the globalist elite. At the end of the day, this main problem with our system cannot be solved by abiding to the rules of the system. That is why massive, militant and powerful civil disobedience is necessary, and yes, this implies breaking the law.”⁴⁶

This statement illustrates how it is hard to discern between the ‘defensive’ strategy—the exodus into Forumland—and the more offensive strategy, actively disrupting the system and building a ‘revolutionary’ movement bottom up. Further, in his plea for civil disobedience, Van Meijeren emphasised the importance of nonviolence, but based on pragmatic arguments: “I’m convinced that we will accomplish more by non-violence than by using violent means.”⁴⁷ However, during a speech for farmers resisting the nitrogen policies of Dutch government, Van Meijeren stated that it is “not always healthy if there is taboo on the use of violence,” as “the state is using violence, brute violence against you.”⁴⁸

He suggested that farmers could legitimately use violence if the authorities were to expropriate their farms, and pointed at the Second Amendment of the American Constitution:⁴⁹ the right to carry guns was interpreted as a form of ‘countervailing power’ to defend oneself against the omnipotence of the state. ‘It is time to start the discussion on a Dutch version of the Second Amendment’, a fellow forum member replied on Twitter.⁵⁰ By not refusing violence based on principled, democratic arguments, and by flirting with an argument for ‘violence as legitimate self-defence’, FvD leaves open the option that in the future more offensive practices are legitimate to topple the ‘tyrannic regime’.

Recently, networks of sovereign citizens have emerged in the Netherlands. A network of websites, Facebook pages, and Telegram channels lure people with the promise that they can disconnect themselves from the system by filling in some quasi-legal documents, allowing them to claim immunity from the law. People can buy diplomatic passports as new identity papers, a certificate that turn their properties into embassies that cannot be entered by the authorities; alternative license plates; or documents to deregister from the electoral register and other administrative registers, in order to withdraw their ‘approval’ to be governed by state institutions.⁵¹ Nearly 8,000 Dutch citizens have sent legal documents to the tax authorities by which they declared themselves ‘sovereign’ and demanded access to the money in their Birth Trust.⁵²

Experiences in the US, France, and Germany show that there is a high potential for escalation between sovereign citizens and the authorities. There have been some recent incidents between authorities and sovereign citizens in the Netherlands, but the potential for escalation has not yet materialised. However, one can argue that this an accident waiting to happen, especially combined with the call to self-defence against a ‘tyrannical system’. Although it is impossible to know whether sovereign citizens are subscribing to the concept of ‘Forumland’, the overlap in terms of ideas, ideals, and grievances is rather high.

Democratic Norms and Governance Inside the Free Spaces

It is a challenge to assess whether Forumland will reflect and practise democratic norms of inclusion, diversity, and respect for minority rights. During the meeting on ‘Plan B for a Parallel Society’, a romantic picture was painted of the ‘older parallel societies’ of family, neighbourhood, and local community, based on three pillars: a strong social fabric; decentralised, local and organic; and based on reciprocity instead of compulsion by the centralised state. A perfect society was portrayed, one that had been ruined by the ‘rampant system’ of banks, big business, mainstream media, universities, and politicians, that “deeply hated freethinkers and ordinary men and women.”

However, FvD—and the far right in general—is also known for exclusionary politics in which, for instance, migrants and refugees are seen as out-groups that have no place in the imagined alternative societal structure. The plea for skipping ‘untimely sexual education’ at the Renaissance schools can be considered to be a dog whistle against the emancipation of LGBTQ+ communities. Baudet referred to Russia as a country with a ‘virile male leader’, in “stark contrast with the womanish, often sexual deviant politicians of the West.”⁵³ The youth movement of FvD is constantly agitating against gender equality, LGBTQ+ empowerment, ‘woke’ ideolo-

gies, migrants, and asylum seekers. After right-wing extremists projected racist and neo-Nazi slogans—such as ‘White Lives Matter’, the ‘fourteen words’, and ‘we wish you a happy white 2023’—on the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam during a live broadcast on New Year’s Eve 2023, the youth movement of FvD tweeted: “Nice! This is a great start of the new year for Rotterdam.” FvD has been accused of tolerating antisemitism and Islamophobia and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories inside and outside Parliament.⁵⁴

