



Cumberland
Lodge

Cumberland Lodge Police Conference 2026

CONFERENCE REPORT



DIVISION, DISTRUST AND DISORDER:

POLICING POLARISATION
IN MODERN SOCIETY

THE
POLICE
FOUNDATION

The UK's policing think tank

OCTOBER 2026

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About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is the only independent think tank focused exclusively on improving policing and developing knowledge and understanding of policing and crime reduction. Our mission is to generate evidence and develop ideas which deliver better policing and a safer society. We do this by producing trusted, impartial research and by working with the police and their partners to create change.

Cover image: Exterior of Cumberland Lodge

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1. Introduction

We live in an anxious society where it seems the only thing uniting us is our shared sense of distrust and division. Many of us feel that something is wrong: that we cannot trust our neighbours or our institutions like we used to; that democracy is fragile; that affording life's essentials is becoming harder than ever; and that those charged with keeping us safe are failing in their duty. In the meantime, wars rage overseas, extremism grows at home, and malign actors use online spaces to spread hatred, misinformation and division, with real world consequences. In this climate of uncertainty, it is little wonder that confidence in politics, the police and even one another has begun to erode.

The police, occupying their accustomed place as “the anvil” on which society beats out its problems, find themselves as the focal point of this distrust and division. Simultaneously accused of bias by groups on opposing sides of the political spectrum, their role as society's referee is becoming harder than ever to fulfil. After all, how can one enforce rules when no one agrees what those rules are, or even whether everyone is playing the same game?

If policing is to maintain its legitimacy as a keeper of the peace, it must confront difficult questions about its role in an increasingly polarised society. What does it mean to uphold the law without fear or favour when public consensus is so fractured? How should officers respond when political, cultural and social conflicts increasingly play out in the streets they are asked to police? How can the police maintain public confidence when trust in institutions is declining more broadly? And how can they communicate a single, strong message to citizens increasingly splintering off into their own tribes with their own personal echo chambers?

Yet these questions are almost impossible to answer amid the demands of day-to-day policing. The 44th annual Cumberland Lodge Police Conference, titled *Division, Distrust and Disorder: Policing Polarisation in Modern Societies*, gave police leaders, academics, policymakers, practitioners and politicians from all sides of the political spectrum a rare opportunity to step back and reflect on what may be required to maintain legitimacy, restore public confidence and reinforce social cohesion in the years ahead.

While delegates all agreed that these challenges had real operational impact for policing, there was less consensus on what the diagnosis was, let alone what the cure might be. This report offers a reflection on the weekend's discussion, seeking to draw out some of these themes and highlight the common ground on which positive change can be built.

2. Two tier policing: operational reality, public perception, and police legitimacy

Key Insight

Large sections of the British public now believe policing operates unfairly, regardless of whether evidence supports that view.

The conference took place just days after riots in Southampton following the sentencing of the killer of 18-year-old Henry Nowak. This incident formed the backdrop for heated discussions around whether policing in modern society can truly be said to operate without fear or favour.

Nowak was fatally stabbed in December 2025 by Vickrum Digwa, who falsely claimed he had been racially abused and had acted in self-defence. The release of police body-worn video footage showing an officer handcuffing Nowak while he was mortally wounded fuelled public anger and reinforced perceptions among some commentators that policing applies different standards to different groups (BBC News, 2026).

This idea that certain groups, political viewpoints or forms of protest are treated more favourably than others by law enforcement is now widely labelled as “two-tier policing” (Jameson and Ferguson, 2026). Although the term was originally associated with over-policing of Black communities, it has increasingly been adopted by critics who argue it applies to police treatment of right-leaning groups and causes. The term itself has been weaponised by politicians and influential commentators on social media in the last 18 months (Boothe and Philemon, 2026).

The perception of ‘two-tier’ policing is widely held. An exclusive survey conducted by Zencity (2026) for the conference found that nearly half of the British public believe police apply rules more strictly to people with certain political views. Among those who held this belief, 43 per cent thought people with right-leaning views were treated more harshly than those on the left. Significantly, the survey was conducted just before the Southampton disorder, meaning it was likely to be an underestimate. As one speaker remarked, “Post this event, everyone thinks it is a thing.” The survey also found that 62 per cent of respondents considered fairness more important than outcomes. This aligns with wider research by Public First

¹ Former Met Commissioner Sir Robert Mark famously described the police in 1975 as “the anvil on which society beats out the problems and abrasions of social inequality, racial prejudice, weak laws and ineffectual legislation” (Blair, 1999).

