

Teneo Risk White Paper: One Year Post January 6 Insurrection

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One Year After the January 6 Insurrection, COVID-19 and Government-Directed Misinformation and Propaganda Continue to Fuel Far-Right Activity

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This week will mark the one-year anniversary of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, when a mob of nearly 800 supporters of former President Donald J. Trump stormed the Capitol to disrupt the tally of electoral votes. Participants ranged from private citizens with no ties to organized or extremist groups to individuals affiliated with the Proud Boys, a white nationalist group, as well as members of the anti-government Oath Keepers and Three Percenters groups. The January 6 riots followed threat assessments by the nation's intelligence and law enforcement agencies pointing to a growing threat from racially and ethnically motivated movements.

While there is currently no indication that any of the groups that participated in the January 6 insurrection are planning any commemorative action, Federal officials are concerned that lone actors may look to exploit the anniversary, even in the absence of large-scale, organized action. Affiliates of groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers continue to play an active part in the domestic threat milieu. In November, the US Department of Homeland Security assessed that, “through the remainder of 2021 and into 2022, domestic violent extremists (DVEs), including racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists and anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists, will continue to pose a significant threat to our homeland.” Similarly, in September, FBI Director Christopher Wray told Congress that the Bureau has increased personnel by 260% over the previous 18 months to investigate domestic threats. Domestic far-right groups will likely continue to pose the leading terrorist threat to the US homeland in the near term. The growth of hyper-local white supremacist and anti-government activity, coupled with ongoing disinformation campaigns, will further continue to fuel domestic terrorist threats in both the United States and in Europe.

Despite Arrests and Lawsuits, Groups that Participated on January 6 Continue to be Active, but Have Become Increasingly Hyper-Local

Since January 6, authorities have arrested dozens of Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenter members. Last month, District of Columbia Attorney General Karl Racine filed a lawsuit against 31 members of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers for conspiring to terrorize the District on January 6, calling their actions “a coordinated act of domestic terrorism.” Mr. Racine’s lawsuit represents the latest charges leveled against the groups, including conspiring to incite the insurrection. Despite these arrests and lawsuits, the Proud

Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Perceners continue to be active, though they have become far less visible on the national stage.

Since January 6, these far-right groups have increasingly decentralized their leadership and operations, shifting their focus to participation in hyper-local events. Local chapters have begun attending town council, health board, and school board meetings, where they protest a range of issues, including school masking and vaccination requirements and the teaching of critical race theory. The groups likely perceive several benefits to this strategy. As authorities continue to investigate organizers’ roles in the January 6 insurrection, decentralizing operations allows far-right groups to operate without risks to their senior leadership. Operating at a defused level also keeps the groups out of the spotlight and makes their activities more difficult to uncover and track. Finally, as noted recently in the *New York Times*, focusing on local issues helps engender and streamline support for their positions, which drives new membership.

COVID-19 Policies and Misinformation Continue to be a Rallying Cry

COVID-19 policies and mandates continue to be a rallying topic for these groups, undermining government efforts to tame COVID-19 outbreaks and propagating pandemic and vaccine-related misinformation. Since the spring of 2020, as the coronavirus began to surge globally, racist tropes regarding the virus began appearing in the near and far corners of the Internet. These conspiracy theories not only spread misinformation, instilled fear, and conveyed deep distrust of government entities, they spewed hateful, anti-minority and anti-Semitic rhetoric and conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories subsequently found a physical outlet in the anti-quarantine and reopening rallies that took place at state houses across the country during

much of 2020, with active participation from the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the Three Percenters.

COVID-19 conspiracy theories have become a mainstay of the pandemic and continue to proliferate. While the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters have taken their opposition to mask mandates and vaccination efforts to the hyper-local level, local chapters of these groups are propagating the same conspiracy theories as before.

Far-Right Activity in Europe Mirrors US Far-Right Environment

Opposition to vaccinations and frustration with pandemic restrictions also continues to drive protests and support for European far-right movements, in some instances leading to violent demonstrations and clashes with law enforcement. Last month, rioting broke out in The Hague regarding the Dutch government's new COVID-19 measures. Austria, Italy, Germany, and other European countries have also witnessed mass pandemic-related protests.

Many of these protests are driven by rampant misinformation spread by European far-right parties, similarly undermining pandemic-related efforts in Europe and undermining public safety and security. For example, in Austria, both the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the newly established People, Freedom, Fundamental Rights party (MFG) have perpetually instigated COVID-19 misinformation and organized protests. The MFG has often evoked perceived parallels to Nazi rule when protesting COVID-19 restrictions, while the FPÖ has referred to COVID-19 vaccination efforts as a genetic experiment. Dutch protests have also recalled perceived parallels to Nazi occupation and made references to vaccines being part of a broader global plot. Similar to the United States, coronavirus-related conspiracy theories

and memes circulate rampantly on social media platforms and websites popular among European far-right sympathizers. [A recent study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) of the social media app Telegram found significant crossover between COVID-19 conspiracy content and far-right extremist communities, with discussions related to restrictions and vaccines the most popular COVID-19 narratives among both sets of communities.

Corporate Vigilance Essential as New COVID-19 Variants and Renewed Pandemic Restrictions Continue to Fuel Far-Right Disinformation

The emergence of the Omicron variant, coupled with a significant spike in COVID-19 cases worldwide, has precipitated a new wave of restrictions, fueling additional protests and conspiracy theories that threaten to further impede public health and safety efforts during the next year. Even countries such as New Zealand, which had been largely isolated from both COVID cases and related protests, have experienced a small but increasingly vocal resistance to vaccination efforts and pandemic-related restrictions. As witnessed in both the United States and Europe, mistrust of governments is also intrinsically weaved into the disinformation spread both online and at physical demonstrations. As the US heads into mid-term elections this year, and Europe prepares for elections in Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden in 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies and misinformation will continue to play a central role in national political discourse.

As companies look to the new year, maintaining a heightened focus on both local and global developments regarding COVID-19 and extremist political activity will be critical to ensuring they are adequately prepared to respond to rapidly developing threats. Companies that operate in politically sensitive

industries – such as media, internet technology, and infrastructure – should work to identify any unique threats they may face as a result of potential extremist activity. Proactively addressing vulnerabilities to business continuity, physical and cybersecurity programs will minimize the impact of such threats in the event of unforeseen disruption. Additionally, companies with large, geographically diverse footprints should carefully monitor for any shift in local ordinance, law enforcement posture, or specific threats to the area as a result of either the pandemic or resultant extremist activity.



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