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# How Contagious Were the Capitol Riots in Europe – In Praxis and in Perception?

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution presents a short overview on the impact of the Capitol Riots riots in Europe. Fear of a similar mass-mediated contagion was explicitly expressed by most of the European leaders. Echoes and acclamation for the riots in the U.S. were indeed heard on websites, QAnon-sites, and within circles of Trump supporters in Europe as well. An earlier storming of the German Reichstag (in 2020) was cited. In the Netherlands, the curfew riots of 24–25 January 2021 also were put into this context. Security agencies and officials in the U.K. and the Netherlands repeated this threat awareness in recent, formal threat assessments.

## KEYWORDS


Capitol Riots; contagion; curfew riots; QAnon; accelerationism; threat assessment

In line with Brigitte Nacos' research on ideological, tactical or inspirational contagion after terrorist attacks or incidents of political violence, it is interesting to see whether this phenomenon played a role after the Capitol Riots of 6 January. According to Nacos, "Contagion refers here to a form of copycat crime, whereby violence-prone individuals and groups imitate forms of (political) violence attractive to them, based on examples usually popularized by mass media."<sup>1</sup> After presenting an overview of the academic debate on copy cat behavior and contagion, Nacos concludes that although it is true the "cause-effect relationship" is sometimes contested, "the notion of mass-mediated contagion seems commonsensical and is indeed supported by anecdotal accounts as well as more systematic research." When it comes to various types of domestic and international political violence, extremism and terrorism, media do play an important role in stimulating both tactical and inspirational contagion. Via the internet and social media, but also via regular television broadcasting, mass mediated inspirational influences can be demonstrated and identified after large scale attacks or events of political violence.<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore relevant to inquire how the events of 6 January resonated abroad. In this brief report, the array of reactions in European countries, both on the level of governments and within society, and amongst likeminded radical groups will be discussed—to what extent was there evidence, or talk, of the Capitol Riots as contagious events in Europe? This paper's analysis is limited by the brief timespan between the events and this discussion, as well as by the fact that this contribution is based on media coverage and open sources only. Yet, with the events being livestreamed, and captivating the attention of the world, these sources do already yield an interesting, and worrisome picture. Because of this overwhelming amount of attention, I will present a selection of reactions from European state leaders and officials, some noticeable reactions in society, as well some resonances of the 6 January events within radical groups.

## Official reactions: fear for contagion

For many of the state and cabinet leaders of Europe, the Capitol Riots were serious enough to prompt them to issue statements and comments on the event. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson

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said that the scenes were “disgraceful,” and both Johnson and his Home Secretary Priti Patel held Trump directly accountable for the storming of the Capitol. “Utterly horrifying,” Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland, condemned them, “Stop trampling democracy,” she called out. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas furthermore asked for the perpetrators to be held accountable. And Chancellor Angela Merkel denounced the mob violence as well. Remarkably, most European leaders explicitly defined the events as “an assault on democracy” on the one hand (French President Emmanuel Macron, Joseph Borrell European Union Foreign Policy Chief, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven), but also appealed to their American partners, that “this is not America” (Macron). They thus both condemned the storming and expressed their fears that this would further undermine democracy in the US.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, in the European media pundits, journalists, experts and officials alike also expressed worries about the state of their own democratic institutions. In a very practical, and physical sense: could their parliaments also be stormed? “How well is the Bundestag protected,” the *Berliner Morgenpost* asked.<sup>4</sup> Here, the answer was somewhat worrisome, since on 29 August 2020 around 500 anticoronavirus protesters, right wing extremists and so-called *Reichsbürger*<sup>5</sup> had already stormed the staircase towards the head entrance of the Bundestag. Luckily enough, they were soon disbanded and pushed back by the police officers, and no people were wounded let alone killed. But the image of right wing extremists waving the Black and White flag of the old German Empire on the stairs of the Bundestag were horrifying in the eyes of the public and a direct assault on parliamentary democracy, which is sometimes still considered frail and young in Germany.<sup>6</sup> Eva Högl, the German parliament’s commissioner for defense, warned that the threat of the far right had been trivialized and that it should be taken more seriously.<sup>7</sup> President of the Bundestag Wolfgang Schäuble announced that his office would draw its conclusions from the U.S. Capitol breach for the protection of the Bundestag in Berlin and examine improvements to their own parliament’s security precautions.<sup>8</sup>

With this in mind, European leaders expressed their fears that similar events could happen in their countries too, stimulated by the performative success of the American rioters. Joseph Borrell, the EU Foreign Minister with a Spanish background, wrote in a blog post that the riots in the U.S. had “a particular echo” for him, and reminded him of the possibility of military coup attempts that troubled Spain in the past. But could happen again, if their leaders would goad such people on again, and tell them elections had been fraudulent.<sup>9</sup>

