

Normalisation, Party Politics and Vigilantism: Why the Next Terrorist Wave will not be Right-Wing Extremist

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Abstract

The right-wing extremist terrorist attacks in the last three years have led many to designate right-wing extremist terrorism as the next major terrorist threat. This paper will argue that for large parts of the West such concerns are misguided for two main reasons. First, right-wing extremists lack the organisational clout to generate a wave of terrorist attacks that is on a par with the wave of jihadist terrorism in the West in recent years. Second, right-wing extremists have displayed a preference for other tactics; many of these tactics are non-violent, and even when they are violent, they are not necessarily terrorist in nature. We should acknowledge the importance of these other tactics and not make the mistake of viewing right-wing extremism as another form of terrorism, as that will lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of what the threat of right-wing extremism entails.

Keywords: right-wing extremism, terrorism, cultural racism, politics, islamist extremism, far right extremism

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Introduction

Terrorism has a way of taking us by surprise. No matter how focused governments are on preventing terrorist attacks, it will always be difficult to tell when, where, and how terrorists are going to strike. In fact, this unpredictability and the resultant fear among the public go a long way towards explaining the appeal of terrorism as a form of political violence. But the element of surprise in terrorism is not limited to individual attacks. We not only fail to see attacks coming, we also fail to anticipate entire waves of terrorism. Few people had ever heard of al-Qaeda when 9/11 happened, and the most recent jihadist wave of terrorism, driven and inspired by ISIS, took off at a moment when many observers believed that the jihadist movement was done for. One only has to recall the enthusiastic responses to the Arab Spring in 2011, which many read as proof that jihadist terrorist organisations were yesterday's news.¹

But this time around things are different. The terrorist attacks committed in the last three years or so by right-wing extremists have alerted terrorism scholars and counter-terrorism practitioners alike to the possibility that a new terrorist threat might be brewing. Determined not to be caught flat-footed again, the editorial boards of *Perspectives on Terrorism* and the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* recently issued special editions of their journal entirely devoted to right-wing extremist violence.² Echoing the sentiment that the fight against terrorism should focus more on right-wing extremist terrorism, then FBI-director Christopher Wray told Congress in July 2019 that most terrorist plots in the US

are right-wing extremist, not jihadist.³ In the UK, the Metropolitan Police declared that right-wing extremist terrorism is the fastest growing threat to the UK's national security.⁴

But is it possible that we're jumping the gun here? Could it be that we are too eager to brand right-wing extremism as the next terrorist threat, on a par with the wave of jihadist attacks in the period 2014-2017? The purpose of this article is, simply put, to show that with regard to large parts of the West (the US and Germany may be exceptions) the answer to both of these questions is 'yes'. Right-wing extremist activists deploy a variety of ways to achieve their political goals, and terrorism does not play a large role in this. Actually, several of these tactics are incompatible, or at the very least not easily reconcilable, with openly violent strategies such as terrorism. Given the ways right-wing extremist groups are currently trying to make their influence felt, it is more likely that they will largely stick with non-terrorist tactics. If there is an increase in the number of right-wing terrorist attacks, it will be the work of fringe figures.

But before setting out to make this point, a word about definitions is in order, especially in light of the fact that the lines between the various elements of the far right (political parties, non-violent protest movements, violent extremist groups) are blurring.⁵ As Alex P. Schmid pointed out in a widely-cited ICCT-paper on the meaning of terms like radicalisation and de-radicalisation, “[e]xtremists strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities.”⁶ The

1 Ian Black, “Al-Qaeda Already Looked Irrelevant after Arab Spring,” *The Guardian*, 2 May 2011. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/02/al-qaeda-irrelevant-arab-spring>, accessed 28 April 2020; Associated Press, “Al Qaeda Now ‘increasingly Irrelevant’ Britain,” *Zee News*, 11 September 2011. Available at: https://zeenews.india.com/news/world/al-qaeda-now-increasingly-irrelevant-britain_730929.html, accessed 11 November 2020. As late as May 2012, Fawaz Gerges, generally a well-informed observer of the jihadist movement, wrote that the Arab Spring “unraveled the standard terrorism narrative” and that “only a miracle will resuscitate a transnational jihad of the al Qaeda variety”. Fawaz Gerges, “Fawaz A. Gerges on How the Arab Spring Beat Al Qaeda,” *The Daily Beast*, 13 May 2012. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/fawaz-a-gerges-on-how-the-arab-spring-beat-al-qaeda>, accessed 28 April 2020.

2 See, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (2018), and *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2019).

3 Igor Derysh, “FBI Director to Congress: Most Domestic Terror Cases Are Driven by ‘White Supremacist Violence,’” *Salon*, 24 July 2019. Available at: https://www.salon.com/2019/07/24/fbi-director-to-congress-most-domestic-terror-cases-are-driven-by-white-supremacist-violence/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app, accessed 11 November 2020.

4 Vikram Dodd and Jamie Grierson, “Fastest-Growing UK Terrorist Threat Is from Far Right, Say Police,” *The Guardian*, 19 September 2019, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/sep/19/fastest-growing-uk-terrorist-threat-is-from-far-right-say-police>, accessed 11 November 2020.

5 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge and Medford MA: Polity Press, 2019).

6 Alex P. Schmid, “Radicalisation, de-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review,” *The*

homogeneity the right-wing extremists are shooting for should be understood in ethnic terms. In other words, right-wing extremists are willing to go to great lengths to shield their ethnically defined in-group and its way of life from external influences.

This being the case, this article applies Schmid's assertion to right-wing extremism by adopting the "minimal definition" put forth by Elisabeth Carter, who understands right-wing extremism as "an ideology that encompasses authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and exclusionary and/or holistic nationalism."⁷ Right-wing extremist groups and activists are anti-democratic, first, in the sense that they deny ethnic groups other than their own the rights and safeguards typically provided for in liberal democratic constitutions and, second, in the sense that they are highly critical of liberal democratic systems for enabling political and cultural pluralism, even if that does not automatically mean that they are all against democracy *per se*. They are authoritarian in the sense that they favour a strong state and envisage the strict application of law-and-order tactics to create and maintain the ethnically uniform order they desire. Their nationalism is exclusionary and holistic in the sense that they believe the members of their ethnic in-group form a natural whole and that membership of that group entitles its members to a position that people with different ethnic backgrounds will be denied.

Phrased differently, this paper will focus primarily on the extreme right as defined in a 2019 ICCT Policy Brief by Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal. They distinguish the radical right, which wants to maintain democracy and claims that Western civilization should be protected against Islam, from the extreme right, which wants to overthrow democracy and adheres to ideas about their racial superiority over other groups.⁸ It should be noted, however, that such distinctions are tricky, as they suggest clear delineations in a movement where many actors have views

that are insufficiently articulate or consistent to allow for neat categorisation. Moreover, one of the claims of this paper is that, to use Bjørgo and Ravndal's terms, the extreme right is adopting the terminology of the radical right to appear more acceptable, which further complicates the distinctions between various strands among the far right.

