The Rise of Far-Right Violence in Europe

Abstract

Far-right extremists inspire each other in transnational online communities. Each new attack serves as a motivation to do the same or even more. Despite these networks being decentralized, international links are maintained, particularly between the U.S. and Europe. The most common way these connections occur is via open and closed online groups and forums, where far-right ideologies are propagated. The online space also serves as a platform for recruitment. Asylum seekers and ethnic minorities are often the primary targets. The presented paper offers an explanation of the problem and suggests possible solutions.

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The far right today is diverse, decentralized, and presents a threat to many groups around the world. Europe is no exception; the number of people arrested for right-wing terrorism in the European region has increased overall, and both media and academics are now devoting increasingly more time to studying right-wing violent extremism. This paper focuses on right-wing extremism in Europe, its prevalence and characteristics.

While there are commonalities between the far right in Europe and elsewhere, such as xenophobia, this rhetoric is more than simply xenophobia, superiority, or a way to hold onto a resurrected imagined past. It is an imagining of Europe and a politicization and securitization of European culture and identity. In short, anyone not considered "European" is an existential threat to the "European" identity. So, who or what constitutes the threat?

A number of groups are considered primarily responsible and constitutive of an existential threat to the "European" identity. These groups include both external actors, such as migrants, and internal actors. Internal actors can be considered those such as the LGBTQ+ community, those that support minority groups within the state, and members of government, who are seen as attempting to extinguish the "European race" through oppressive policies that are seen as dedicated to integration, openness, and minorities, whether they be religious, ethnic, sexual, or racial. The reasons for which violence is sought vary depending upon the specific far-right group itself. Likewise, there are members of far-right groups that come from other, unsuspecting groups, including those who are persecuted by the far right. One such is Enrique Tarrio, the former "chairman" of the Proud Boys, who is of afro-Cuban descent (Contreras & Galván, 2022).

The place and space in which the radicalization of far-right terrorists occurs must be considered because it is built upon the foundations laid by jihadi terrorists. Today's far-right extremists utilize the internet in a number of platforms, such as forums, social media, or video games. The internet has become the home and refuge of those seeking to cause harm. However, it does more than provide an incubator for the radicalization of individuals. It also provides them with plans for homemade weapons, bombs, and video tutorials on how to carry out attacks (Caniglia et al., 2020; Hayden, 2019).

This radicalization space, being global in nature, modifies how we see the goals of the European far right and the far right in general; most extreme right-wing groups of the past looked for an ethnocratic future, yet the far right of today reaches back to the past and aims for an ethnopluralist future.

Defining the Threat

To analyze the trends of extreme right-wing violence in Europe, it is essential to define some key terms which will be used throughout this publication. The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) refers to right-wing terrorism as "the use of terrorist violence by right-wing extremists to facilitate their political or ideological goals" (Europol, 2022). While right-wing extremist groups can share some core ideological concepts such as supremacy (predominantly white supremacy), exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and other intolerances to minorities, they cannot be regarded as a monolithic block.

The terms far-right violence and extreme right-wing violence are usually defined with nuanced differences in academic literature, but this paper will use them interchangeably. It outlines an unusual type of political violence that encapsulates both hate crime and organized terrorism as a means of promoting their anti-democratic values (Pauwels, 2021).

Terrorist Attacks and Arrests

According to Europol's (2020) annual Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT), the number of people seized for right-wing terrorism has been fluctuating since 2010. There were periods indicating a clear upward trend, the most prominent one between 2015 and 2018. However, by 2019 the number of arrests declined from 44 to 21 and began upward sloping, creating a long-term inclining trend (Europol, 2020).

The year 2021 has yielded the highest number of arrests yet, as 64 individuals were taken into custody in nine member states based on suspicion of involvement in far-right terrorist activities. This was a sharp increase compared to the 34 arrests in 2020, with the most substantial difference in numbers being in France, increasing from 5 arrests in 2020 to 29 in 2021 (Europol, 2021). This development is attributed to transnational accelerationist groups and their effective propaganda targeting French far-right extremists (Europol, 2021).