A report showed that politicians of FvD retweeted antisemitic accounts on social media networks (where antisemitism is already commonplace) on a regular basis, promoting conspiracy theories about George Soros and hate messages about Jews drinking the blood of children. Another report showed that antisemitism is prominent in comments under videos of FvD.⁵⁵

Another indicator of the democratic quality of Forumland is the way FvD is being governed as a political party. Thierry Baudet is said to have almost absolute power, and it has been questioned if FvD would survive beyond the political lifespan of its founding leader. Decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of party elites. The party organisation of FvD is considered to be “deeply hierarchical and completely undemocratic.”⁵⁶ However, according to current research by Dutch investigative journalists, while FvD members of Parliament are withdrawing from parliamentary debates and activities, they are repositioning themselves in an alternative world in which their constituency has become more active.⁵⁷ It suggests that interactions between the party elites and their constituency cannot only be assessed from the functioning of more traditional party structures but also should be assessed from the perspective of interactions in digital cultures.

Conclusion

Naturally, this initial, tentative sketch of an analytical model for potentially assessing whether strategies of withdrawal can be understood as a form of anti-government extremism has some limitations, both in terms of the level of sophistication of the model and the limited empirical data on Forumland. One important takeaway is that the dimensions of ‘delegitimising democracy’, ‘defensive versus offensive practices’, and the ‘democratic quality of free spaces’ should be understood as a matter of degree—more a continuum than binary categories. Other dimensions, such as geography (it is quite difficult to ‘hide’ in a physical free zone in a small country like the Netherlands) and access to weapons, must also be included in future assessments.

By introducing an analytical model, this article proposed some important dimensions that can be used to assess levels of anti-government extremism of (nonviolent) groups. Second, it shows that specific strategies that are usually not seen as examples of anti-government extremism may very well be conceptualised as such. The structural delegitimation of the current liberal democratic order and the disruption of institutions, the fine line between defensive and offensive practices (including references to the legitimate use of violence as self-defence), and the exclusionary ideas and practices of FvD violating fundamental democratic norms of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination, all demonstrate extremist tendencies. Third, the model offers a novel analytical perspective on FvD. The political party should not only be assessed by tradi-

tional notions of 'anti-system' parties, but also in its objective and capacity to disrupt democratic values and institutions by strategies of withdrawal. In the words of Vinthagen and Johansson, it sheds light on the way the escape is done and the particular power relation that is affected.

Finally, in terms of the 'context' Vinthagen and Johansson are referring to: FvD is part of an (international) eclectic milieu, or a bricolage of conspiracy theories, anti-government sentiments, conservative nationalism, libertarianism, orthodox Christianity, right-wing extremism and New Age.⁵⁸ Soft, friendly, spiritual narratives about love, freedom, and mutual connection coexist with hard, aggressive and intimidating narratives about satanist pedo-sexual elite networks, future tribunals to convict the 'coronavirus culprits', and (death) threats against politicians, journalists, and scientists. Right-wing extremists try to jump on the bandwagon of the anti-governmental sentiments, posing as freedom fighters. Apocalyptic and dystopian images of the future articulate an urgent call for self-defence and action.

This 'messiness of the categories of cultural practice' are hard to capture by sticking to established concepts and assumptions.⁵⁹ Therefore, for the time being it will continue to be a challenge to unravel the anti-government milieu in order to assess if and when strategies of withdrawal will be a risk in terms of undermining democracy, or even in terms of security threats. Analysing and understanding the phenomenon and dynamics of anti-governmental movements therefore remains a multidisciplinary challenge for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike.

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Endnotes

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