A final point that deserves mentioning here, concerns the nature of the actors whose actions this paper will be analysing. Although it does not follow immediately from the definitions just provided, this article concerns extra-parliamentary groups and social movements, not political parties that have been or want to be elected representative bodies. The latter are highly unlikely to engage in terrorism; it is the former from whom the threat of terrorist attacks is believed to emanate. Thus, the extra-parliamentary groups are much more relevant for the current analysis.

Right-wing extremism lacks the organisational clout to sustain a terrorist wave

The first reason why we should be sceptical of the claim that we are at the beginning of a wave of right-wing extremist terrorism is that the right-wing extremist movement, if one can indeed speak of one movement, does not have the organisational clout to create a terrorist wave. In order to make this point, it can be instructive to mention some obvious differences between right-wing extremist terrorism and jihadist terrorism, as that will make clear that, at the very least, there are some hurdles to be overcome before the former can operate on the same scale as the latter.

First of all, right-wing extremist terrorism lacks the centripetal mobilising force of the kind that played an important role in the rise of jihadist terrorism in, roughly, the period 2012-

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT), (March 2013), p. 9. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-a-conceptual-discussion-and-literature-review/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

⁷ Elisabeth Carter, "Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2018), p. 174. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451227>, accessed 11 November 2020.

⁸ Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses," ICCT, (September 2019), pp. 3-4. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/extreme-right-violence-and-terrorism-concepts-patterns-and-responses/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

2017. Through a skilfully executed propaganda campaign, the Islamic State managed to present itself to its potential supporters in the West as a viable and promising alternative to life in their home countries.⁹ This enabled the group to absorb the resources, skills and manpower of its supporters and steer them into the right direction.¹⁰ Put differently, the Islamic State's main achievement was to set up an international, coordinated effort to fight for the caliphate. As a result, the group came a long way towards the realisation of their political goals.

And the group's success was in a way self-reinforcing. Once the Islamic State had recruited an army big enough, it could establish a proto-state in Syria and Iraq, which could function as a hub for the planning and perpetration of large-scale terrorist attacks in Europe. This, in turn, helped the organisation draw more support, being as it was the most important and notorious jihadist organisation in the world.¹¹ Also, its proto-state, the caliphate, allowed the Islamic State to intensify its online propaganda and recruitment campaigns as well as provide remote instructions and support for jihadist attack perpetrators who had not travelled to Syria or Iraq.

The most recent jihadist wave of terrorism was carried by a mobilisation, concentration and coordination of resources that are as yet lacking in right-wing extremist terrorism. Right-wing extremist attempts at cooperation or coordination have traditionally – and still are – hampered by discord and infighting. Cas Mudde lists several explanations for why this is so, including one that would be particularly hard to overcome, namely the fact that right-wing extremist groups have narrowly defined in-groups whose interests do not easily coalesce. As Mudde explains, “the Croatian and the Serbian far right dream of a largely

similar territory – Greater Croatia for the former, Greater Serbia for the latter – while many West European far-right activists look down on East Europeans, and several East European far-right groups are strongly anti-German.”¹² It is true that in the caliphate relations between jihadists from different countries were at times strained¹³, but the Islamic State, again, owed much of its ability to create a wave of terrorism to the way it managed to mobilise large numbers of people from very different countries for one and the same cause. This will be very hard to accomplish for right-wing extremist terrorists.

Moreover, right-wing extremist terrorists lack a space from where they can train its fighters and attract new recruits. Yes, the war in Ukraine attracted its share of foreign fighters, many of which were right-wing extremists. The vast majority of those (some 15,000 out of an estimated 17,000) were Russians, but this still leaves some 2,000 fighters who could travel back to their home countries in the West and use their expertise and their status as war veterans to organise terrorist attacks.¹⁴ This latter number, though, is a lot smaller when compared to the numbers of jihadist foreign fighters, which run into the hundreds even for medium-sized Western countries like Belgium and the Netherlands. Moreover, there is little to suggest that the Ukrainian war zone is being used as a hub for training and attack planning in the same way the caliphate and the al-Qaeda training camps in Pakistan once were.

As a result of the persistent fragmentation, right-wing extremist terrorism has so far been the work of isolated groups or cells. It has been less organised, more spontaneous and less planned than many of the most deadly jihadist attacks. This is reflected in the numbers of deadly victims of jihadist and right-wing extremist terrorist attacks in the West.

9 Charlie Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy” (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015). Available at <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

10 Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: the State of Terror* (HarperCollins: New York, 2015), chapters 5, 6 and 7.

11 Clint Watts, “Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (July 2016), pp. 1-6. Available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/deciphering-competition-between-al-qaida-and-the-islamic-state/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

12 Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 2019, p. 65.

13 Jeremy Bender, “Cracks in ISIS Are Becoming More Clear,” *Business Insider*, 1 March 2015. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/weaknesses-of-isis-2015-3?international=true&r=US&IR=T>, accessed 28 April 2020.

14 Kacper Rekawek, “‘It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over’: Extreme Right-Wing Foreign Fighters in Ukraine,” *Counter Extremism Project*, 23 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/it-ain-t-over-til-its-over-extreme-right-wing-foreign-fighters-ukraine>, accessed 28 April 2020.

According to the data presented by Jacob Ravndal et al., the 208 fatal right-wing extremist attacks in Western Europe in the period 1990-2019 killed 330 people.¹⁵ The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) states that in the US, right-wing extremists killed 335 people in 893 violent attacks in the period 1994-2020.¹⁶ For comparison, the current author's personal database of jihadist terrorist attacks in the West¹⁷ shows that jihadist attacks in Europe, Canada and the US killed 772 in the period 2004-2019. Unfortunately, all these numbers do not lend themselves to a neat comparison, as the various databases do not measure exactly the same things. For instance, unlike the current author's personal database, the data presented by Ravndal et al. covers only fatal attacks and includes terrorist as well as non-terrorist acts of violence. But in spite of these methodological reservations, these data do make clear that jihadist terrorism took considerably less time (fifteen years) and fewer attacks (96 to be precise) to get to a higher number of deadly victims. Thus, jihadist terrorist attacks are more lethal and flared up more intensely than right-wing extremist terrorist attacks have done so far.