Since 2010, there has been a relatively stable number of reported terrorist attacks in the EU, except for 2015 during which France and Greece disclosed 9 terrorist attacks motivated by far-right ideologies (Europol, 2016). Nevertheless, according to the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, the number of far-right fatal attacks in Western Europe follows a long-term downward sloping trend. While in 2010 there were 6 attacks, for both 2020 and 2021 only 2 were recorded (Ravndal et al., 2022).

A similar trend can be observed when analyzing severe attacks between 2015 and 2021. While in 2015 there were 182 premeditated and spontaneous attacks,

only 131 occurred in 2021, which places 2021 among the least deadly years since 1990 (Ravndal et al., 2022). The 2011 July bombings and shootings in Norway are still recognized as the worst mass-casualty terrorist attacks committed by a right-wing extremist, resulting in 77 fatalities.

Since 2015, most of the severe terrorist attacks in Western Europe were carried out by unorganized informal groups and lone perpetrators, out of which 88% were targeting ethnic and religious minorities (Ravndal et al., 2022). This indicates that large-scale terrorist attacks are no longer the most acute threat, rather, it is the unplanned racist violence of everyday actors. Germany has been at the center of these attacks, likely due to the pro-refugee policies instituted by Angela Merkel. In 2016, out of 125 attacks committed within its borders, 109 targeted ethnic and religious minorities. High levels of extreme right-wing political terrorism have been common in Germany ever since, as in the first months of 2022 extreme right-wing violence surged by 40%. Interior Minister Nancy Feaser commented that: "The far right is the biggest threat for democracy and the biggest extremist threat to people in our country" ("Germany Sees Jump in Far-Right Violence," 2022).

The European countries which have been most affected by right-wing violence since 2010, according to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), are Germany, Greece, Finland, Sweden, and the UK. Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Ireland, and Norway fall into the medium-high threat category based on right-wing attacks per Capita (Jones et al., 2020). Regardless, due to the absence of a single definition of terrorism, not all EU countries share the same criteria when assessing which anti-democratic acts of violence are categorized as terrorism (Koehler, 2016). This makes it challenging to accurately analyze the trends of far-right violence.

The Dangers of Far-Right Rhetoric and Propaganda

The growing trend of recurring far-right violent actions encapsulates both physical and symbolic violence; however, the latter is often overlooked, as it means to coerce individuals more subtly through language and political rhetoric. This allows for the normalization of extreme ideologies in societies, a dangerous phenomenon occurring throughout the EU, which should be analyzed in connection to the proliferation of extreme right-wing violent attacks.

Far-right political party leaders generally propagate their ideas through highly emotional and dramatized speeches, which rely on the use of colloquial language as a means of connecting with the people (Ekström et al., 2018). Their rhetoric, often nationalist and anti-establishment, is intended to be compelling and targets a minority, which is depicted as the common enemy and the source of

everyone's problems. The propaganda is very well thought through, capitalizing on the fears of the population, may it be the migration crisis of 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the current energy crisis. Far-right parties such as the Freedom and Democracy Party (SPD) from the Czech Republic target Muslim minorities in their propaganda, commissioning billboards with denouncing slogans such as "No to Islam, No to Terrorism" ("Ostrý jazyk znovu zabral, Okamura přivedl po Úsvitu do sněmovny i SPD", 2017). This reinforces the idea of extreme right-wing ideologies being based on exclusion and division.

The normalization of extreme right-wing parties secures a place for their rhetoric within society. Due to the lack of empirical data, there is no clear connection between the propaganda of far-right parties and acts of terrorism. Moreover, parties do not associate themselves, nor do they officially support committed violent attacks. When questioned about the Halle and Hanau attacks in Germany, for instance, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) denied any complicity and refused to bare any responsibility (Marcks & Pawelz, 2022). Regardless, German Professor Dubslaff argues that there is a link between terrorist attacks and the normalization of hate speech against ethnic and religious minorities not only in Germany but also in the rest of the EU ("Fusillades de Hanau", 2020).