(2026) which identified fairness as one of the strongest shared values across British society. Perceptions of fair treatment matter because they influence whether people obey the law, cooperate with police and report crime (The Zencity (2026) survey showed, among those who believed policing was politically biased, only 31 per cent reported being very willing to report a crime).

However, delegates were sharply divided over how these findings should be interpreted. Some argued that well-intentioned efforts to address racism, sexism and discrimination had over-corrected, producing a perception of “virtue signalling” and preferential treatment for certain groups that left other communities feeling disregarded. As one speaker put it, “the public are not stupid; two-tier policing is how they experience it on the ground.” For example, some delegates argued the Police Race Action Plan 2022), in its commitment to being not just “not racist” but “anti-racist” risked stepping dangerously close to activism, and was having the effect whereby officers might “hesitate” before they act for fear of facing accusations of racism

Others insisted policing had still not gone far enough in implementing the lessons of the Macpherson Report (1999) and the Casey Review (2023). They argued Black communities remain both over-policed and under-protected, while officers from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to face disproportionately negative experiences within policing. Delegates in this camp rejected the argument that officers involved in the Nowak arrest were racially-biased, and insisted that initiatives such as the Police Race Action Plan had delivered important improvements in training, confidence and trust, warning against “throwing the baby out with the bathwater”.

A third group argued that necessary reforms had been implemented in response to well-documented failings, but that these changes had not always been communicated effectively. As a result, actions intended to strengthen legitimacy among some communities had undermined it among others. Participants in this group contended that officers present during the death of Henry Nowak were responding to a rapidly evolving and highly confusing incident, but that this had been poorly communicated to the public, who only saw a brief body-worn video clip stripped of all context.

Despite these divisions, there was broad agreement that public perceptions matter. The operational reality on the ground was closer to what people were calling for than they appreciated, and there was no evidence to support examples of two-tier policing in practice. However, the fact that many members of the public believe it exists makes the perception itself a matter that policing must engage with and cannot afford to dismiss.

Consensus points

- There is no systematic two-tier policing in practice, but large sections of the public believe it exists, and that belief itself is now the operational problem.
- Fairness – both real and perceived – is central to public confidence, cooperation and willingness to report crime.
- Legitimacy depends as much on public perception of police action as the actions themselves.

3. Policing protest in a divided world

Key Insight

Acting impartially during protest situations is no longer enough; policing must also be seen to be impartial.

The conference heard that not all protests are created equal. What may be seen as unfairness and inconsistency in policing stems from the difference between the management of peaceful protest compared to disorder and serious violence. While the right to protest is a fundamental democratic freedom, it is not an absolute right and must be balanced against the need to prevent harm, protect property and maintain public safety. However, delegates heard that while the police may be expert at using different tactics for different protests, they are less good at explaining these nuances to the public.

Violent disorder followed the murders of six-year-old Bebe King, seven-year-old Elsie Dot Stancombe and nine-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport during the summer of 2024, triggered by the spread of some misinformation about the offender (Coffey and Moritz, 2025; Morley-Davies, 2024). One senior police leader observed that the “huge show of force and rapid justice” deployed in response to the riots that year had led to accusations of two-tier policing but maintained that “we have to do this when the streets are burning”.

Participants heard that responses to protest are shaped by assessments of the immediacy and severity of potential harm, but that differences in police action can quickly become a communications challenge. While some argued that it remains sufficient for officers simply to act impartially and “without fear or favour”, others contended that modern policing requires greater emphasis on explaining decisions to the public. The issue, they suggested, is often not what police do but how those actions are understood and how quickly they are explained.

The conference also heard that the need for public order policing resources had increased dramatically in recent years, placing considerable strain on frontline officers. One speaker suggested the scale of demand had increased some 600-fold, while delegates described the growing physical and psychological burden of maintaining public order. As one participant observed, officers are increasingly required to endure cancelled rest days “holding the line while people are chucking stuff at you”.