One could argue that the higher lethality rate of jihadist violence has to do with political and ideological considerations rather than with organisation and the mobilisation of resources. Right-wing extremists generally operate in areas where the majority of the population could theoretically be supportive, and this may incline them towards more focused attacks rather than towards the mass casualty attacks that jihadist terrorists built their reputation on. On the other hand, the perpetrators of recent right-wing extremist mass shootings showed no intention to keep the number of victims low. Also, not all jihadist terrorist attacks are mass

casualty terrorist attacks. Many are targeted against police officers, Jewish people, Islam critics or other specific victim categories. These two things being the case, the higher degree of organisation, cooperation and coordination in the jihadist movement is likely to be one of the explanations of its higher lethality rate. Indeed, many – although, admittedly, not all – of the most deadly jihadist attacks (the Madrid, London and Brussels bombings, the attacks in Paris in November 2015, and of course 9/11), did require training, planning, cooperation and long-distance travel, things the jihadist movement could provide because of its higher degree of organisation and coordination. This means that right-wing extremism would have to change quite fundamentally before it will be able to create a terrorist wave that is on a par with the jihadist wave of recent years.

One further relevant difference between the jihadist and the right-wing extremist movement is that highly deadly right-wing extremist terrorist attacks, the ones which triggered a fear of a right-wing extremist terrorist wave, are concentrated in a smaller number of countries. As far as is known to the current author, there have been only four right-wing extremist terrorist attacks in the period 2010-2020 that killed more than two people and that did *not* take place in the US or Germany.¹⁸ The US, of course, is a very particular case. Its wide array of militias, Ku Klux Klan-branches and white supremacist organisations and the free availability of assault rifles and other heavy calibre firearms makes for a deadly cocktail of circumstances that are lacking in – and do not easily spill over into – many other countries. Something similar goes for Germany, which practically since the end of the Second World War has dealt with groups that wanted to resurrect the Nazi ideology and has

15 Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Sofia Lygren, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Tore Bjørgero, "RTV Trend Report 2020: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019," (Oslo: Center for Research on Extremism, 2020), p. 7. Available at: https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/rtv_trend_report_2020.pdf, accessed 9 November 2020.

16 Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States," Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Briefs (Washington DC: CSIS, 2020), p. 3. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>, accessed 9 November 2020.

17 The database has been compiled using criteria that have been outlined in a previous ICCT Research Paper. See Teun van Dongen, "The Fate of the Perpetrator in the Jihadist Modus Operandi: Suicide Attacks and Non-Suicide Attacks in the West, 2004-2017," ICCT, (December 2017), pp. 3–5. Available at: <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2017/12/VanDongen-The-Fate-of-the-Perpetrator-December2017.pdf>, accessed 11 November 2020.

18 In addition to the Breivik attacks (2011) and the Christchurch shooting (2019), there has been an attack on a high school in Sweden in which four people got killed (2015) and there has been an attack on the Islamic Cultural Center in Quebec City, Canada, in which six people got killed (2017).

long grappled with violent neo-Nazi groups and skinhead movements.¹⁹ This suggests that right-wing extremist terrorism in recent years needs to be understood to a considerable extent against the background of these two countries. One cannot simply assume that because such attacks occurred in Germany and the US, they are also likely to occur in countries that are very different in important respects.

But while there are reasons to doubt whether right-wing extremists will be able to sustain a full-fledged terrorist wave, this should not be read to mean that right-wing extremism is not a problem. Quite the opposite, the movement is growing and becoming more active. The reason that this will not translate into a terrorist wave has much to do with the fact that today's right-wing extremists choose to use different, non-terrorist tactics.

Cultural racism as a way to gain legitimacy

One important such tactic adopted by right-wing extremists is the reframing of their views. Previously, neo-Nazi groups were explicitly racist in the way they expressed their political ideas. Open references to Jews and black people as belonging to inferior races were quite common in such circles. Today things are different: only a fringe of the right-wing extremist movement still openly assert that non-white ethnic minorities are by definition inferior to whites. Right-wing extremists are more likely to express a version of what has been called 'cultural racism'. Instead of blatantly claiming that Muslims or people from the Middle East are biologically inferior to people from Western Europe, right-wing extremist groups now claim that Islamic values are somehow incompatible with Western values.²⁰ By couching their

worldview in such terms, they can claim that they are not racists, but are merely engaging in legitimate criticism of Islam.²¹ A salient example is the Identitarian movement, which fights against the Islamisation of Europe. The movement's aim is to increase the birth-rate among ethnically white Europeans to save European civilization, but the terminology of cultural racism allows Mark Willinger, one of its leaders, to claim that the Identitarians are "0 percent racist, 100 percent identity".²²

The concept of cultural racism has been criticised on the grounds that it broadens the concept of racism and thus strips it of its essence, i.e. the notion that biological characteristics decide whether someone belongs to an inferior race. As a result, very different forms of discrimination would all carry the label 'racism', which some critics feel is unwarranted. They have suggested using terms like 'cultural essentialism' instead.²³ But whatever terms are being applied, it is important to note that there has been a widely acknowledged shift among right-wing extremists from biological racism to a discourse of identity and values. This shift, which some authors noted as early as the 1990s, not only makes right-wing extremist causes appear more acceptable, but also opens the door for them to other, more mainstream causes, which are much more agreeable than the struggle for the biological purity of the white race.²⁴

More specifically, right-wing extremists can, using cultural racist or cultural essentialist rhetoric, claim that they want to take a stand against the threats to Western values. In a 2012 ICCT-paper, Arun Kundnani cites the English Defence League (EDL) as an example of a counter-jihadist activist group that claims to fight against the Islamisation of Europe out of concern for traditionally liberal causes. Rather than come out and openly profess racist views, groups like the EDL hold rallies and

19 Arie W. Kruglanski, David Webber and Daniel Koehler, *The Radical's Journey: How German Neo-Nazis Voyaged to the Edge and Back* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 9–13.

20 Sindre Bangstad, Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia (London: Zed Books, 2014), pp. 29–30.

21 Ibid.

22 Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 2019, p. 95.

23 See, for example, Hans Siebers and Marjolein Dennissen, "Is It Cultural Racism? Discursive Exclusion and Oppression of Migrants in the Netherlands," *Current Sociology*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (October 2015), pp. 470–489. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0011392114552504>, accessed 11 November 2020.