Case Study: Sweden Democrats

The Sweden Democrats (SD) party was established in 1988 by 30 right-wing extremist founding fathers, out of which 18 had Nazi affiliations, and according to historian and former party member Tony Gustaffson, some even served in Hitler's Waffen SS ("Sweden Democrats admit Nazi roots in new 'white book'", 2022). Due to their neo-Nazi affiliations, the party was not perceived to be a legitimate actor at the time; however, over the years, they began gaining support. In the 2022 election, the SD secured 20.6%, the second-largest share of the vote.

The success of the Sweden Democrats can be attributed to a plethora of factors. One is the appointment of Jamie Åkesson as the party leader, which has been defined by de-demonizing the party image with the expelling of various neo-Nazi leaders and moving away from racist rhetoric towards a more populist one (Widfeldt, 2014). The most prominent parties have contributed to the normalization process. By adopting a similar rhetoric when addressing the crime rates in the country, they have pushed the voters further toward the far-right. Furthermore, before the 2022 election, the Social Democratic Party declared the SD their main enemy, which polarized the voting pool and led many, especially male, voters to support the Sweden Democrats (Asbrink, 2022).

The results made the SD the strongest extreme right-wing party since the end of WWII and will shape Sweden's position globally, especially concerning their responses to the war in Ukraine, potential NATO membership, and the upcoming EU presidency in 2023 (Crouch & Rauhala, 2022). The party's efforts to distance itself from its neo-Nazi roots through effective online propaganda have normalized its position in Swedish politics; however, its ideas remain centered around exclusion and anti-migrant rhetoric.

The Internet, Radicalization, and Violent Extremism

Since September 11, 2001, violent extremism has been at the top of the priority list for security forces in the Western world. While the initial focus of study was on religious extremism emanating from Salafi Islamists, a new "wave" of extremist violence began in the mid-2010s among the far right. The internet has been the hotbed of fermenting the ideology and extremism that has produced events such as the Charleston, South Carolina shooting, the Christchurch shooting in New Zealand, and others across the globe. From the rhetoric to the actions, the internet has served those instigating this new wave of extremism.

The internet has empowered individuals from all walks of life, allowing them to communicate faster and more efficiently. However, the business model upon which the internet runs has proven to be problematic, especially when it comes to social media. For instance, Facebook's recommendation algorithm has been proven to lead individual users to extremist groups and promote far-right content (Horowitz & Seetharaman, 2020). This trend is not limited to Facebook. The personalization filtering that users experience while using social media creates a "Filter Bubble" (Pariser, 2011), where users are encouraged to isolate from opposing perspectives based on algorithmic recommendations. It also plays into the pay-for-clicks business model of the internet, where advertisements are the primary stream of revenue for websites, meaning that the more web traffic on a site, the more money the site makes. Those who propagate and disseminate far-right ideology do not only rely on algorithms and filter bubbles. They use many methods and platforms to do so, meaning that strategies may be platform-dependent.

The manners in which far-right ideology is spread vary depending on the platform (Davey & Ebner, 2019). For instance, on mainstream websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, "Piggy-Backing", which involves taking a trending topic or hashtag such as "#HappyNewYear" and tacking on "#WhiteGenocide" to the content to increase visibility and views, is effective and popular among these users (Bennhold, 2020). These websites have also used to spread disinformation by malicious state and non-state actors (UNCRI, 2020).

Messaging platforms, such as Discord and Telegram, are also utilized to spread extremism. Telegram is particularly interesting because of its lack of oversight regarding white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and other far-right extremist content. When ISIS-related groups appeared on the platform, they were banned immediately. Yet far-right groups, such as Saint Calendar or the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) saw no bans nor restrictions. Groups such as these often glorify individuals who commit racial, ethnic, and politically-motivated mass shootings or specific figures from the world of the far-right. Additionally, they go so far as to include instructions for making weapons (Venkataramakrishnan, 2019).

