

**Thematic Panel 1: Ideologies & Conspiracy Narratives**

**Thematic Panel 3: New Technologies & the Online Dimension**

*Working Groups of EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation*

# Joint Meeting 1

## Nihilistic Extremism in the Digital Age

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Brussels, Belgium

# CONCLUSIONS PAPER



EU Knowledge Hub on  
**Prevention of  
Radicalisation**



European  
Commission



## Introduction

The joint meeting in Brussels of **Thematic Panels 1 (Ideologies & Conspiracy Narratives)** and **3 (New Technologies & the Online Dimension)** brought together policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to examine the evolving phenomenon of nihilistic violence in the digital age. The meeting aimed to deepen understanding of a form of violence that challenges conventional categories of extremism and stretches existing policy, legal and operational frameworks.

Nihilistic violent extremism is not easily captured within traditional counter-terrorism paradigms. It is shaped by digital environments, youth subcultures, and behavioural dynamics where violence becomes a form of expression, status, and belonging. The phenomenon has emerged within online subcultures since the late 2010s and is increasingly visible in both online and offline forms of harm.

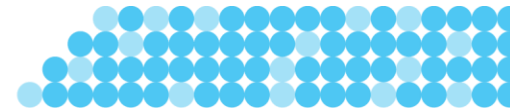
The meeting focused on three interlinked dimensions: the conceptual and definitional challenges posed by the phenomenon; the role of digital ecosystems in shaping and amplifying nihilistic violent extremism; and the vulnerabilities of minors and young people who are disproportionately affected as both victims and perpetrators. Across sessions, a clear consensus emerged that addressing this threat requires moving beyond siloed approaches towards a coordinated, whole-of-society response integrating prevention, safeguarding, and enforcement.

## Defining the phenomenon

The question emerged about defining nihilistic extremism in a way that is both analytically meaningful and operationally useful. While terminology varies, including “nihilistic violent extremism”, “nihilistic extremism”, “nihilistic extremist violence” and “post-ideological violence”; participants broadly converged on a working understanding of the terms.

Nihilistic violent extremism can be understood as a form of violence in which the act itself becomes the primary objective, rather than a means to achieve a political, explicitly ideological, or religious goal. As highlighted in expert interventions, perpetrators are often motivated by a misanthropic worldview, a fascination with violence and gore, transgression, and a desire for recognition and status within online communities rather than clear ideological motif.

The “post-ideological” character of the phenomenon was widely noted. While elements of established extremist ideologies may be present (from right-wing extremism/neo-Nazism, accelerationism, or incel-related misogyny), they are often used symbolically rather than as coherent belief systems, with violence frequently pursued as an end in itself. However, there was no full consensus on the role of ideology. Some viewed the phenomenon as non-ideological, while others emphasised that nihilism and misanthropy can still provide a worldview and justification



for violence. Participants also cautioned against treating it as entirely unique, noting that weak ideological engagement is not new in violent extremism and that existing prevention approaches, particularly public health models, remain relevant.

The phenomenon exists at the intersection of multiple domains, including counter-terrorism, fighting cybercrime, and child protection. It therefore resists categorisation within a single policy or legal framework. This ambiguity has practical implications, particularly for law enforcement, including questions around the applicability of terrorism legislation, the treatment of minors, and thresholds for intervention.

Importantly, the discussions on definitions highlighted that nihilistic extremism is not merely an abstract concept, but a rapidly evolving operational reality. It is characterised by decentralised, transnational networks, such as “The Com”, 764 network<sup>1</sup>, the Order of 9 Angels (O9A)<sup>2</sup>, which operate across platforms (mainstream and more niche) and engage in a spectrum of activities ranging from online coercion, sextortion and abuse to offline acts of serious violence.

## Key Takeaways of the Meeting

**A Shift from Ideology-Driven to Behaviour-Driven Violence:** Nihilistic violent extremism marks a departure from traditional ideology-driven models of radicalisation. While elements of extremist ideologies may be present, they are often fragmented, instrumental, or aesthetic rather than coherent belief systems. Instead, violence is pursued as an end in itself, driven by the pursuit of recognition, status, and belonging within online communities.

**Digital Environments as the Operational Core of the Phenomenon:** Nihilistic violent extremism is inherently shaped by digital ecosystems. Online spaces are not merely tools for communication, but form the infrastructure through which identities are shaped and violence is amplified. Cross-platform migration, anonymity, and algorithmic recommendation systems allow these networks to persist and evolve, making them highly adaptive and difficult to disrupt.

