

# VORTEX NEWSLETTER

*Welcome to the second 2026 edition of our newsletter!*

*For this penultimate issue, we decided to take a self-reflective look back at the past three years. To do so, we asked our doctoral candidates to share their experiences of the doctoral journey: How did they perceive the process of their doctoral projects? What were some memorable moments or fun anecdotes along the way? In this issue, we are happy to present a selection of their reflections.*

*As usual, we also provide updates on recent publications and other news before our next and final issue offers a broader retrospective.*

*We hope you enjoy reading this June issue.*

*Your editorial team,*

*Anna, Laura and Lotta*

## The VORTEX Blog Series

*VORTEX has its own blog series where our doctoral candidates regularly publish short pieces related to their work. Check it out at: <https://vortex.uni.mau.se/blog/>. The following blog posts have been published since the last VORTEX newsletter:*

### **Working with Former Extremists**

By Tore Bjørgo



## VORTEX News



On 18-20 May 2026, VORTEX candidates Violette Mens, Javid Ibad, Rohan Kit Bains Stevenson, and Marzena Oliveira Ribas participated in the 6th Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPP6) at the University of Helsinki.

## News from VORTEX doctoral candidates



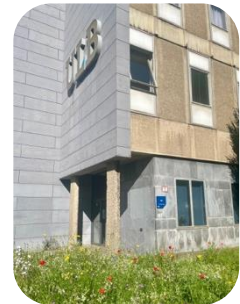
In the last few months before submitting her dissertation, [Heidi Campana Piva](#) has been hard at work writing the final chapters. Although she is looking forward to the moment, she will finally deem it "finished", she is also enjoying the process of seeing all of her past years' work coming together. During this PhD, Heidi has second-guessed most of her decisions regarding her research. It has been difficult to deal with the insecurities surrounding her capabilities to develop this work fully. Nevertheless, now it seems that she is finally able to look at the fruits of her work proudly. Heidi knows her dissertation is not perfect, but she also knows that it is a faithful representation of her PhD journey, with all the hardships it contained. All in all, Heidi cannot wait to share with the VORTEX consortium the final version of her dissertation. Stay tuned to our blog to see it once it is officially published in her university's web library!



Following an initial research stay at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, [Lotta Rahlf](#) returned for a two-week follow-up visit. Her goal was to conduct further interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to better understand the role of evaluation and quality management in Norwegian P/CVE practices. The visit was a success, providing Lotta with the necessary data to develop a comparative case study between Germany and Norway. This explores why these two countries take such different approaches to evaluation and what these differences reveal about accountability within the P/CVE field.



During her second research stay at the Université libre de Bruxelles, [Laura Stritzke](#) had the opportunity to gain valuable insights into the local research environment and to exchange with colleagues from different fields and disciplines. She was warmly welcomed by Corinne Torrekens, the director of GERME and her thesis supervisor. It gave her the chance to get to know her research group further and share an office with very kind colleagues. Besides, the Centre for Social and Cultural Psychology, directed by Laurent Licata and Olivier Klein, invited her to take part in their seminar series. The discussions and exchanges with colleagues at ULB were very enriching and provided valuable impulses for her research.





During the last months [Violette Mens](#) took two ECPR classes. One on critical discourse analysis, the other on how to write academic research, both in articles and bigger research projects such as a PhD. The knowledge acquired was extremely useful and will be used for her own dissertation. On this note, she has started writing her monograph and hopes to finish a first draft during summer. Violette also started giving a class titled "Introduction to Radicalisation" to the Center for Conflict bachelor students at Marburg University and will be doing so until the end of the semester mid-July. In the next months, Violette will continue working in her PhD while also attending the BISA conference in Brighton and the CES one in Dublin during June.



[Javid Ibad](#) has recently submitted and pre-defended his Ph.D. thesis titled "Programmatic Analysis of Mainstream Right Radicalization (MRR) in the Netherlands and Romania: the Tale of a Typical and a Diverse Case." He is scheduled to defend his thesis on September 4. Reflecting on the process, he reported that the pre-defence went better than he had expected. Based on his experience, he noted that thesis writing forces one into a boring and disciplined routine. He therefore encouraged others to view this phase as an opportunity to balance their lives. As he put it, a great hack is to find a relaxing secondary activity to counterbalance the demanding work of writing.



