

Jürgen Conings: the case of a Belgian soldier on the run shows how the pandemic collides with far-right extremism

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A soldier has been on the run from police in Belgium since mid-May after being implicated in the theft of weapons from a military base in Flanders.

The federal prosecutor charged Jürgen Conings with attempted murder and the illegal possession of weapons in a terrorist context after he was connected with threats to kill Belgium's top pandemic virologist, Marc Van Ranst.

The case highlights the country's much overlooked problem with extremism on the right – and how these politics have become entangled with the pandemic.

Pandemic politics

It is not just fringe far-right conspiracy groups, such as QAnon and Viruswaanin, that have been exploiting the COVID-19 crisis. Several Belgian right-wing parties and movements are using the pandemic to spread misinformation and fuel resentment.

These mostly conservative, pro-Flemish-independence parties include the right-wing New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and the extreme far-right Vlaams Belang. Both have been vocal about the way the caretaker governments led by former temporary prime minister Sophie Wilmès have handled the pandemic. The criticism grew even louder when a seven-party coalition took over in October 2020. Even though N-VA and Vlaams Belang were the largest elected parties in Flanders in 2019, they have been reduced to an opposition role in the current federal government.

This has been a bitter pill to swallow, especially for Vlaams Belang, which had hoped to form a coalition with the N-VA in order to bypass a 1989 ruling aimed at keeping it out of government because of its extreme politics.

The tense political climate has been further exploited by the Flemish alt-right movement Schild & Vrienden to sow even more division.

It is in this complex context that pro-Conings groups have been popping up online ever since his news of disappearance was broadcast in May.

Homegrown extremism

Conings had been on a terror watch list since February as a “potentially violent extremist” and was known to be connected to another former soldier, convicted neo-Nazi Tomas Boutens. Yet neither the Belgian army nor the Belgian minister of defence appear to have been informed about this.



A Facebook group supporting Conings soon attracted more than 50,000 members before being banned and relocating to encrypted messaging app Telegram, which is harder to regulate. Posts praised his actions with fascist memes – which are popular among the Flemish alt-right and extreme far-right.

At least three support marches have taken place since his search warrant was issued – one of them coinciding with protests against COVID-19 measures in Brussels.

Conings supporters at a protest in Brussels at the end of May. Alamy/Belga News Agency

The right-wing trolling of experts

A number of scientific experts have become targets during the pandemic. As well as Van Ranst, infectious diseases specialist Erika Vlieghe and vaccinologist Pierre Van Damme have had to endure online attacks.

Belgium’s record-breaking federal government formation talks did not help either. Politicians from the caretaker government quickly passed on all responsibility to a team of scientific experts at the start of the crisis. Trying to save political face, most of the pandemic communication was left to the experts. This is how Van Ranst, head of Belgium’s pandemic planning team and an opinionated Twitter user, became the personification of the pandemic.



Mainstream politicians from the traditional right and extreme far-right have played a part in fuelling personal attacks against experts. Calling Van Ranst “doctor Hatred” in a previous Twitter dispute, N-VA politician Theo Francken, infamous for his anti-immigration stance, set the tone again at the start of the crisis. Quoting a satirical article, he sent out and subsequently deleted a tweet targeted at Van Ranst. The tweet combined the Dutch word for “pandemic” with the gay slur “sissy”, suggesting the virologist was being overly dramatic about the pandemic.

Francken’s pande-mietje Tweet. Twitter Marc Van Ranst

Van Grieken and his party have taken advantage of their social media know-how during the pandemic, often publicising content from Vlaams Belang-linked “alternative” news sites, such as the Flemish nationalist ‘t Scheldt. Recurrent themes are xenophobic conspiracy theories and the constant suggestion that Van Ranst is the “leftist hand puppet” to Belgium’s “illegitimate” federal government, associating him with China’s alleged communist dictatorship.



Dries Van Langenhove, Schild & Vrienden’s leader and now independent Vlaams Belang politician, has participated in the bashing of Van Ranst as well. In a recent meme-packed video, he even compared Van Ranst to Stalin for advising against reopening hospitality businesses too soon. This excessive trolling, often accompanied by death threats, has had a concrete impact on all experts involved: before the Conings case, Van Ranst already spoke about being prank-called by groups of drunk youngsters, often ending their calls by singing the Flemish national anthem and calling him “leftist vermin”.

Van Langenhove with Van Ranst depicted as Stalin. Kies Dries YouTube channel

Lessons for the future

The pandemic climate has proven to be an excellent breeding ground for extremists. It has provided them with an excuse to go after what they see as the “freedom-destroying” establishment.

In this climate, Conings is portrayed as a Flemish “resistance fighter” by many sharing his feelings of exclusion – despite being wanted for extremely serious crimes. The way people have responded to his case shows there is an urgent need to more closely inspect Belgium’s homegrown far-right extremism problem.

In my research, I have been looking at how continental urban terrorist violence materialises both online and offline in the aftermath of the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 attacks. This pandemic-driven case teaches us that present-day terrorist threats do not only stem from Jihadist milieus, as is often assumed. The actions of people such as Conings – who appear, on the surface, to be outliers or lone wolves – need to be analysed as part of a wider sociopolitical environment, particularly when political parties appear to feel so comfortable spreading misinformation.