**Minors at the Centre as Both Victims and Perpetrators:** A key concern is that minors are disproportionately involved in this phenomenon. Young people are not only targeted as victims, particularly through grooming, coercion, and exploitation, but are also active participants in these environments. This dual role makes responses more complex and highlights the need for safeguarding approaches that take into account vulnerabilities such as mental health challenges, social isolation, and identity development.

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<sup>1</sup> 764" network is a violent, decentralized international online group that exploits and coerces vulnerable children (often ages 10-17) into producing child sexual abuse material (CSAM), engaging in self-harm, and committing violent acts, including animal cruelty and arson.

<sup>2</sup> The Order of Nine Angles (O9A) is a decentralised extremist network that combines occultism, Satanism, and neo-Nazi ideology, and promotes violence, transgression, and societal collapse as part of its belief system.



**A Multi-Crime and Cross-Sectoral Threat Landscape:** Nihilistic extremist environments cut across multiple domains, including cybercrime, child sexual exploitation, violent extremism, and offline criminality. Activities range from hacking, sextortion and swatting<sup>3</sup> to coordinated harassment and acts of physical violence, including coerced self-harm. This multi-crime nature contributes to fragmented responses, as responsibility is often divided across different agencies and policy frameworks. Participants stressed the need for more integrated and coordinated approaches.

**Gaps in Early Detection and Intervention:** Despite the presence of warning signals in many cases, early detection remains a significant challenge. Indicators often emerge through online behaviours, language, and aesthetic cues that may be dismissed as provocation or “edgy” youth culture, as well as behaviours in person. Existing tools and frameworks are not fully adapted to distinguish between experimentation and escalation, resulting in missed opportunities for timely intervention.

**The Central Role of Visibility, Status, and Reward Systems:** A recurring insight was that violence in these environments functions as a form of social currency among young people who are in pursuit of sense of meaning and belonging. Recognition, validation, and visibility, often measured through attention, reactions, or status within online hierarchies, act as key motivators. This creates self-reinforcing dynamics where increasingly extreme behaviour is incentivised. As such, responses must address not only harmful content, but also the underlying systems that reward and amplify it.

**The Need to Move Beyond Siloed Policy Frameworks:** Existing policy responses remain fragmented across sectors such as counter-terrorism, child protection, and the efforts to fight cybercrime. This siloed approach hinders both understanding and response, as the phenomenon spans multiple domains. A more holistic, whole-of-society approach is required, combining prevention, particularly around mental health, as well as safeguarding, law enforcement, and platform governance.

**Gaps in Research and Data:** The current evidence base on nihilistic violent extremism remains limited, with a lack of reliable and comparable data across Member States. This constrains both understanding of the phenomenon and the development of effective policy responses. Greater awareness and visibility of the issue are therefore needed among relevant stakeholders and authorities.

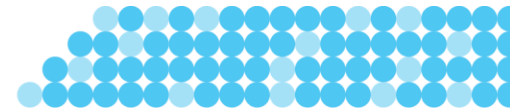
## Highlights of the Discussion

### Conceptual dimension and the online ecosystem

Discussions highlighted the emergence of a distinct digital ecosystem in which nihilistic extremist content circulates and evolves. This ecosystem spans mainstream platforms and is characterised

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<sup>3</sup> Swatting is a dangerous criminal harassment tactic involving reporting a fake emergency (like a bomb threat or hostage situation) to police to trigger a massive, armed response, such as a SWAT team in the United States, at a target's home or workplace.



by fluid membership, rebranding of groups, and a high degree of adaptability. Perpetrators often follow a structured approach in selecting their victims, supported by manuals that circulate within these groups. This highlights the organised nature of their activities, despite the informal character of their online networks.

A defining feature is the aestheticization and gamification of violence. Content is often highly stylised, combining shocking imagery with irony, humour, memes and subcultural references. Violence functions as a form of social currency, with individuals seeking “clout” (or notoriety) through increasingly extreme acts.

Discussions also highlighted the role of grooming and exploitation dynamics, particularly targeting vulnerable young people. Victims may be drawn into cycles of coercion, where they are both exploited and, in some cases, then become perpetrators themselves, requiring nuanced and context-sensitive responses.

### **Youth dynamics, psychology and identity**

A second major theme of the meeting concerned the psychological and developmental factors that make young people particularly susceptible to nihilistic violent extremism.