Police leaders explained that operational decisions during protests are guided by assessments of “threat, harm and risk” and grounded in the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and accountability. However, applying these principles has become increasingly difficult. Speakers pointed to more disruptive protest tactics emerging across the political spectrum and suggested that both police powers, the laws on protest and assembly, and public expectations have struggled to keep pace with these developments. At the same time, an increasingly complex legislative framework has made decision-making more challenging for officers and commanders alike.

Several participants expressed concern about the role of individuals and groups who sought to frame the Southport murders in ways that maximised outrage and division.. Such narratives, they argued, contributed to escalating tensions and were linked to incidents including the attack on the Southport mosque, assaults on businesses and homes associated with immigrant communities, and attacks on hotels housing asylum seekers. These discussions prompted broader debate about the boundaries between free speech and public safety, and the right response to those who exploited “awful tragedies” such as the murder of Henry Nowak to sow division. As one participant asked, at what point does “freedom of expression become incitement.”

Although real-time explanations may not always be possible during rapidly evolving incidents, participants argued that policing organisations must do more to communicate the rationale for operational decisions afterwards to prevent these negative voices gaining the upper hand.

Practical examples of effective communication were also highlighted. Reflecting on unrest in Bradford during 2024, one senior officer described how long-standing relationships with community leaders, youth groups, faith organisations and neighbourhood networks proved crucial in dispelling rumours and preventing wider disorder. Because those relationships had already been established, police were able to disseminate accurate information quickly through trusted local intermediaries, reducing the impact of rumour and misinformation. The example was cited as evidence that neighbourhood policing and

sustained community engagement, often overlooked during periods of crisis, remain essential components of effective public order policing and crisis communications.

Consensus points

- Acting without fear or favour is necessary but no longer sufficient. Policing must also be seen to be impartial.
- In order to preserve public trust after a critical incident it is essential for the police to explain to the public why particular actions were taken and to adopt a proactive communications posture.
- Effective communication via pre-existing community relationships can reduce the impact of misinformation and rumour during crisis situations. It is the responsibility of neighbourhood policing to build these links, making them a core component of crisis communications for forces.

4. Division, dissent and the dissolving of democracy

Key Insight

Young people have faith in the idea of democracy but do not believe government or the police are democratic.

The conference heard that the declines in trust and confidence were not limited to the police but were felt across all institutions. Academics explained that whilst the crisis of trust has recently gained prominence in public discourse, it should be understood as a long-term, chronic decline rather than an acute crisis. Confidence in institutions has steadily decreased over time in Britain, as displayed by longitudinal survey data from over five decades of c.3000 people in the latest instalment of the UK in the World Values Survey (2022). Since 1981, the proportion of people who say they have confidence in the press has decreased from 30 per cent to 14 per cent while confidence in Parliament has declined from 41 per cent to 23 per cent. However, the largest decrease has been in confidence in the police, which has dropped from 87 per cent to 67 per cent ((Duffy et al, 2023).

Generational differences in the findings are most stark. Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) reports dramatically lower confidence in the police compared to older generations. Even after controlling for other factors, including the general tendency for younger people to express lower confidence in the police, Gen Z exhibits

significantly lower levels of trust than previous generations at the same age (Duffy et al, 2023).

The particularly low levels of trust in the police among Gen Z appear to be distinct to Britain, with young people in other countries exhibiting attitudes more in line with their elders (Duffy et al, 2023). This suggests that domestic factors rather than international ones such as social media adoption are to blame. Austerity and prolonged cuts to local services have weakened community infrastructure and reduced opportunities for engagement between young people and the police. This is reflected in Zencity (2026) survey data assessing police visibility. In the previous year, 32 per cent of participants of a representative survey of 3,291 people reported that they had not seen a police officer or Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) on foot patrol in their local area, and 56 per cent had not spoken to an officer.

A speaker argued there was a link between social polarisation and crisis in institutions, adding that as society became more divided, whether one perceived an institution as benevolent no longer depended on whether it was good for society as a whole but whether it worked for them and people like them. This not only has implications for the wellbeing of society but also its safety as hate grows when trust in institutions is lost.