24 See, for example, Anthias Floya, "Cultural Racism or Racist Culture? Rethinking Racist Exclusions," *Economy and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May 1995), pp. 279–301. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03085149500000011>, accessed 11 November 2020.

demonstrations purportedly because they are concerned that the growing influence of Islam threatens individual liberty, freedom of speech, gender equality and gay rights.²⁵

And indeed, Kundnani's analysis still holds. When former EDL-leader Tommy Robinson was banned from Twitter for hateful conduct in 2018, he called on his supporters to stage a rally to defend freedom of speech in the UK. Several thousands of people turned up, including the famous right-wing commentator Milo Yiannopoulos and former UKIP-leader Gerard Batten. Also in the crowd were members of the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA)²⁶, a group of football supporters who, according to their website, banded together "following the 2017 terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, as a working class voice against social, economic and political injustice". The DFLA's objective, the site goes on, "is plain and simple – to combat terrorism and extremism".²⁷ They claim to be anti-racist and pro-freedom of expression, but that does not keep its members from cultivating ties to Polish Nazi football hooligans and bringing Nazi salutes at their marches.²⁸ One demonstrator at a DFLA-march in October 2018 lamented about his fellow protesters: "I detest some of the people I'm walking with. A lot of them hate people because of the colour of their skin."²⁹

Another theme right-wing extremists use to avoid espousing explicitly racist views is the protection of women. In the right-wing extremist narrative white women are helpless

victims against the stereotypically virile and hypersexual Muslim men and need the protection of vigilante groups like the Soldiers of Odin (see the paragraph on other forms of violence), who claim they want to protect women from asylum seekers.³⁰ In the same vein, Magnus Söderman, once a leading member of the neo-Nazi Swedish Resistance Movement, complained about the lack of real men willing and able to keep innocent, vulnerable Swedish women from being brutalised by Muslim invaders:

We live in a time in which the strong man – the protector – has been reduced to entertainment [e.g. Braveheart] for feminized men who hardly would protect their own. They have handed over this [responsibility] to the state and praise the police's monopoly of violence. [However] the state has neither the will, nor the capacity to protect our women and children. That task is our obligation. Be men, goddamnit!³¹

One could counter that perhaps right-wing extremist groups are sincere in their advocacy for free speech and women's interests. If this is the case, they are not helping their cause by their inconsistent positions on exactly these two points. With regard to women, right-wing extremists want to put a stop to the Islamisation of Europe because Muslims supposedly mistreat women. At the same time though, right-wing extremism is unmistakably misogynistic. In the right-wing extremist

25 Arun Kundnani, "Blind Spot? Security Narratives and Far-Right Violence in Europe," ICCT, (June 2012), p. 3. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/blind-spot-security-narratives-and-far-right-violence-in-europe/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

26 Damien Gayle, "Thousands March in 'Free Speech' Protest Led by Rightwing Figures," The Guardian, 6 May 2018, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/06/thousands-of-far-right-protesters-march-in-london-in-support-of-free-speech>, accessed 28 April 2020.

27 Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), "About the DFLA," DFLA, 4 August 2018. Available at: <http://dfla.co.uk/2018/08/04/about-the-dfla/#more-146>, accessed 28 April 2020.

28 Sam Cunningham, "Football Must Send a Clear Message to Far-Right Groups: Our Doors Are Firmly Closed," INews, 19 March 2019. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/sport/football/democratic-football-lads-alliance-islamophobia-far-right-wing-fa-505283>, accessed 28 April 2020; Bhvishya Patel, "Nazi Salutes in the Heart of London: March by 'Far-Right Anti-Muslim Football Supporters' Turns Violent as Dozens Fight with Officers and Marcher Yells 'I'll Kill You' at Police," The Daily Mail, 13 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6272589/March-Democratic-Football-Lads-Alliance-turns-violent-marcher-yells-ill-kill-you.html>, accessed 28 April 2020.

29 Adam Forrest, "Democratic Football Lads' Alliance March Erupts into Violence with One Supporter Threatening 'to Kill Police Officer,'" The Independent, 13 October 2018. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/democratic-football-lads-alliance-march-violence-riot-kill-police-officer-london-protest-a8582636.html>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

30 Anthony Faiola, "Soldiers of Odin: The Far-Right Groups in Finland 'Protecting Women' from Asylum Seekers," The Independent, 1 February 2016, Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/soldiers-of-odin-the-far-right-groups-in-finland-protecting-women-from-asylum-seekers-a6846341.html>, accessed 28 April 2020.

31 Quoted in Mattias Gardell, "Pop-up Vigilantism and Fascist Patrols in Sweden," in Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš, eds., *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 291. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780429485619/chapters/10.4324/9780429485619-18>, accessed 11 November 2020.

discourse, women are portrayed either as helpless, passive creatures who desire nothing else but children and a dominant husband, or as devious, aggressively assertive feminists who are undermining the natural order in Western civilization and who should be punished for not doing men's bidding, especially when it comes to granting them sexual favours.³²

The right-wing extremist rhetoric regarding the freedoms in liberal societies rings equally hollow. They fight Islamisation because they believe an increasing influence of Islam will put an end to people's freedom to say whatever they want. At the same time, right-wing extremist activists are trying to intimidate Muslims out of freely confessing their religion. In the Netherlands, members of the right-wing group The Right Fights Back (*Rechts in Verzet*) left a beheaded doll near a mosque in Amsterdam³³, while mosques in the eastern city of Arnhem came out in 2019 to say they regularly receive threatening letters, packages with pork and white powder letters.³⁴

It is hard to say with absolute certainty whether such inconsistencies are the result of cognitive dissonance or simply of the cynical use of liberal concepts to appear more acceptable to a mainstream target audience by advocating causes that many people will consider worth fighting for. That said, we should note that the Front National in France, one of the first parties to move from biological to cultural racism, did so to improve its public standing, not because it rejected its earlier views.³⁵ Also, given the virulently racist and misogynistic language that is being used in, for instance, closed-off

Facebook forums of groups that disavow racism and extremism on their websites suggests that the professed fight for causes like the freedom of speech and women's safety is a ploy to hide the movement's ugly face and gain acceptance among wider audiences.³⁶

In this context, we should also take note of the strategy known in right-wing extremist circles as meta-politics. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, the concept of meta-politics holds that political movements have to go through a period in which they quietly spread their views, not exclusively through political means (like elections and demonstrations), but also through cultural expressions, like lectures, books and documentaries. In doing so, the movement gradually increases the legitimacy and popularity of their ideas, up to the point where the movement will have enough support to pull off a seizure of power.³⁷ While this approach is too intellectual for the more action-oriented segments of the right-wing extremist movement (who have occasionally, for instance in the Nordic Resistance Movement, fought against the application of meta-politics³⁸), there has been a clear shift towards such tactics in the previous decades. Claiming scholarly, journalistic or even artistic legitimacy, right-wing extremists clad their culturally racist views in guises that are less repellent to their audiences than mobs bringing the Hitler salute and carrying swastika flags. Consequently, people will be more open to typical meta-political expressions, which often involve the rewriting of history as well as strident claims about the importance of the traditions and the unity of the ethnic or racial in-group.

32 Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "When Women Are the Enemy: The Intersection of Misogyny and White Supremacy," (New York: ADL Center on Extremism, 2018). Available at: <https://www.adl.org/media/11707/download>, accessed 28 April 2020.

33 Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, "AIVD Publicatie - Rechts-Extremisme: Een Fenomeen in Beweging" [AIVD Publication - Right-wing extremism in the Netherlands, a changing phenomenon] (The Hague: Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), 2018), p. 15. Available at: <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2018/10/02/rechts-extremisme-in-nederland-een-fenomeen-in-beweging>, accessed 11 November 2020.