Adolescence is a period of identity formation, during which individuals seek belonging, recognition, and meaning. In this context, online subcultures that valorise transgression and violence can provide a sense of identity and community, particularly for those experiencing isolation, trauma, or marginalisation.

The concept of a broader ‘crisis of meaning’ was discussed, reflecting wider societal and generational dynamics. Nihilistic violent extremism can be understood as an extreme manifestation of this crisis, where violence becomes a way to assert identity and agency.

Mental health factors were also central to discussion. Participants emphasised that perpetrators often exhibit complex psychological profiles, including trauma, low self-worth, and a perceived loss of control. The discussions further highlighted the role of desensitisation to violence, facilitated by exposure to gore content and extreme material. Over time, this can lower psychological barriers and contribute to escalation.

### **Digital ecosystems & platform governance**

The role of digital spaces was identified as a critical enabler of the phenomenon. Participants noted that content often starts on mainstream platforms before moving to more permissive spaces, such as encrypted messaging services.



Platform features further enable the spread and escalation of harmful content. This is compounded by limitations in content moderation, particularly regarding visual content, language diversity, and evolving subcultural codes and language, which create gaps in enforcement.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) was also discussed. AI tools can generate and disseminate harmful content, including across languages and expand reach.

Participants stressed the need for closer cooperation with online service providers, improved transparency, such as through implementation and enforcement of the EU Regulation on Terrorist Content Online (TCO) and Digital Services Act (DSA), and more proactive approaches to content moderation and risk detection. There is also a need to strengthen early detection, awareness, reporting, of conversational AI (chatbots, such as ChatGPT, and AI companions) and develop clear protocols for identifying and responding to critical content by AI companies, as highlighted by cases such as [Tumbler Ridge mass shooting](#).

### Cooperation between law enforcement agencies

Discussions highlighted the need to **strengthen coordination across law enforcement, the judiciary, and prevention actors**, particularly in cases involving minors and overlapping forms of harm. Closer engagement with prosecutors and judges was flagged as important to ensure a shared understanding of the phenomenon and its implications for investigation and prosecution.

Improving **cooperation with the mental health sector** emerged as a key priority. Participants noted gaps in awareness among the law enforcement community and delayed intervention, calling for stronger **links, joint protocols, and the integration of mental health expertise** into law enforcement responses where appropriate.

At the operational level, participants recommended establishing **focal points or specialised units within law enforcement** to support coordination and collaboration with external partners. Strengthening links with schools and social services was also seen as essential for early detection, including identifying behavioural signs such as bullying, isolation, or changes in online activity.

Finally, **capacity-building** was identified as critical, with calls for joint EU-level training for law enforcement, judicial actors, journalists and relevant practitioners, alongside improved information-sharing and multi-agency cooperation.

### Case Studies

Case studies presented during the meeting illustrated how nihilistic extremist dynamics manifest across different contexts, while revealing patterns when it comes to pathways, behaviours, and intervention gaps.



One example was the case of **Solomon Henderson**, a 17-year-old who carried out a mass shooting in the United States after extensive engagement in online communities. Despite references to white supremacist content (though a person of colour himself), it was emphasised that his actions were primarily driven by personal factors such as a deep self-loathing, a desire for recognition and legacy-building, and violence functioning as a form of social currency. His activity across multiple platforms and attempts to document and (unsuccessfully) broadcast his suicide highlight the performative nature of the phenomenon.

Other cases from Germany and the United States stressed the role of **personal vulnerability and online reinforcement**. Individuals involved displayed patterns of vulnerability, including isolation and psychological distress, trauma, and strong identification with and glorification of previous attackers, alongside active participation in online communities. In several cases, warning signs, such as expressed intent, fascination with violence, and behavioural changes, were present but not acted upon, highlighting gaps in early detection and intervention.

A case in Slovakia demonstrated the **broader operational reach of these networks**, involving a coordinated swatting campaign targeting approximately 1,500 schools. The objective was not ideological, but to generate disruption, fear, and notoriety, illustrating the capacity for large-scale impact driven by attention-seeking dynamics.

Across cases, a consistent pattern emerged: individuals operated within **decentralised, cross-platform ecosystems**, where peer validation, competition, and visibility accelerated escalation. Importantly, ideology, where present, was often secondary to behavioural and social drivers.

Taken together, these cases show that nihilistic extremist violence is not an abstract or emerging risk, but a current threat shaped by clear patterns of behaviour, vulnerability, and online interaction. They highlight both the limitations of existing frameworks, particularly those centred on ideology, and the consequences of missed opportunities for early intervention. The case studies therefore reinforced three key insights, namely the centrality of **online ecosystems** in this phenomenon, the importance of **early warning signals**, and the need to prioritise **vulnerability- and behaviour-based approaches** over purely ideology-focused frameworks.

