



# Everyday Extremism Policy Brief

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## Overview

There are widespread concerns that political extremism is on the rise in the UK and Ireland and it is negatively impacting on social cohesion and individual wellbeing. The UK has three key pieces of legislation which have been created to tackle political extremism: (1) PREVENT, which is one of the four pillars of the UK Government's 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, (2) Hate speech legislation (Public Order Act 1986, Racial & Religious Hatred; Religious Hatred 2006, and Scotland's Hate Crime and Public Order Act 2021), and (3) The Online Safety Bill (2023).

This briefing builds on these existing legislation to capture the everyday acts of political extremism that most people have the capacity to enact. The current legislation focuses on the 'extreme aspects' of political extremism (i.e.: violence, intentional hate speech, and criminal on-line activities). Whilst incredibly important, most people who engage in politically extreme narratives and behaviour do this in what has become known as Everyday Extremism, which risks falling between the cracks of the current legislation.

## What is Everyday Extremism?

Conceived as part of the Innovate UK/Horizon-Europe funded OppAttune Project, Everyday Extremism is when political views are expressed which have real and symbolic violence or a desire to limit the democratic rights of others in hybrid on-line and off-line spaces. These extreme narratives and behaviours become a part of a person's everyday understanding of a particular issue, typically polarising ones (e.g.: immigration, free speech, climate crisis, sovereignty, etc.) underpinned by oppositional worldviews, suggesting incompatible cultures. Everyday Extremism is often shared in on-line spaces as common-sense thinking in the form of entertainment (e.g.: humorous memes, popular hashtags, etc.) to disguise the extremist sub-text. As such, the content may appear as low-intensity expressions of extreme thinking (e.g.: mild types of dehumanising language against political opponents, conspiracy theories/disinformation, content that plays on social anxieties) to enter mainstream discourse.

OppAttune researchers, across 15 countries, found that the accumulative and accelerating impact of sharing these types of ideas, whilst individually and legally minor, collectively contribute to the erosion of trust and reduce democratic resilience (i.e.: the ability to interact with those who may have opposing views in a non-antagonistic way). The risk here is that this common-sense thinking, which typically involves symbolic violence against a person and/or group, has the potential to escalate into real-world harm if encouraged. The UK riots of 2024 (which occurred in England and Northern Ireland) offer an example of how far-right disinformation becomes mainstreamed into a false explanation and can mobilise sections of the public into action in the form of violent protests.



# Current Policy Approaches – Tackling Political Extremism

Creating legislation which addresses the rise in political extremism is undoubtedly challenging given the fundamental dilemma between protecting democratic values and preserving freedom of expression. Across the five nations, anti-extremism legislation is generally uniformly applied with the exception of Scotland’s 2021 Hate Crime and Public Disorder Act.

Ireland’s recently introduced the Criminal Justice (Hate Offences) Act 2024 to align with the European Union. Ireland’s other recent legislation, the Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences Bill 2022, removed all the speech-related measures as they were considered to compromise free speech (e.g. the bill had proposed potential prison sentences for possessing content considered ‘hateful’ regardless of proven intent).

	<b>PREVENT</b> (Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, 2015)	<b>Public Order Act 1986</b> (Hate Speech legislation)	<b>Racial &amp; Religious Hatred 2006</b> (Hate Speech legislation)	<b>Hate Crime and Public Disorder Act 2021</b> (Hate Speech legislation)	<b>Online Safety Act 2023</b>
<b>England</b>	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	✗	✓ <sup>2</sup>	✓	✗	✓
<b>Republic of Ireland</b>	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
<b>Scotland</b>	✓ <sup>1</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Wales</b>	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓

1. Implemented more selectively via Scottish institutions.

2. Northern Ireland have their own version: Public Order Act 1987.

This section offers an overview of the three main pieces of legislation that apply to the UK: Prevent, various hate speech acts, and the Online Safety Act.

## PREVENT

PREVENT's primary aim is to identify individuals vulnerable to radicalisation and intervene prior to any terror-related activity occurring. PREVENT works in encouraging organizations (e.g.: schools, healthcare providers, etc.) to refer a person who shows signs of extremist thinking or behaviour associated with radicalisation. Such signs typically include a combination of the following: social withdrawal,

increasing anger with society, expressing an obsessive desire for radical changes, and /or time spent in online spaces which promote extremist content. The aim is to find and support those at risk, via a voluntary support program called Channel, to stop this behaviour and thinking (be that through mentoring, psychological support, increasing educational opportunities, etc.).

## Hate Speech Legislation

The second legislative approach is designed to protect individuals and groups from speech that is intended to incite hatred, cause distress, or encourage violence based on protected characteristics (e.g.: ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation,

disability, or gender identity). In the UK, the Public Order Act 1986, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, and, in Scotland, the Hate Crime and Public Order Act 2021 provide legal mechanisms to prosecute speech that crosses these thresholds.

