

1 Full-time PhD Fellowship in Social Sciences (digital extremism)



The **Catholic University of Louvain** (UCLouvain) is looking for strong candidates for a generous, **full-time PhD fellowship** in the field of **digital extremist communication**. This 2-years (renewable) fellowship is funded by UCLouvain's internal Special Research Funds, granted for Prof. Stephane Baele's project *WESTOPIA: Utopian and Dystopian Imaginaries of "Western Civilization" in Far-Right Digital Ecosystems*.

A first round of applications will be gathered and evaluated for a project start October 1st, 2025 (**deadline for applications 7 July 2025**, interviews online 11 July 2025, decision communicated 14 July 2025). The selection committee keeps the right to launch a second round of application and postpone the project start if no suitable candidate is identified during the first round.

Any question on the project or selection can be directed at Prof. Stephane Baele <stephane.baele@uclouvain.be>.

Applications should include:

- A 1-page letter of motivation explaining your interest for the project and clearly listing how your profile matches the application requirements (see below).
- A full CV (including degrees obtained for each study year, the title of your MA-thesis, and, when applicable, a list of publications, relevant courses taken, and conference presentations).
- One or two recommendation letters.

Please send the above documents electronically **in one single file** entitled **Application_WESTOPIA_[NAME]** to Prof. Stephane Baele (stephane.baele@uclouvain.be).

Minimal requirements for applicants:

- A Masters degree in the social sciences, ideally in political science, communication, or sociology, awarded with a distinction or high distinction.
- Rigour, hard-working ethos, scientific open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity.
- Ability to implement quantitative and qualitative methods; some familiarity with computational text analysis (NLP).
- Native-level or very good command of English; commitment to learn French (if not spoken already).

Assets for a competitive application:

- Demonstrable substantive knowledge of scholarship on (online) extremism/terrorism.

- Strong coding and social data analysis skills, including various tools for computational text analysis and visual analysis.
- Some proficiency in French.
- International background and/or experience.

What you will do:

- Conduct your own original research on the worldviews and narratives found in far-right online ecosystems (blogs, websites, social media, etc.). More specifically, offer a rigorous and systematic analysis of how the “Western civilization” is presented in influential far-right platforms through language and imagery, paying special attention to conceptual notions such as narratives, extremism, and utopia/dystopia/retrotopia.
- Co-author papers on this and related topics with your PhD supervisor Prof. Stephane Baele, thereby building a strong and competitive scientific profile on which to launch an academic or law-enforcement career.
- Attend conferences, workshops, and events dedicated to digital extremism and the ongoing contestation of liberal norms and “order”, and do a short research stay abroad.
- Participate, in person, to the intellectual life of the research centre (ISPOLE) in UCLouvain’s campuses in Louvain-la-Neuve and Mons.
- Enrol for the PhD programme at UCLouvain. Prepare for, and successfully pass, a confirmation panel after one year of work. Submit your PhD thesis within a 4 years timeframe.
- Apply, with the help of the PhD supervisor, to Belgium’s National Funds for Scientific Research (FNRS) to switch from UCLouvain’s internal funding scheme to an external source of funding.

What we offer:

- An intellectually stimulating project focusing on an important, highly topical issue with evident societal relevance.
- A full-time doctoral fellowship, with careful mentorship and guidance from your thesis supervisor (Prof. S. Baele) and committee.
- A yearly stipend to fund travel and research stays.
- A shared office in both the Louvain-la-Neuve and the Mons campuses, with very good facilities (common room, access to university sports facilities, etc.).
- Excellent and friendly research environment at UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve and Mons campuses), with ample possibilities for skills and language training as well as social interactions.
- Outstanding opportunities for international networking, including at least one research stay abroad, as well as contacts beyond academia with anti-extremism/terrorism services.

Background information on the project:

WESTOPIA: Utopian and Dystopian Imaginaries of “Western Civilization” in Far-Right Digital Ecosystems.