Nevertheless, there was hope buried in the data – while members of the public, particularly young people, might have lost trust in the way democracy is delivered, they have not lost trust in democracy itself. The conference heard the UK in the World Values survey found that there was more support than before – 76 to 90 per cent thought democracy as an ideal was very or fairly good – they just did not think that the way their country was run in practice was democratic (Duffy and Morini, 2025).

Consensus points

- The crisis of trust is chronic rather than acute, but policing has a particular problem: falling trust levels but also a whole generation of young people much less trusting of the police than earlier generations
- Support for democracy as an ideal remains high and has increased. What has collapsed is confidence that democracy is being delivered on the ground. Both policing and the courts stand out as institutions suffering a crisis of trust.
- Reduced police visibility and community contact form part of the domestic explanation for the sharp fall in confidence among the public, and by extension young people. The wider drivers of that trust deficit are less well understood.

5. The changing nature of extremism

Key Insight

Existing approaches to extremism may not be fit for emerging threats.

The conference heard that growing social division is not a domestic challenge alone. Delegates argued that hostile state actors increasingly seek to exploit political and cultural divisions in Western democracies, using misinformation and polarising narratives to erode trust in institutions.

Alongside these geopolitical threats, speakers argued that the terrorist landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade. Whereas counter-terrorism efforts were once focused primarily on organised Islamist and far-right extremist movements, today's threat picture is considerably more fragmented and complex. While groups such as Islamic State continue to pose a threat, they no longer possess the same clear organisational structure or "centre of gravity" that characterised earlier forms of terrorism.

Instead, new terrorist threats involve individuals consuming and sharing extremist material across multiple digital platforms. Traditional statecraft and security responses were described as increasingly ill-suited to an environment in which young people can be exposed to radicalising influences through social media, online communities and even gaming platforms.

Against this backdrop, delegates explored whether existing definitions of extremism remain adequate for understanding emerging forms of serious violence. Several speakers argued that some recent attacks appear increasingly difficult to explain through traditional understandings of terrorism, which is commonly defined as the use of serious violence to advance a political, religious or ideological cause.

The Southport attack, committed by Axel Rudakubana, was presented as a key example of this challenge. Speakers suggested that his actions appeared not to be driven by a coherent ideological objective but instead reflected a fixation with violence itself. This phenomenon was described by one speaker as "New Extremism": violence committed not as a means to achieve a political goal, but for its own sake. Similar concepts have been described elsewhere as "Nihilistic Violent Extremism". The conference heard that Southport was not an isolated example. Parallels were drawn with other attacks, including the Dendermonde nursery attack in Belgium.

Speakers argued that existing systems, such as the Prevent programme, are often designed around ideological radicalisation and therefore struggle to respond effectively to individuals whose risk stems from a fixation with violence rather than a coherent belief system. Some delegates pointed to the Inquiry findings and suggested these systemic gaps contributed to failures in the lead-up to the Southport attack. Because Rudakubana did not fit conventional definitions of extremism, concerns about his behaviour were not addressed through a framework designed to manage the risk he posed. While delegates were careful not to suggest that any single intervention would necessarily have prevented the attack, many believed the case exposed weaknesses in the current safeguarding landscape.

A recurring theme was the need for a more multidisciplinary approach to managing violence fixated individuals. Delegates argued that future responses should draw together policing, mental health services, education, social care and safeguarding professionals to develop a fuller understanding of an individual's developmental history, family background and personal circumstances. The role of mental health expertise was emphasised, as was the importance of early intervention before harmful behaviours become entrenched.

Consensus points

- Definitions of terrorism, risk models and intervention frameworks need revision to address violence detached from traditional ideological drivers.
- Effective response requires multidisciplinary collaboration between policing, mental health, education, social care and safeguarding. This should draw on developmental history, family background and personal circumstances.
- Early intervention before harmful behaviours become entrenched is essential. Technology access and new online networks can accelerate radicalisation; policing and safeguarding systems must adapt accordingly.

6. Combatting misinformation through communication

Key Insight

Disinformation loves a vacuum, so rapid, authentic and honest communication is essential.

The conference heard that while the democratisation of information has brought many benefits, public institutions were largely unprepared for the consequences of declining trust in traditional sources of authority. Members of the public are no longer passive consumers of information but active participants in its creation, interpretation and dissemination. In an online environment where visibility is often driven by emotion, content that provokes anger, outrage or moral certainty frequently attracts greater engagement and attention than more nuanced or evidence-based accounts.