During the 6<sup>th</sup> Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism, and Polarisation (HEPP6) [Marzena Oliveira Ribas](#) gave a presentation entitled „Gendered Narratives and the Construction of Community in Far Right and Islamist Telegram Groups.“ She also published an analysis for International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), where she explores how gendered narratives are used in far right and Islamist online communities to strengthen belonging and provide members with guidance in times of crisis

## Research Output

Rahlf, Lotta (2026) The Institutionalisation of Evaluation and Its Potential for Isomorphism. *Evaluation*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890261434566>.

Ribas Oliveira, Marzena (2026). The Role of Gender in Far Right and Islamist Online Communities. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). <https://icct.nl/publication/role-gender-far-right-and-islamist-online-communities>.

## VORTEX at Conferences

- 6<sup>th</sup> Helsinki Conference on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (Hepp6), University of Helsinki, May 18- 20, 2026 (Violette Mens, Javid Ibad, Rohan Kit Bains Stevenson, Marzena Oliverira Ribas)
- Political Studies Association (PSA) 76th Annual conference, University of Oxford, March 30-01 April 2026 (Rohan Kit Bains Stevenson)
- The Spring School on Democratic Backsliding and Political Conflict, Scuola Normale Superiore and European University Institute, Florence, March 30-02 April 2026 (Javid Ibad)
- ECPR Joint Sessions, University of Innsbruck, April 07-10, 2026 (Javid Ibad)
- 17th Düsseldorf Graduate Conference on Party Research (GraPa), HHU Düsseldorf, January 29-30, 2026 (Javid Ibad)

## Other News



In the field of P/CVE, evaluation has traditionally been viewed as a formal hurdle—a box to be checked for reporting purposes rather than a tool for improvement. However, a shift is underway. In a recent article for the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation, titled “[Embedding Evaluation in P/CVE: From Compliance to Shared Learning Opportunities](#)”, Lotta Rahlf argues that evaluation must evolve into a shared, collective learning process.

# OUR VORTEX JOURNEY

We know the VORTEX journey, like any PhD, was supposed to challenge us. Looking back, it brought unpredictable ups and downs and continuously confronted us with new challenges that required effort, adaptation, and resilience to navigate.



For some of us, the experience resembled climbing a mountain: progress often felt slow and sometimes invisible, requiring sustained effort without clear markers of how far we had already come. Uncertainty, setbacks, and moments of isolation made the path uneven, so reaching each milestone demanded persistence and the ability to continue even without always seeing the summit ahead.



For others, the journey felt more like navigating a river, constantly moving forward but not always in a straight or predictable direction. At times the flow felt calm and manageable, while at other moments obstacles, strong currents, or unexpected turns required patience, flexibility, and resilience to stay on course.



For many of us, however, the journey resembled riding a rollercoaster. Emotions, motivation, and progress shifted repeatedly between highs and lows, with moments of excitement and achievement often followed by stress, setbacks, or uncertainty. The journey could feel intense, unpredictable, and difficult to control, yet despite all the ups and downs, it continued moving forward toward its destination.

# OUR GROWTH

Over the past three years, the VORTEX journey has not only shaped our research projects but also influenced how we developed professionally and personally. Reflecting on this experience, many of us highlighted growth in confidence, adaptability, communication, collaboration, and the ability to navigate academic and professional challenges.

“I developed a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of academia and the current landscape of my field.”

Furthermore, over the three years we have strengthened our communication, writing, and research discussion skills, alongside greater confidence in presenting academic work. Working habits have also developed substantially, particularly in terms of time management, maintaining work-life balance, as well as planning ahead, and structuring workloads more effectively.

“I’ve become more resilient in the face of challenges, both scientific and in terms of research management.”

We have also developed greater resilience, including learning not to say yes to every career opportunity, and to trust our own judgement more. While feedback, critique, and advice remain important, we have learned that they do not always need to be followed, and that it is valuable to listen to our own instincts when making decisions.

Over the past three years, VORTEX has shaped our future plans in several key ways. It deepened our understanding of radicalisation and provided actionable expertise with clear relevance for future research and practice. It also enabled the strategic expansion of our professional networks, which we see as important for future academic and non-academic opportunities. In addition, we gained important insights into working methods, including how a PhD operates in practice, working within a consortium, and being embedded in a university research centre. Overall, these experiences combined to strengthen both our research focus and our preparedness for future career paths.