### **Societal reactions: abhorrence and fear for contagion**

The events of 6 January were no stand-alone incident, but the outcome of a longer festering spread of QAnon theories—in the U.S., and across the Atlantic. Security services were already issuing report on the sprawling support for QAnon and other coronavirus conspiracies within the societies of Europe. In the Netherlands, media and researchers point to 40.000 QAnon related postings on public Facebook sites, producing half a million interactions in 2020 alone.<sup>10</sup> The Utrecht data school moreover reported on the increase of conspiracy websites on the internet and the translation of antigovernment and conspirational slogans from the internet into real life demonstrations and activities.<sup>11</sup>

The role of media practices and internet induced radicalization processes was compounded as well. “If ever there was a sign that American tech platforms were having an impact on international discourse in a way that has no borders, this is it,” Anna-Sophie Harling, the head of Europe at NewsGuard, a firm that tracks misinformation, stated.<sup>12</sup>

The fear of contagion and the spread of violent QAnon campaigns, including the threat of physical violence and raids, to Europe, was palpable in the immediate days after 6 January. But were there also factual incidents and occurrences of such a spread, be it an inspirational, ideological or tactical contagious spread? Was there any form of copycat behavior, on individual or group level after the Capitol Riots in Europe?

## Radical groups: acclamation and inspiration in the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe

In the Netherlands, there seemed to be a quite direct echo of the Capitol Riots on 24 and 25 January, therefore, we will examine events in the low countries.

On 14 April 2021, the Dutch National Coordinator for Terrorism and Security published its quarterly threat assessment, *DTN 54*. Next to the identification of an ongoing jihadist threat and the trend of an increased, conspirational and coronavirus-related radicalization, the Capitol Riots of 6 January were singled out as a trigger event. The NCTV saw “some overlap” between right wing extremist groups, including the Boogaloo-movement, and the accelerationist ideas of the U.K. based Feuerkrieg Division. “This type of groups is trying to instigate a civil war. Up until now the threat emanating from such groups remains limited in Europe, yet, events in the U.S. can have an inspiring effect.” In the same paragraph, the NCTV referred to two individual cases of young men who were arrested on suspicion of right wing extremist terrorism, and who were considered part of the American online network The Base. The Capitol Hill Riots were not the trigger for their radicalization process, the Christchurch attacks were. But the fear of geopolitical events and triggers elsewhere, such as in the U.S. on 6 January are singled out to raise awareness in the *DTN* for the active threat of right wing extremist violence.<sup>13</sup>

Alt-Right and populist political leader Thierry Baudet issued a tweet, one hour into the riots on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, in support of President Trump. And representatives of his party and of another rightwing populist party also issued statements that were interpreted as a call to action against the government, official Covid-19 test locations and start a protest. Then, on 24 and 25 January 2021, upon implementation of the Covid-19 related curfew, riots broke out in more than twenty cities and villages in the Netherlands, leading to the worst riots since the 1980s, with 12 people injured and more than 570 arrests. The riots seemed mostly spontaneous, triggered by the curfew, and were carried out by youngsters, hooligans and bands of rioters known by the police.<sup>14</sup> Yet, with 12,000 people in the Netherlands subscribing to QAnon related Facebook sites, numerous calls to action and attempts to rally the masses to “drink coffee,” and come to public places, to the Museum Place in Amsterdam or prominent demonstration sites in The Hague were made in advance of the riots by (more or less well known) peddlers in these conspirational theories. QAnon slogans, antigovernment yells and anti-Covid-19 protests went hand in glove, and many of these protesters did refer to the then very recent storming of the Capitol in the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

Similar threats, conspirational calls to action were also heard in the U.K. With the murder of MP Jo Cox during the EU referendum campaign in 2016 as a watershed moment, fear of right wing extremist attacks and insurrection was and is palpable. With some experts pointing to reciprocal radicalization, a report by anti-fascist campaign group Hope Not Hate found that the U.K. far-right was becoming “more racist” in the aftermath of the BLM movement. Moreover, the U.K. based right wing extremists have been spreading misinformation on the Capitol Riots in the U.S. And it has been noted that the Proud Boys, who were among the Capitol rioters, have links with British right wing extremist Tommy Robinson and the EDL.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

This contribution has only marginally covered the reactions and echoes on the Capitol Riots in some European countries. It is therefore not possible to come to a conclusive response on the question to what extent the riots provided tactical, motivational or inspirational contagion to radical, extremist or terrorist groups in Europe.

Yet, fear of such a mass-mediated contagion was explicitly expressed by most of the European leaders. Not only did they see democracy in the U.S. as under threat, they also felt the need to check, claim and step up security of their parliaments. Which was no empty move, since in Germany in August 2020, a similar storming of the Bundestag, albeit far smaller in scale, had caused great shock

there. Moreover, echoes and acclamation for the riots in the U.S. were heard on websites, QAnon-sites, and within circles of Trump supporters in Europe as well.

In the Netherlands, it was difficult not to put the curfew riots of 24–25 January into this context as well. Similar concerns were voiced in the U.K., with security agencies in the Netherlands and elsewhere repeating this threat awareness in recent, formal threat assessments.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

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