Short Summary. Over the past 15 years, a series of terrorist attacks across the world – from Oslo (Norway, 2011) to Christchurch (N-Z, 2019) and Buffalo (US, 2022) – have been perpetrated by individuals who denounced the alleged demise of the

“Western civilization” and sought to stop it through violence. This project unearths the roots of this phenomenon, by detailing the ways “Western civilization” is portrayed in the vast far-right online ecosystem. Leveraging computational and qualitative methods, we will systematically analyze how utopian and dystopian imaginaries of the “West” are visually and linguistically constructed, and shed light on the implications of these perceptions.

Context and scholarship. The past three decades have witnessed the relentless growth of the “far-right online ecosystem” (Baele et al. 2020; Droogan et al. 2022; Conway et al. 2019), a sprawling constellation of online spaces of all kinds. Today, hundreds of thousands of social media channels, podcasts, websites, forums, digital archiving, apps, streaming platforms, etc. together constitute a complex system of unmappable scale. In this context, it is critical to rigorously study the ideas and narratives constructed and promoted in this ecosystem, especially as some percolate into “mainstream” politics (Brown et al. 2021) and frequently motivate attacks such as the mass shootings in Christchurch and El Paso in 2019.

An emerging literature has documented, in particular, that the traditional association between nationalism and the far-right is increasingly superseded, in these online spaces, by “civilizationism”, i.e. the belief that the key polity worth “defending” is the “Western civilization” (Ferber & Kimmel 2000; Wollenberg 2014; Brubaker 2017; Stewart 2020; Bettiza et al. 2023; McFadden 2023). Attachment to the “West” is exacerbated by beliefs in its alleged decline or fall – a claim found in several terrorist manifestos. However, this civilizationism – which echoes both foreign policy lines such as Putin’s “Eurasian” discourse (Lewis 2022) and claims made by jihadist groups (Baele et al. 2021) – has multiple variants depicting the “West” in contrasting and sometimes incompatible ways. This diversity and its implications remain insufficiently documented and understood. The existing literature is indeed mostly conceptual, with weak methodological and empirical bases; studies mostly focus on select cases that tend to “fit” expectations, and the exclusive use of qualitative methods calls for methodological diversification.

Aim of the project. The present project seeks to significantly strengthen this literature, and terrorism/extremism studies more broadly, by offering the first systematic, large-scale multimodal (visual and text) analysis of how the “Western civilization” (and other related constructs such as “Europe”) is presented in influential far-right platforms. Specifically, it will build on recent interventions delving into the ideology of the “far-” and “new” right that stress the role of utopian imaginaries of the past and dystopian projections of the future (Abrahamsen & Williams 2025), to study the dominant visual and linguistic descriptions of an imagined “West”, past, present, and future. Scientifically, the project will:

- ✓ Ask how far-right online spaces construct and promote, with recurring visual tropes and linguistic associations, specific understandings of what the “Western civilization” is. Analyzing large visual and text corpora with a combination of computational and qualitative methods, to determine how these understandings articulate utopian vs. dystopian imaginaries that connect to historical narratives such as the “1950s golden age” (past utopia) or the “great replacement” (current/future dystopia).
- ✓ Establish a clear typology of the different conceptions of the “West” (e.g., as “Judeo-Christian”, or as a racial entity) promoted in far-right spaces, evaluate which utopian/dystopian narratives support them, and measure the saliency of each conception (how often each representation occurs in different online spaces).

The project has also a broader, social objective: it will strengthen our understanding of today's shifting ideological landscape at the international, more precisely what Abrahamsen and colleagues (2024) recently named the "World of the Right".

Methodology. This multi-methods project will combine both quantitative (computational) and qualitative analyses of visual and text data gathered from several existing corpora (covering France, the UK, and the US, and including websites, forums, blogs, and social media channels). Combining inductive and deductive logics will ensure a comprehensive yet granular depiction, typology, and measurement of utopian/dystopian narratives of the "West".