34 Eric van der Vegt, "Dreigbrieven En Varkensvlees per Post: Arnhem Heeft Extreemrechts Op Korrel Na Signalen Radicalisering," [Threatening letters and pork by mail: Arnhem has the extreme right in the crosshairs after signals of radicalization] De Stentor, 18 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.destentor.nl/arnhem/dreigbrieven-en-varkensvlees-per-post-arnhem-heeft-extreemrechts-op-korrel-na-signalen-radicalisering~acf79e48/>, accessed 28 April 2020.

35 Kundnani, "Blind Spot?" p. 6.

36 Tom Wall, "Secret Facebook Page Reveals Violence at Heart of Forum for 'Football Fans,'" The Guardian, 17 March 2018, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/17/football-lads-alliance-secret-facebook-page-racism-violence-sexism>, accessed 28 April 2020.

37 Roger Griffin, *Fascism* (Cambridge and Medford MA: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 116–117; Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Transnational Militancy in the Making: A Primer on the Nordic Resistance Movement and Generation Identity," C-REX Working Paper Series (Oslo: Centre for Research on Extremism, November 2019), p. 7. Available at: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/publications/c-rex-working-paper-series/transnational-militancy-in-the-making.pdf>, accessed 11 November 2020.

38 Ravndal, "Transnational Militancy in the Making," 2019, p. 21.

Working through political parties

A second non-terroristic and non-violent tactic currently *en vogue* among right-wing extremists is the use of political parties, mostly on the far right, as vehicles to wield influence. By joining such parties or by cooperating or maintaining ties with them, right-wing extremists hope to shape those parties' political agendas, speculating this will lead to a broader acceptance of their ideas in the parliamentary political arena in general.

A case in point is the Dutch right-wing populist party Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*), which in 2017 turned out to have ties to a right-wing extremist group called the Dutch People's Union (*Nederlandse Volksunie*, NVU). During the campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2017 the NVU helped the Forum for Democracy to set up a rally in Badhoevedorp, near Amsterdam.³⁹ Moreover, in an article for the NVU's in-house publication *We Europe (Wij Europa)* NVU-leader Constant Kusters spoke highly of the Forum for Democracy and its leader, Thierry Baudet. Kusters, who reported in the article on a Forum for Democracy rally where he met the party leadership, especially took to Baudet's comment that "you shouldn't learn Moroccans how to shoot in the army." (In fairness, Kusters was at the same time critical of the vagueness of some of Baudet's policy proposals.)⁴⁰ Especially revealing with regard to the extreme-right's tactics is Kusters' perception of the role of organisations like the NVU. In an interview with the magazine *De Kanttekening* he said he was happy to see that his ideas on immigration and Dutch identity are now being embraced by more and more parties in the Dutch Lower Chamber, adding: "We are avant-garde, we don't want to join a government. My

personal role is that I keep the parties in The Hague [where the Dutch parliament is seated, *TvD*] on their toes, and in that capacity I will be needed."⁴¹ In other words, it is through far-right but still parliamentary political parties that the NVU wants to achieve its political goals.

But it is not only established right-wing extremist organisations that use parliamentary parties on the far right. What also happens, is that people with right-wing extremist views who are not members of an established group simply join the political party they feel most closely affiliated with. Here too, the Forum for Democracy is a case in point. The party expelled the NVU member who was involved in setting up the rally in Badhoevedorp, but that did not make it any less attractive to right-wing extremists. In September 2019 the party stirred some controversy when several prominent right-wing extremists attended one of its gatherings⁴², and in spring 2020 a group of party members wrote a letter to the party leadership to voice their concerns about the views that were being expressed in Whatsapp groups of the Jongeren Forum voor Democratie (JFVD), the party's youth wing. According to the letter, JFVD members, some of whom reportedly hold prominent positions in the party, are using Whatsapp groups to convey "authoritarian, fascist and/or national-socialist ideas, including antisemitism, homophobia and racial imperialism."⁴³ Thus, the Forum for Democracy is not only egged on by right-wing extremist organisations, but is also used as a vehicle by right-wing extremists among its own members.

Another example of a party that appears to be a conduit for right-wing extremists who want to insert their ideas into the political mainstream is the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). Especially the party's increasingly powerful far

39 Dennis l'Ami, "NVU-Voorman: 'Wij Werken Samen Met Forum Voor Democratie,'" [NVU leader: 'We work together with Forum for Democracy'] *De Kanttekening*, 25 August 2017. Available at: <https://dekanttekening.nl/samenleving/nvu-voorman-wij-werken-samen-met-forum-voor-democratie/>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

40 Constant Kusters, "Forum Voor Democratie: Een Bezoek van de NVU Op 9 Februari 2017," [Forum For Democracy: A Visit from the NCE On February 9, 2017] *Wij Europa*, 2017. No link available.

41 l'Ami, "NVU-Voorman: "Wij Werken Samen Met Forum Voor Democratie," 2017.

42 Willem Wagenaar, "Fact Sheet 12: Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeenten" [Extreme right in Dutch Municipalities] (Amsterdam: Anne Frank Stichting, 2020), p. 22. Available at: https://www.annefrank.org/nl/downloads/filer_public/63/7a/637a0b11-6953-4afd-bc24-65013ed66ac3/factsheet-extreemrechts-update-september-2020.pdf, accessed 9 november 2020.

43 Ton F. van Dijk, "FVD-Jongeren "Fascistisch" En "Antisemitisch" in Appgroepen," [FVD youths 'fascist' and 'anti-Semitic' in app groups] *HP/De Tijd*, 28 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.hpdetijd.nl/2020-04-28/forum-voor-democratie-jongeren-fascistisch-en-antisemitisch-in-app-groep/>, accessed 9 November 2020.

right wing, called *Der Flügel* (The Wing), and its youth wing have been raising eyebrows in this regard. The Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV), Germany's federal security service, announced in 2019 that it was going to monitor both of these AfD-currents because "[o]n the basis of an extensive collection of materials and a detailed expert assessment the BfV determined that both sub-organisations show enough sufficiently important factual indications of an effort against the free democratic order. Both are classified as suspect."⁴⁴ *Der Flügel* has since disbanded, but it remains to be seen whether this will be the end of the right-wing extremist influence in the AfD, as the former members of *Der Flügel* have not been expelled from the AfD. Earlier, state authorities in Lower Saxony defended their decision to monitor the AfD's youth wing on the grounds that they had noticed "a not insignificant ideological and personal overlap" between that organisation and the Identitarian movement.⁴⁵

Right-wing extremists in Belgium have tried to find ways to influence parliamentary politics as well. For instance, in 2019 Dries van Langenhove, widely known as the founder of the Flemish right-wing extremist movement *Shield & Friends* (*Schild & Vrienden*), won a seat in the Belgian federal parliament for the right-wing populist party *Flemish Interest* (*Vlaams Belang*).⁴⁶ Several other *Shield & Friends* members ran as well, trying to win seats for parties other than the *Vlaams Belang*, but they did not disclose their membership of *Shield & Friends*. They took their names off the ballots when the media reported that they were or had been members.⁴⁷