“Looking back to where I started, I can see development in my academic writing, teaching skills, presentation abilities, finding one’s place in a research field, and professional networking.”

# OUR HIGHLIGHTS

Beyond academic achievements and professional development, the VORTEX experience was also shaped by memorable moments, shared challenges, and personal connections. For many of us, the friendships and networks formed throughout the program remain one of its most valuable outcomes, often just as important as the professional insights gained. These connections not only provided support during challenging phases but also made the journey more meaningful and enjoyable. Reflecting on the earlier metaphors, it was often the strong sense of community and teamwork that helped us climb the mountain, navigate the river, and endure the roller-coaster together and made even the most demanding moments manageable.

Getting a residence permit, being a non-EU immigrant. Each time I had to go (there were several) to the Federal Police to get some sort of document will forever be branded in my mind. I will ever forget how hard these three years were.

The moment I saw my first article published online. It was the first time I realised "I can do this!"

I think the team that we created is the thing that will stay with me the most. I met people of great value and believe they are now my friends.

The highlights for me were the collaborations and friendships. These weren't just social; they also led to tangible results like joint conference presentations and co-authored papers. Having a peer group to discuss hurdles and personal development with made the PhD process much more productive and

Support among the PhD students, possibilities to share experiences and exchange thoughts. The experience that will stay with me the most is collaborating on a joint article with fellow PhD students in the network. At first, many of our research projects seemed quite diverse, with different topics, methods, and disciplinary perspectives. However, through our conversations and collaboration, we began to discover important overlaps. We recognized shared questions, similar challenges, and common experiences in conducting research.

## OUR PLANS

Looking ahead, the VORTEX experience has also had a lasting influence on how we think about our future plans, both professionally and personally. Over the past three years, it has helped clarify directions in terms of career aspirations, research interests, and long-term goals, while also broadening our perspectives on what different paths can look like within and beyond academia.

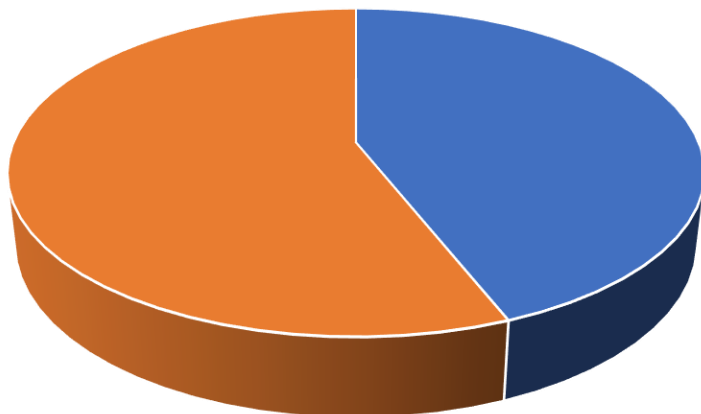
VORTEX has strengthened its commitment to academic careers, particularly in post-doctoral research. In one case, it directly enabled securing a highly competitive MSCA postdoctoral position, with the programme seen as decisive in a highly competitive environment. More broadly, it has increased the visibility and strength of our CVs and helped clarify individual academic trajectories.

At the same time, it has broadened perspectives on alternative career paths, including opportunities in think tanks and other non-academic sectors alongside academia. Reflecting this diversity of future plans, around 56% of us currently see ourselves in two years primarily in academia, while 44% are considering non-academic career paths or a combination of both.

One of us noted that the programme reinforced a preference for critical over policy-oriented research, while also highlighting the relevance of our work and the need for further research in the field.

We also gained transferable skills such as project management and communication that are applicable beyond academia. On a personal level, the experience is described as challenging but resilience-building. Finally, VORTEX fostered strong professional networks and interdisciplinary collaboration, with ongoing cooperation with consortium colleagues expected.

Where we are in two years



Postdoctoral position  
Still working on my PhD thesis  
Employed outside academia

## Other News



Check out the new episodes of the [Europe Elects podcast](https://europeelects.eu/podcast/) with Javid Ibad as co-host.  
Link: <https://europeelects.eu/podcast/>

Stay updated on our social media channels!



Project: 101073440 - VORTEX - HORIZON-MSCA-2021-DN-01  
REA.A - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions & Support to experts  
A.1 - MSCA Doctoral Networks