Another strategy is humor, often utilizing memes, such as Pepe the Frog, and "shitposting". Shitposting is the act of throwing huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, to provoke an emotional reaction in less internet-savvy users to derail and distract (Evans, 2019). These are not easily picked up by artificial intelligence (AI) tools (Pohjonen, 2021). Utilizing humor through memes and shitposting creates an easier way to open regular users up to participation in the ideology and actions of right-wing extremism.

Within the digital realm, there are also "fringe" websites. These are websites that are not generally visited by regular users and are rather niche. Reddit, a popular forum-style website that has become quite mainstream, started off similar to the more well-known sites where far-right ideologies have spread, such as 4chan and 8chan. In general, these are forum-style websites with anonymous users. The websites consist of imageboards and discussion threads that are opened by users posting images or text (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021). 8chan became known as one of the most violent, with some users going on to commit violent acts, such as the Halle Synagogue shooter in Germany, who, in his manifesto, called himself an "Anon", noting his link to the 8chan site ("Far Right Terrorism in Germany: Shooting Exposes Lapses in Security Appparatus," 2019). Other violent actors, such as the Baerum Mosque shooter in Norway and the Christchurch Mosque shooter in New Zealand also participated in such forum sites (Burke, 2019). Some of the more popular sites among far-right users were shut down but were quickly replaced.

Gamification of Far-Right Violence

Gamification, defined as using game-like elements in a non-game-like context, which is reminiscent of Eppman et al.'s (2018) definition, has become both a trend and a strategy to encourage user engagement. At its core, gamification has a positive appeal and has effectively solved issues regarding performance, development, and engagement in multiple fields including marketing, but especially in the field of education, where it is being used at an increasing rate to keep students engaged and motivated to complete their work and learn their course material (Chang & Wei, 2016; Eppmann et al., 2018). It is often used in

education and work settings, where engagement or the desire to engage may be somewhat lacking on the part of the individual. Yet, school-settings are not the only environments or contexts in which gamification has been utilized; the far right has also learned how to gamify extremism and acts of violence.

Terrorists and other extremists have found "creative" ways to both execute their attacks and disseminate them to appeal to a broader audience. One trend that has been emerging among far-right violent extremists is utilizing the view modes of popular videogame genres, such as the first-person shooter (FPS) to stream these attacks, and some have challenged other extremists to "beat their score". In fact, far-right extremists have criticized those who have committed violent acts for having low "scores", i.e., not killing enough people (Mackintosh & Mezzofiore, 2019). These users do not only utilize methods of gamification itself, but they also use streaming platforms where gamers generally congregate to showcase their attacks. Twitch, a streaming platform that focuses on streaming live plays of video games, is one such platform that has been used and affected by far-right extremists.

Like anonymous forum sites and social media platforms, online multiplayer games offer radicalized gamers the opportunity to come into contact with regular gamers. For better outcomes in these games, gamers must find others with whom they can cooperate, and after intense gaming sessions, trust and rapport are built among those who collaborate on achieving the game's objectives.

While gaming can be a tool to radicalize those who are not already, games can also be a tool to further radicalize those who are already in the radicalization process. For instance, extremist organizations have created their own games that simulate attacks on different communities, which right-wing extremists feel to be at war with. They also re-create prior attacks in a virtual format and employ different video game styles from the FPS genre to the alternative reality exploration genre, which includes games like "Pokémon Go!" (Schlegel, 2020).

Recommendations

During the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right beliefs and attitudes spread as a lack of trust in elites and experts at an all-time high. While Europe's law-and-order model of countering terrorism has done a fair job of keeping the number of attacks down, it has not stopped them altogether, and European states must face the challenge of how to act regarding far-right extremism and violence. Therefore, a holistic approach to countering violent extremism is recommended.