## Online Safety Act

The third piece of legislation is the Online Safety Act of 2023, a UK-wide law intended to regulate online content and increase the accountability for platforms hosting material considered to be harmful in order to protect users (especially children). This does not just refer to illegal acts (such as cyberflashing or stalking) but defines legal but harmful content in three categories: (1) Primary Priority Harm (dangerous TikTok challenges, promoting self-harm, etc.) (2) Priority Harm (misleading health advice, anxiety-evoking conspiracies, etc.), and (3) Context-dependent harm

(peer pressure to engage in risky behaviour, oversharing advice based on self-diagnosed mental health issues). This is regulated by Ofcom as the primary independent regulator, who can enforce codes of practice and fine those for non-compliance. The platforms themselves are also expected to self-regulate in accordance with Ofcom's guidance by conducting risk assessments as a preventative measure and engage in the proactive removal of illegal content.



## Policy Challenges

The PREVENT program focuses on intervention for those perceived to be at risk of radicalisation and, potentially, violent extremism. However, this preventative program is not designed to capture the potential for subtler forms of political extremism (ones that stop short of violence). That is to say, what the majority of people have the potential to do on a daily basis regarding the sharing and normalising of extreme political content in everyday discourse. Unlike PREVENT which has been criticised for its potential to stigmatise particular communities, especially Muslims, everyday extremism recognises we all have the capacity to be extreme in sharing symbolically violent content which could limit the capacity of others to engage in democracy.

A key criteria for identifying hate speech under the current UK laws is proving the intention to cause harm and incite hatred towards an individual or group based on certain characteristics. This distinguishes hate speech from everyday extremism in that the motivations with the latter may not be to incite hatred or cause harm to any one group but, in some cases, may simply be the unintended

consequence of sharing a political view. Even if the motivation to cause harm were present, the memes and hashtags used to express a form of everyday extremism may simply be too subtle to be categorised as ‘hate speech’ under current legislation. Consequently, the mainstreaming of extreme narratives into people’s everyday political discourse challenges the efficacy of current hate speech legislation in online spaces.

Whilst the Online Safety Bill focuses on monitoring content, discourse and behaviour that would be everyday extremism, there is an important gap in how such content is regulated. Whilst platforms have a legal duty to self-regulate for any illegal content, they are under no obligation to do so for adult audience materials which, even if extreme and potentially harmful, are legal. This may include the exact type of content that, over time, adds to the disinformation in the public sphere, degrades social cohesion, and creates hostile political extremists. This creates a regulatory blind spot: a space where everyday extremist discourse can circulate, escalate, and gain legitimacy, without triggering moderation or legal scrutiny.



# Current interventions into Everyday Extremism

The OppAttune project has developed a variety of different interventions that are intended to either track, detect or limit the spread of everyday extremism. The tools and interventions are designed to be used by various different stakeholders – be that practitioners working with young people vulnerable to extremism, policymakers aiming to address the issue, researchers building on these ideas, or media influencers raising awareness through collaborations with the project. OppAttune aims to understand the factors which allow the mainstreaming and spread of extreme narratives in both on-line and off-line spaces. This involves applying interventions designed to understand how everyday extremism can be measured and understood. For example, the development of an everyday extremism measure that can

be applied in real-world contexts in collaboration with the University of Malta or the WiDE Lens survey, in collaboration with Panteion University and KCSS, which offers policymakers and researchers insights into how worldviews, identity and disaffection influence everyday extremism endorsements across 15 European countries. Interventions include the creation of an i-Attune interactive that the public can use to understand how to relate to those with different political positions, narrative group work with vulnerable people, AI reflective prompts and empathy builders, and awareness raising collaborations with the BBC and media influencers. For an in-depth overview of the project and the attunement tools on offer, please refer to the [project's website](#).



## Wise Up – Five Points to Consider

Here are five points that could contribute towards future policy to limit the spread of political extremism.

- 1** **Everyday Extremism is a contributing factor to the rise in political extremism witnessed in the UK and Ireland in both on-line and off-line spaces.**
- 2** **Everyday extremism moves away from a narrow, potentially discriminatory, focus on certain sections of society or ideological outlooks to widen the scope in identifying those narratives, techniques and behaviours which constitute everyday extremism.**
- 3** **New training on both identifying narratives, techniques and behaviours which constitute everyday extremism and how it is mainstreamed should be developed to intervene when the content falls between violent acts and intentional hate speech.**
- 4** **At present, online platforms have no legal obligation to protect adults in the UK from harmful, but legal, politically extreme materials. However, it is perfectly possible to develop political literacy within citizens so they can detect and avoid everyday extremism techniques encountered on these platforms.**
- 5** **There may be considerable value in developing a formal framework to address everyday extremism in collaboration across the five nations.**



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### **Dewi Knight, Director**

## **Our funder**



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