## Breakout Sessions and Participant Insights

Breakout sessions focused on practical reflections, highlighting main challenges and priorities for action. A central theme was the **difficulty of identifying when behaviour becomes actionable risk**. Early engagement can look like irony or provocation, making it hard to tell the difference between experimentation and escalation. Participants therefore emphasised the need for **behavioural and contextual indicators**, such as shifts in online language, desensitisation to violence, and deeper involvement in closed online communities.

Importantly, participants stressed that **single indicators are not sufficient**. For example, exposure to violent or transgressive content alone may not signal risk, but when combined with admiration for perpetrators or active involvement in harmful communities, it may indicate escalation. This shows that behaviour must be understood in context, using informed practitioner judgement.



Pathways into nihilistic extremist environments can be quick, reducing the window for response. In several cases, warning signals were present but not recognised or acted upon, underlining the need to **equip educators, parents, and youth workers** with practical tools and awareness.

Participants further **cautioned against over-securitisation**, particularly when working with minors. Framing young people primarily as security threats risks stigmatisation and may undermine prevention efforts. Instead, there was strong support for approaches grounded in safeguarding, social support, and proportionate intervention.

The sessions also emphasised the need for **stronger coordination between key actors**, including law enforcement, schools, social services, and families. Gaps in communication were identified as a recurring barrier, with warning signs not always effectively shared across sectors.

Finally, participants stressed the importance of **engaging young people both online and offline**, through digital literacy and stronger support for community spaces that foster connection and identity. Interventions should be flexible and tailored to each case, recognising different pathways and vulnerabilities.

## Communication-Based Approaches to Prevention

Nihilistic violent extremism is shaped by **communication dynamics**, where violence generates recognition and status. As such, responses that focus solely on removing content or countering ‘ideology’ are insufficient.

Strategic communications can be used as a tool to address the **systems of visibility and amplification** that make harmful behaviour desirable and imitable.

Four priority areas emerged:

- **Incentive-aware platform governance**, addressing how algorithms and platform features amplify harmful content
- **De-amplification protocols**, including responsible media reporting and reducing the visibility of perpetrators
- **Early signal communication frameworks** to help educators, parents, and practitioners recognise warning signs
- **Identity and belonging strategies** that offer alternative pathways for recognition and meaning

However, strategic communications must consider risks such as **unintended amplification, over-labelling of youth behaviour**, and **over-securitisation**. Such approaches must therefore be carefully calibrated to avoid reinforcing the dynamics it seeks to counter and should be adapted



to national context where the phenomenon of nihilistic extremist violence is expressed in different ways.

## Solutions and Recommendations

Participants identified a set of challenges that require a coordinated and multi-layered response.

### Member State Action and Coordination

- Encourage Member States to progress with **national-level discussions** and data collection strengthen understanding of the phenomenon and assess how existing prevention and intervention frameworks can address nihilistic violent extremism.
- **Increase awareness** among policymakers, practitioners, and authorities, through training<sup>4</sup> and targeted cross-sectoral education.
- Examine how the phenomenon fits within **existing national strategies for the prevention** of extremism, including its conceptual classification and intervention frameworks can address nihilistic violent extremism and what are the remaining gaps.

### Improve Coordination and Governance

- Foster **multi-agency cooperation** at national and EU levels, and where relevant internationally, bridging gaps between counter-terrorism, fighting cybercrime, and child protection.
- Develop **shared definitions, frameworks and narratives** to align understanding across sectors. Support pilot initiatives and local-level interventions that can be scaled up.
- Expand **training for law enforcement** including public prosecutors and raising awareness of NEV among judges and closer cooperation with tech platforms operational and training level.
- Consistent and **evidence-based reporting** by MSs to encourage tech companies take action (e.g. through the EUIF).

### Invest in Research and Knowledge

- Address key **knowledge gaps**, including the role of ideology (or lack thereof), pathways to violence, and the impact of digital environments.
- Promote **comparative research** across Member States.
- Ensure **sustained funding** for research and prevention initiatives.

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<sup>4</sup> See initiatives such as the [EU Internet Forum's Knowledge Package](#) and Action Day with Member States, Europol, and tech companies on nihilistic violent extremism.