Another interesting example of how right-wing extremist groups can work their way into the mainstream is *Shield & Friends*' successful attempt to infiltrate not a political party, but the Flemish Youth Council, a consultative body whose eight members give policy advice to the Belgian government. In September 2018 it came out that no fewer than four of the eight members of the Youth Council were secretly members of *Shield & Friends*. In the words of the documentary filmmakers who broke the news, *Shield & Friends* was working on "long march through the institutions" in order to normalise their ideas and radicalise the Belgian political system from within.⁴⁸

What these examples show is that right-wing extremists do not violently attack the political system, but try to use it to their advantage. In doing so, it is likely that they are encouraged by the less than vehement responses by the heads of the parties they feel most closely associated with. The most famous example of this dynamic is, of course, Donald Trump. When *Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard* David Duke called on his supporters to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections, Trump did not reject Duke's endorsement. Instead, he denied ever having heard of Duke, even though he had spoken publicly about him on several occasions in the previous decades.⁴⁹ After right-wing extremists killed an anti-racist protester in Charlottesville in 2017, Trump famously asserted that "there were fine people on both sides". That these signals were not lost on right-wing extremist groups is clear from reactions on *The Daily Stormer*, a right-wing extremist website in the

44 Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, "BfV: Konzentration Auf Die Beobachtung Der Verdachtsfälle "Der Flügel" Und "Junge Alternative";" [BfV: Concentration on the observation of the suspected cases "Der Flügel" and "Junge Alternative"] Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 8 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/presse/pm-20190308-konzentration-auf-die-beobachtung-der-verdachtsfaelle-der-fluegel-und-junge-alternative>, accessed 11 November 2020.

45 Associated Press, "Far-Right AfD to Disband Youth Groups over Police Surveillance," *Deutsche Welle*, 3 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-afd-to-disband-youth-groups-over-police-surveillance/a-45336059>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

46 Associated Press, "Oprichter Extreemrechtse Schild & Vrienden in Zee Met Vlaams Belang," [Founder of the extreme right-wing *Shield & Friends* works together with *Vlaams Belang*]

Algemeen Dagblad, 9 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/oprichter-extreemrechtse-schild-en-vrienden-in-zee-met-vlaams-belang~aaa11627/>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

47 Associated Press, "Weer Twee N-VA-Kandidaten Trekken Zich Terug, Wegens Schild & Vrienden-Band," [Another two N-VA candidates withdraw due to ties with *Shield & Friends*]

Nieuwsblad, 12 September 2018. Available at: https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20180912_03738958, accessed 28 April 2020.

48 Maarten Rabaey, Pieter Gordts and Beau Wauters, "Ultrarechtse Beweging Schild & Vrienden Infiltrert in Vlaamse Jeugdraad," [Ultra-right movement *Shield & Friends* infiltrates the Flemish Youth Council]

De Morgen, 5 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/ultrarechtse-beweging-schild-vrienden-infiltrert-in-vlaamse-jeugdraad~b30acae8/>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

49 Eugene Kiely, "Trump's David Duke Amnesia," *FactCheck.Org*, 1 March 2016, Available at: <https://www.factcheck.org/2016/03/trumps-david-duke-amnesia/>, accessed on 28 April 2020.

US, to the way Trump handled the fall-out of the Charlottesville incident. Andrew Anglin, the site's founder, was glad to see that Trump did not explicitly condemn neo-Nazis, commenting in a live feed: "No condemnation at all. When asked to condemn, he just walked out of the room. Really, really good. God bless him."⁵⁰

An even more blatant example of Trump's signalling occurred during the presidential debate annex shouting match between Trump and Joe Biden in September 2020. When pressed to distance himself from white supremacists, Trump stunned many observers by calling on the Proud Boys, a fascist and violent white supremacist group, to "stand back and stand by". Joe Biggs, a prominent member of the Proud Boys, took to Twitter to celebrate, saying: "Trump basically said to go f*** them up! This makes me so happy." Shortly after the debate, the Proud Boys began selling t-shirts and tank tops with their logo and the words 'stand back and stand by'.⁵¹

One has to speculate at this point, but it is certainly possible that other US right-wing extremists feel encouraged by Trump's performance to use the Republican Party as a vehicle to further their cause. What is indisputable is that the Republican Party does attract right-wing extremists. In the state of Illinois, several neo-Nazis and white supremacists tried to win the candidacy for the Republican Party in the 2018 midterm elections.⁵²

In fairness, and while it is easy to find examples, it is as yet unclear how widespread the influencing of parliamentary parties is as a tactic among right-wing extremists actually is. But the fact that it has already occurred in several countries with prominent far right parliamentary parties does suggest that this course of action is a serious option among

right-wing extremists in the West today.

Other forms of violence

The previous sections are not meant to suggest that right-wing extremism abandoned violence. No one will dispute that right-wing extremists have attacked immigrants, refugees, mosques and other targets, and it is probably also true that, as for instance Daniel Koehler argues, this kind of violence has not received the attention of media, politicians and scholars that it deserves. Another question is whether much of this violence can legitimately be labelled terrorism.

The line between hate crime and terrorism is fine, but there is a difference. A hate crime is, in the definition of Randy Blazak, "a criminal act that is motivated by a bias toward the victim or victims real or perceived identity group"⁵³ and does not have the communicative element that is necessary to speak of an act of terrorism. It is unlikely that we will ever see an end to the debate on how to define terrorism, but many definitions include a clause to the effect that the act of political violence has to be intended to send a message to an audience that is broader than merely the victims who are directly undergoing the act of violence.⁵⁴ This is not the case for hate crime, or at least not by definition.

How does this relate to right-wing extremist violence? Several right-wing extremist shooters in recent years issued manifestos in which they explain how their violent acts were meant to influence an audience beyond their immediate victims. In these cases it is clear that we can speak of an act of terrorism. And indeed, the copycats who emerged in the wake of the shootings by Anders Breivik (Norway, 2011) and Brenton Tarrant (Christchurch, 2019) show

50 Andrew Anglin, '#UniteTheRight: Charlottesville LIVE UPDATES' (The Daily Stormer). Seen at: <https://dailystormer.su/unitetheright-charlottesville-live-updates/>, dead link, accessed on 23 February 2020.

51 Graeme Massie, "'Downright Shameful': Proud Boys Wear 'Stand Back and Stand by' t-Shirts after Donald Trump's Remarks," *Independent*, 30 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election/proud-boys-trump-debate-t-shirts-supremacism-b724688.html>, accessed 9 November 2020.