The spread of what one speaker described as “information manipulation” is not a new phenomenon. Attempts to weaken opponents through rumour, propaganda and deception have long formed part of political conflict. However, participants argued that digital technologies and social media have “rocket propelled” these dynamics to an unprecedented scale. Several speakers suggested that human beings are not cognitively equipped to evaluate the volume of information now encountered daily. Susceptibility to misinformation, they argued, is rooted in normal human psychology rather than ignorance. Complete scepticism would make everyday life impossible, yet the trust required for social interaction can also leave individuals vulnerable to manipulation. Domestic and foreign actors alike may exploit periods of uncertainty to spread misleading messages.

The conference heard survey evidence from Zencity (2026) which suggested that most people attempt to verify information before sharing it, although younger individuals are more likely to distribute content without checking its accuracy. One speaker argued that such moments represent a critical intervention point: “when information and disinformation is being shared, people are open-minded for a moment”.

Yet views differed on how the police should make use of these moments, or even if they should seek to intervene at that point at all. Some argued that, in order to restore public trust, police should reject the “wild west” of the online information environment, and focus exclusively on core operational responsibilities – “police streets, not tweets”. Others rejected this position, warning that disengagement would leave the information space vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation. Echoing H. L. Mencken's (1920) observation that there is often a

solution to every human problem that is “neat, plausible, and wrong”, they argued that withdrawal from public discourse in this way was unlikely to strengthen legitimacy or public confidence.

Despite these differences, there was broad agreement that policing must become more confident and proactive in communicating its impartiality. As one speaker put it: “Communication is key ... disinformation loves a vacuum ... policing needs a stronger voice in public debate; we need professional self-confidence.” Participants argued that public trust increasingly depends not only on what police do but also on how effectively their actions are explained and understood.

Speakers stressed that there is no single solution or “silver bullet”. Effective communication requires a sophisticated understanding of the information environment, including who needs to be reached, which messages are most likely to resonate with different audiences, and how information moves through communities and networks. Delegates repeatedly emphasised the importance of preparation, arguing that trusted communication channels and community relationships must be established before a crisis occurs rather than during one. Several compared this process to a fire drill: communication strategies should be developed, tested and refined in advance so that forces are prepared when major incidents arise.

The conference heard that, in an increasingly fragmented society, the desire for honest and credible communication may be one of the few values that remains widely shared. Authenticity was therefore viewed as essential. Participants argued that police leaders should communicate quickly and openly, acknowledging uncertainty where it exists, and explaining decisions clearly. As one delegate observed, members of the public are often more willing to accept honest, human responses such as “we do not know yet” than statements that appear overly cautious, bureaucratic or evasive.

However, participants noted that communication and public engagement have not traditionally been prioritised as core leadership competencies within policing. Several speakers suggested that forces may need to invest more heavily in developing officers’ capabilities in public communication, media engagement and community leadership if trust and legitimacy are to be sustained in a rapidly changing information landscape.

Technology was also discussed as both a source of risk and a potential solution. Several speakers argued that rapid publication of contextual information, including body-worn video footage where appropriate, could help counter false or misleading narratives following critical incidents. One speaker cited the international law-enforcement response to the LockBit ransomware group as an example of how strategic communications can be used offensively as well as defensively. By publicly exposing the group’s leadership, undermining its credibility and highlighting operational failures, authorities demonstrated how communication can weaken malign actors, not merely respond to them (National Crime Agency, 2024). Another speaker suggested that artificial intelligence may simultaneously accelerate the spread of misinformation and provide tools to counter it, through identifying coordinated amplification, detecting malicious activity and assisting in the verification of synthetic media.

Consensus points

- Policing must communicate its impartiality more confidently and proactively, with a special duty on police leaders to be confident communicators.
- Effective communication requires a detailed understanding of audiences, message resonance and the pathways through which information travels.
- Authenticity matters. Honest, human communication is often more credible than overly bureaucratic language.

7. Lessons from New Zealand

Key Insight

Public confidence can be restored if effective and authentic communication is placed at the centre of police leadership.

The conference concluded by hearing lessons from New Zealand, where a significant improvement in public confidence over recent years was outlined. Speakers attributed this progress not to any single reform but to a sustained focus on organisational clarity, community engagement and visible leadership.