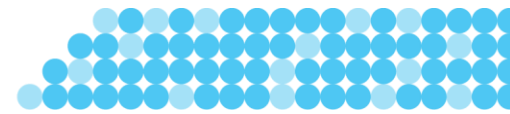


## Enhance Early Detection, Prevention and Rehabilitation

- Develop and disseminate **early warning indicators** tailored to nihilistic environments, identifying common patterns based on similar case studies including high vulnerability, exposure to violent online content, desensitization, and engagement in small “micro communities” that escalate fascination with violence.
- Develop **multi-level interventions and tools** to engage with young people in a sensitive way such as educational games (e.g. a board game focused on sensitivity).
- Invest in **digital literacy programmes** that address not only online safety but also exposure to harmful content and subcultures.
- Develop and expand awareness raising and **training for mental health professionals** working with young people.
- Strengthen the role of **educators, parents, and community actors** in identifying and responding to risks, including through adequate resources and training.
- Combine online, offline, social, and mental health interventions, **promoting resilience, social connection, and youth-centred rehabilitation**. Promote offline connection and resilience to counter isolation and “crisis of meaning”.

## Strengthen the Online Response

- Enhance enforcement of **existing EU and national frameworks** (e.g. DSA, TCO, national child safeguarding frameworks) and improve transparency of platform reporting.
- Develop more proactive and **coordinated approaches to content moderation** and including visual and content in different languages, and regulation of generative AI chatbots.
- **Transfer know-how from adjacent crime areas**, such as the use of hashing, or effective requests for illegal content takedown.
- Continue **fostering dialogue with the tech sector** on effective approaches and the need to keep humans in the loop (e.g. caution against full replacement of content moderators with AI, encourage effective content moderation in less-spoken languages, nurture engagement with willing individuals).
- Promote **cross-platform cooperation** and information-sharing, including access to data for researchers (within the framework of the DSA) to help inform formulation of evidence-based approaches.
- Engage with **international stakeholders**, such as United States-based stakeholders and regulatory frameworks addressing the same threat, due to their specific know-how and programming in this area.
- Implement **stronger trust and safety measures**, and more proactive online prevention e.g. Better Internet for Kids.
- Raise awareness of **digital literacy** among parents and educators and make digital literacy mandatory in educational curricula.
- **Engage young people** when designing prevention programmes.



### Adopt a Public Health and Safeguarding Approach

- Treat nihilistic violent extremism as a **public health issue**, focusing on underlying vulnerabilities and risk factors.
- Expand access to **mental health support** and trauma-informed interventions.
- Promote **rehabilitation approaches** for minors, recognising their dual status as victims and perpetrators.

### Address legal framework challenges

- NEV does not fit into traditional CT or P/CVE categories, complicating prosecution and content removal, and meaning that existing tools under TCO, DSA, and child-protection legislation cannot always be applied with NEV.
- Shift from a narrow terrorism lens to a **broader child-protection and harm-reduction framework**, with stronger cross-platform coordination, reporting mechanisms, and youth-specific safeguards.
- Emphasize **earlier and lower-threshold detection**, using flexible indicators and context-based assessment rather than fixed profiles. Effective prevention depends on strong local ecosystems (parents, teachers, peers, police, health services etc.) and trust-building between them.
- Apply a dual approach: broad **social prevention** combined with tailored, **case-by-case interventions**, alongside increased online presence of law enforcement and peer-based prevention.

## Conclusions

The meeting confirmed that nihilistic violent extremism represents a significant and evolving challenge for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers across the European Union. At its core, the phenomenon reflects a **convergence of digital, social, and psychological dynamics**. It is characterised by forms of violence that are performative and embedded in online youth cultures for whom the lines between the online and offline world have become blurred.

Current **policy approaches remain fragmented**. Addressing nihilistic violent extremism requires moving beyond siloed frameworks and adopting integrated strategies that combine prevention, safeguarding, and enforcement.

Effective responses must also address the **communication dynamics** at the heart of the phenomenon. Shaping what is visible, valued, and desirable to young people in digital environments is not a peripheral concern, but a central component of any meaningful strategy.

Finally, the importance of **early intervention and prevention** cannot be overstated, particularly in relation to the mental health and wellbeing of young people. An effective response must include supporting mental health services, strengthening digital literacy, and empowering young people to create **alternative pathways for identity and belonging**.



As the phenomenon continues to evolve, **sustained cooperation, research, and policy innovation** will be essential to ensure that responses remain effective, proportionate, and grounded in a clear understanding of the underlying dynamics that underpin the phenomenon of nihilistic violent extremism.

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