Part of the difficulty in battling far-right violent extremism comes from the misunderstanding of extremism and radicalization. While the identity

characteristics are well-known, understanding the role that identity and the individual's ontological security play before ever being radicalized is one of the key aspects to battling and *preventing* not only violent acts, but also the prior radicalization of new far-right extremists (Agius et al., 2020; Hogg, 2021).

Considering that conspiracy theories and disinformation, especially on the internet, play a key role in the radicalization and penetration of the individual's identity and sense of ontological security, preventative action must be taken. This is where strategies such as those employed in the Baltics to counter disinformation would be welcome. For example, Estonia's cyber-security strategy includes media literacy and internet-awareness as high-priority features (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communication, 2019). Given that many perpetrators of right-wing violence are younger rather than older, the acquisition of a good foundation for internet literacy and media literacy could possibly prevent radicalization before it even starts. Investing in groups that support these goals is also recommended.

Preemptive strategies should be implemented as well. Efforts such as increasing cooperation between social media and internet companies with the government, increasing vetting for prospective military and law-enforcement members, and enforcing zero-tolerance rules related to proven offenders could go along way. The latter two would also be in-line with the current law-and-order counterterrorism model embraced by Europe, which is characterized by inter-state cooperation and integration in the fields of criminal justice and law. This model can be seen in more detail by examining the recommendations and actions planned in the 2020 Counter-terrorism Agenda set forth by the European Commission (*"A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond"*, 2020).

Finally, reactionary strategies should be observed. These can include prison sentences, but also countering violent extremism (CVE) programs. The difficulty with CVE programs is that there is no solid metric to accurately determine the success of programs; many programs rely on recidivism (someone reverting to criminal or extremist activities and beliefs) as a measurement (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). This can be a problem for various reasons, 1) CVE programs rely on two parties, one of which is the individual being deradicalized, 2) culture and methods of CVE programs differ across cultures; therefore, there are a number of approaches (Cherney & Belton, 2020). That is not to say that CVE programs should be done away with, but that the emphasis should be rather put on preemptive strategies.

Conclusion

Today's violent extremists are not organized into a tight, cohesive group that can easily be tracked and traced, and they don't all gather in party offices. Violent far-right extremists have adapted well to utilizing different characteristics of the internet, such as the algorithmic promotion of content and the pay-for-clicks business model to spread content, ideology, and engage regular users in the radicalization process. Tactics and methodology vary by platform and include the use of humor and encouraging violence. Furthermore, extremism and other issues have only been exacerbated and unregulated by select platforms. Among the many tools used by extremists, gamification has been effective in encouraging terrorism in a number of ways, such as live-streaming attacks, pushing for expanded loss of life through "score" comparisons and scoring, and simulating and recreating attacks. Videogames and popular videogame streaming platforms have also served as unwitting victims to the dissemination of violent extremist ideologies and content.

Preventing and countering these ideologies and battling this version of extremism will take a wholistic effort on the part of policy makers and society in general, which will not be easy. Far-right extremism and violence are not simple issues. Their characteristics ensure that when combating them, we are not necessarily fighting groups or individuals who are already radicalized, but rather radicalization itself with the enablers of radicalization.

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European Liberal Forum

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard.

ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democratic movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European.

We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

www.liberalforum.eu

Institute for Politics and Society

The Institute for Politics and Society is a Czech think-tank founded in October 2014. The mission of the Institute is to cultivate the Czech political and public sphere through an in-depth and open discussion and to create a living platform which terms problems and offers recipes for their solutions through international conferences, seminars, public discussions, political and social analyses available to the whole Czech society. We believe that an open discussion is a prerequisite for any successful solution to political and social problems. Our main themes are foreign and security policy, defence, European matters, but also schooling, digitization, power industry, urbanism, life in a city and in the public space, values in politics and human rights in our country and abroad.

www.politikaspolecnost.cz

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