52 Jane Coaston, "Self-Described Nazis and White Supremacists Are Running as Republicans across the Country. The GOP is Terrified," *Vox*, 9 July 2018. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/9/17525860/nazis-russell-walker-arthur-jones-republicans-illinois-north-carolina-virginia>, accessed 9 November 2020.

53 Randy Blazak, "Isn't Every Crime a Hate Crime? The Case for Hate Crime Laws," *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April 2011), p. 245. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00364>, accessed 11 November 2020.

54 Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005), pp. 5–6 and p. 28.

that this *modus operandi* does have appeal, especially among those who are involved in online extremist subcultures. Fortunately, some were stopped before they could act, while some others carried out attacks that were mostly failures. But some, like the shooter in El Paso succeeded, which shows that the threat of right-wing extremist mass shootings is real.

But irrespective of how popular and appealing the playbook used by Breivik and Tarrant may be, many right-wing extremists (even the violent ones) choose not to use it. Crucially, explanations regarding the perpetrator's intentions are not always available in cases of right-wing extremist violence. In many cases there is not even a claim of responsibility, let alone a clear articulation of the message the perpetrators wanted to send. Some three quarters of the right-wing extremist attacks in Germany have been carried out without any kind of message or explanation on the part of the perpetrator.⁵⁵ For such attacks, for which it is unknown whether the perpetrator's intention was to send a message to a larger audience, it cannot be established whether they are acts of terrorism. They may be, but maybe they are not. And given the spontaneity and 'spur of the moment' nature of a sizeable part of the right-wing extremist attacks⁵⁶, it is possible that sometimes even the perpetrators themselves don't know.

But even if one does consider unclaimed and spontaneous attacks to be acts of terrorism, one still has to acknowledge that right-wing terrorism is different from previous waves of terrorism in an operational sense. One explanation for the relatively restrained way politicians and the media react to right-wing

extremist violence is that right-wing extremist violent incidents, exceptions notwithstanding, tend to be small-scale and claim few victims. There are not many hard data to rely on, but the few databases that are available show that right-wing extremist attacks tend to take the form of lower-intensity acts of violence, like vandalism, arson, assault and kidnapping.⁵⁷ While certainly reprehensible and problematic, especially given the fact that they occur quite frequently, they are less deadly than jihadist terrorists. As has been argued above, jihadist terrorism has a higher lethality rate than right-wing extremist terrorism, which suggests that right-wing terrorism is more of a constant, creeping kind, and less prone to the sudden outbursts that are characteristic of jihadist terrorism. Just as an indication, in the period 2004-2020 there have been thirteen jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe and the US in which ten or more people (perpetrators included) got killed, compared to five such right-wing extremist attacks in the same period and the same region.⁵⁸ Right-wing extremist terrorists could close that gap, but that would mean a drastic shift in a long-term pattern in the *modus operandi* of right-wing extremist terrorists.

Another reason why one could be sceptical about the notion that right-wing extremist groups will turn to terrorism when they take the step towards the use of violence is their response to the migrant crisis of 2015. The responses by right-wing extremists to the sudden increase of the numbers of refugees entering their countries were certainly violent. Germany, for instance, witnessed a wave of 'hive terrorism', spontaneous and generally small acts of violence by people without previous ties to the right-wing extremist groups.⁵⁹ But in

55 Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," PRISM, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July 2016), p. 93. Available at: <https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM/PRISM-Volume-6-no-2/Article/839011/right-wing-extremism-and-terrorism-in-europe-current-developments-and-issues-fo/>, accessed 11 November 2020.

56 Sweeney and Perliger identified 1,193 cases of spontaneous right-wing extremist violence in the US in the period 1990-2012. Matthew M. Sweeney and Arie Perliger, "Explaining the Spontaneous Nature of Far-Right Violence in the United States," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (December 2018), p. 58. Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a4-sweeney-perliger.pdf>, accessed 11 November 2020. Ravndal put 110 of the 578 right-wing extremist attacks in Western Europe since 1990 in the category "spontaneous". Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Introducing the RTV Dataset," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (June 2016), p. 7. Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2016/issue-3/302-right-wing-terrorism-and-violence-in-western-europe-introducing-the-rtv-dataset-by-jacob-aasland-ravndal.pdf>, accessed 11 November 2020.

57 Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe," pp. 92-95.

58 The number of jihadist attacks is derived from my personal database. The five right-wing attacks are the attacks by Breivik (2011), the shooting near the Olympia Shopping Mall in Munich (2016), the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh (2018), the shooting in El Paso (2019) and the shootings at two shisha lounges in Hanau, Germany (2020).

59 Daniel Koehler, "Recent Trends in German Right-Wing Violence and Terrorism: What Are the Contextual Factors behind 'Hive Terrorism'?" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (December 2018), pp. 72-88. Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl>

several countries there was another response as well. Rather than committing terrorist attacks, right-wing extremist groups opted for another, non- or semi-terrorist form of violence, namely vigilantism, meaning that they took it upon themselves to protect or maintain, using force or the threat of force, the social order in their countries. They banded together, in some cases wearing military-style uniforms, to patrol the streets looking for transgressions by immigrants, ethnic minorities or refugees or to carry out attacks to mete out punishments to people they believe to have committed crimes that for some reason have been left unpunished by the authorities. In countries that are hubs for migrants and refugees they also patrolled the borders to put a stop to the influx of what they see as profiteers, intruders, criminals, or worse. In Greece, right-wing extremist vigilante groups even took to the sea to stop migrant ships from harbouring on the Greek islands. (Incidentally, in explaining their concerns regarding the sudden increase in the numbers of migrants, they also used the cultural racist rhetoric discussed above.)

Currently, right-wing extremist vigilantism is hardly a pressing concern in all countries. According to the analyses in *Vigilantism against migrants and minorities*, easily the most comprehensive treatment of this topic in recent years, right-wing extremist vigilante groups proved short-lived in Sweden, fell apart as a result of infighting in Canada, never really amounted to much in Norway, and remained “a rather fringe phenomenon in Germany”.⁶⁰ Even in countries where vigilante groups were working in league with political parties or governments, vigilantism has peaked. In Greece, for instance, the Golden Dawn was at one point the third largest party in the Greek national parliament and was openly allied with violent anti-immigrant vigilante groups, but the party’s fortune has since faded as a result of the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. This anti-fascist rapper’s brutal killing triggered a series of investigations and trials against the Golden

Dawn, whose members, up to and including its members of parliament, turned out to be deeply involved in all kinds of criminal activities, including attempted murder and weapons possession.⁶¹ The Golden Dawn took a series of poundings in the following elections and failed to win even a single seat in Greece’s national parliament.