Delegates heard that public trust had suffered from a series of misconduct scandals at headquarters, but had over time been strengthened by clearly articulating policing priorities and ensuring that frontline officers were supported to deliver them consistently. Communication became a central element of leadership rather than a peripheral function. Leaders were expected to be visible, accessible and accountable, both to their workforce and to the public.

Particular emphasis was placed on maintaining strong relationships with communities. Police leaders described the importance of spending time in the communities they served, communicating regularly about local priorities, and ensuring that officers understood what success looked like for different groups. This included working closely with Māori communities and recognising that justice and community resolution may sometimes involve approaches that differ from traditional enforcement models. As one speaker said, “people do dumb things” and so fairness lies in looking at the intent as well as the action and treating people accordingly.

One speaker summarised the approach succinctly: *“Policing is not difficult when we do the basics well.”*

Consensus points

Effective communication is based on

1. Clearly articulated priorities that officers can deliver consistently.
2. Active protection of public confidence as a core organisational task.
3. Authentic communication from leaders with both their officers and communities.

8. Conclusion

The conference did not produce a single diagnosis of Britain’s growing divisions, nor a single solution. Delegates disagreed on the causes of declining trust, the nature of modern extremism, and the extent to which policing must adapt to changing public expectations or the right way for policing to defend itself.

However, several areas of broad agreement emerged. Delegates recognised that public trust cannot be taken for granted and, once lost, is difficult to rebuild. Legitimacy depends not only on acting fairly but also on being seen to act fairly. In an increasingly fragmented information environment, policing must become more confident in explaining its decisions and communicating the rationale behind its actions, because perceptions of unequal treatment are serious operational issues in their own right. Participants also emphasised that many of the challenges affecting public trust, including misinformation, protest, extremism and public order, cannot be solved by policing alone.

Speakers repeatedly cautioned against viewing complex problems through simplistic or binary lenses. As one delegate observed, policing is often treated as “a switch rather than a dial”, despite the reality that most operational and strategic decisions involve difficult judgements and trade-offs. The conference heard calls for greater confidence in evidence-based policing, with forces encouraged to communicate more clearly why particular tactics and approaches are adopted. Rather than responding to every shift in public opinion, policing should be prepared to explain and defend decisions grounded in evidence, effectiveness and professional judgement.

While acknowledging past mistakes and the importance of learning from them, delegates warned against becoming consumed by institutional introspection. The challenge is to learn lessons while remaining focused on the core purpose of policing: preventing harm, protecting the vulnerable, supporting victims and serving communities. In an increasingly diverse society, this requires a continued commitment to fairness, impartiality and service to all.

The conference concluded on a note of cautious optimism. Several speakers reflected that policing remains a profession defined by public service and a strong sense of civic purpose. Despite the pressures facing officers and staff, the service continues to attract people motivated by a genuine desire to help others and keep communities safe. In a society often characterised by division and distrust, that commitment remains one of policing’s greatest strengths.

As one speaker observed, British policing still compares favourably with any other model around the world. While policing does not always get things right, officers and staff continue to perform an exceptionally demanding role in increasingly complex circumstances. Given this context, police leaders agreed that their words and actions carry significant weight, and that visible, confident leadership will be critical in the years ahead. Ultimately, the social and economic context is less stable and predictable than ever, but the core mission remains unchanged: to cut crime, prevent harm, protect victims and keep communities safe.

Consensus points

- Policing must be seen as legitimate, but legitimacy depends not only on acting fairly, but on being seen to act fairly.
- Communication has become a core operational capability and is essential to secure and maintain public consent for policing actions.
- Declining trust affects public institutions more broadly, not policing alone, but the trust deficit among young people and the police is a serious one. Improved public confidence relies on visibility, transparency and meaningful engagement.
- Strong community relationships are essential, particularly during periods of crisis, and neighbourhood teams can underpin the resilience needed for forces to respond when public disorder challenges emerge.
- Traditional approaches to extremism may not fully address today's emerging threats. Technology presents both significant opportunities and new risks in the spread of misinformation and extremist narratives.
- Many of the challenges affecting social cohesion and legitimacy require wider societal and institutional responses, not policing action alone.

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