But while right-wing extremist vigilantism may not be as prevalent as it was from 2015 to 2017, certainly in Western Europe, it does reveal something about the violent tendencies of right-wing extremism, and that is that it does not automatically resort to terrorism when it perceives an acute threat. Terrorism may be the most eye-catching form of political violence, but that does not make it the weapon of choice for groups who feel they have to fight back against whatever they believe poses an existential threat against their interests. There are many options available to right-wing extremist groups, but even when they go down the path of violence there are other options than terrorism. And if the past is anything to go by, these options are at least as likely as a right-wing terrorist wave.

Conclusion

Most readers of this special issue of the ICCT Journal will be professionally involved in terrorism, either because they study it, or because they are actually involved in the fight against it. When a new threat presents itself, it is therefore tempting for us, terrorism researchers and counter-terrorism practitioners, to focus on the aspects it has in common with terrorism. In the case of right-wing extremism, that would be its terrorist attacks. Instructive in this regard is *Perspectives on Terrorism’s* Special Issue on right-wing extremist violence. All contributions are about violence, as the issue’s objective was to “[explore] the modus operandi of extreme right terrorism and violence”.⁶² This focus on violence is perfectly understandable and

nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a5-koehler.pdf, accessed 11 November 2020.

60 Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš, eds., *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

61 Daniel Trilling, “Golden Dawn: The Rise and Fall of Greece’s Neo-Nazis,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2020. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/mar/03/golden-dawn-the-rise-and-fall-of-greece-neo-nazi-trial?CMP=share_btn_tw, accessed 28 April 2020.

62 Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, “Welcome from the Guest Editors,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (December 2018), p. 1. Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/pot-xii-6.pdf>, accessed 12 November 2020.

legitimate for a journal about terrorism, and, again, it is probably true that over the years right-wing extremist violence has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. That said, it is also harmful to treat the current threat of right-wing extremism as a new or different variation of something we, as terrorism researchers and counter-terrorism practitioners, are familiar with. Looking at right-wing extremism through the prism of terrorism will make us overlook important parts of the strategy right-wing extremists are currently employing to achieve their political goals.

Regarding right-wing extremism's violent potential, this means that government policy needs to be adjusted to the non-terrorist nature of the threat. For instance, long and demanding efforts to infiltrate cells and networks make more sense when terrorist plots are more elaborate and are planned over a longer period of time. The same goes for the constant monitoring of someone's movement and communications. These methods, which have been successfully deployed against jihadist terrorists, require much time and manpower and therefore have to be used sparingly. For the collection of information to build a picture of the adversary's plans to bear fruit, there has to be a plan in the first place. When attack plans are smaller and can be carried out on a whim by any member or group of members of a movement, which is often the case in right-wing extremist violence, there is less point in applying such intensive intelligence methods. The pay-off is smaller, and by the time it is clear that an act of violence will be committed it might well be too late to intervene.

As for right-wing extremist vigilantism, governments should realise that, as Bjørge and Mareš explain, it is a response to a perceived lack of government action against a perceived existential threat. It will emerge when citizens believe governments are unwilling or unable to protect citizens against perceived threat of assault, rape and robbery by members of an out-group, typically refugees, ethnic minorities or immigrants. No government should allow its monopoly of violence to be undermined like that, so firm repressive responses are appropriate here, combined with outreach to communities to restore any confidence that may have been lost.

Crucially, we should be aware that right-wing extremism is not only a security threat, but also, and perhaps even more so, a political challenge, meaning that we need to take its non-violent tactics into account. One could be forgiven for reading parts of this article as an exposé of the devious scheme of the right-wing extremist masterminds, who are cleverly deceiving us and who are diabolically using our freedoms and our political system against us. The point of this article, however, is not that they are successful in every single application of these various tactics. There is, for instance, clearly something boastful in Kusters' claim that the NVU is keeping Dutch political parties on their toes; he is exaggerating his influence. But the fact that this is what he considers his organisation's role to be, says something about the approach right-wing extremist groups have adopted to achieve their political goals. It is important to acknowledge that right-wing extremism is fighting a battle on many fronts, and we should not focus only on the national security front, the one that we happen to be most familiar with and the one where we feel most comfortable fighting.

It is true that repression may have played a role in shaping the strategic preferences that have been described in this paper. Given the counter-terrorism infrastructure currently in place in many Western countries, the operational environment is not very permissive with regard to the use of terrorist violence and other clearly extremist activities. It is, for instance, interesting to note that National Action, a British right-wing extremist group, was blacklisted as a terrorist organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000. In other words, the fact that counter-terrorism laws and capabilities can also be brought to bear on right-wing extremist groups may make other strategies more attractive.

But even so, right-wing extremism needs to be recognised as a different kind of threat that requires a different kind of response. There are no jihadist attempts to normalise their views by tying them to traditionally liberal causes, nor are there jihadist attempts to infiltrate or otherwise use political parties or to organise patrols to protect neighbourhoods from crime or attacks, at least not in the West. This means that right-wing extremism is a threat that cannot be fought using the national security apparatus.

This is not a fight that can be won by deploying police and intelligence officers, who played such a crucial role in the degradation of the jihadist terrorist threat in recent years. Fighting right-wing extremism is also a matter of citizen engagement. Right-wing extremist violence, be it terrorism, hate crime or vigilantism, should be answered with repression, but the fight against the other right-wing extremist tactics is out of the hands of practitioners in the national security field, and to some extent even out of the hands of policy makers in general.

Surely governments can play a role in the fight against right-wing extremism by, to name just a few ways, launching educational programmes, strengthening civil society, adopting anti-discrimination laws and implementing action plans against racism. But at the same time, there are limits to how far governments can and should go in influencing the political views of their citizens. Thus, to the extent that the current right-wing extremist strategies pose no security threats and are not even illegal, we also have to count on citizens to repel right-wing extremist attempts to gain popularity or mainstream their views.

People in a democratic society have a responsibility to stay up to date with current events and to consume and support independent journalism into the dealings of political parties. More importantly, citizens have to hold these parties accountable if the latter allow right-wing extremists in their midst or are working – directly or indirectly – with right-wing extremists. The demise of the Golden Dawn in Greece shows how detrimental the withdrawal of public support can be. Citizens should also, in a variety of ways, raise their voices against actors that, wittingly or unwittingly, facilitate the spread of right-wing extremist views, and they should stay informed about the true intentions of right-wing extremist groups that try to hijack or work their way into campaigns for more amenable causes. If citizens are themselves involved in such causes, they should firmly reject the support of such groups. Political parties, of course, have a role to play as well. Parties that run the risk of being used as a vehicle for right-wing extremists should distance themselves unequivocally and decisively from right-wing extremist groups, in word as well as in deed.

It is important not to allow right-wing extremist views to enter mainstream political discourse.

Drawing up a social firewall of this kind is not easy, as it requires some degree of consensus about what political views are acceptable and what views are not. But if right-wing extremism is to a large degree a challenge that manifests itself through legal and non-violent means, it is up to the people themselves to push back.

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