

We need a better understanding of what drives right-wing extremist violence

Rachel Briggs and **Matthew Goodwin** explore some of the factors that drive individuals to adopt a right-wing extremist identity and maintain that more research needs to be conducted into why some engage in violent activities.



The trial of Anders Breivik – and its forthcoming conclusion – has sparked a [resurgence of interest](#) in one area of research that is often ignored by social scientists: right-wing extremist violence. In contrast to a vast body of research on al-Qaeda or ‘AQ’-inspired religious-based forms of extremism that has set out to identify the social, psychological, physical and contextual factors that render some citizens susceptible radicalization, there is a distinct lack of attention to the drivers and perpetrators of violence and/or terrorism motivated by right-wing extremist narratives and ideologies. Furthermore, this ‘gap’ in the existing evidence base has arisen despite recent warnings from [London Metropolitan Police](#), the [Department for Homeland Security](#) in the United States and [security services](#) in Germany about the potential for violence from an evolving extreme right scene.

It is for this reason that we set out to explore the state of existing research in Europe on right-wing extremist violence, and make this material accessible to a wide audience of policy makers, security officials and researchers through a [briefing paper](#), published by the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD). Although careful not to overstate the scale of the problem (large-scale events like the Norway attacks are rare), evidence shows that there is a pernicious core of extremists seeking to perpetrate sizeable attacks. The discovery of the National Socialist Underground (NSU) or the ‘Zwickau’ cell in Germany is a timely reminder of this; the clandestine group was responsible for the murder of nine immigrants, a policewoman and bombing in Cologne.

There are numerous other examples of the potential for violence from within the extreme right: in 2010, the confiscation of improvised explosive and incendiary devices from activists in the neo-Nazi Kameradschaft Aachener Land (KAL) in Germany; in 2007, the conviction of a British National Party (BNP) candidate who had stockpiled chemical explosives due to his fears over ‘[uncontrolled immigration](#)’; and, in the same year in Russia, the execution of two members of a minority group under a Swastika flag (one of whom was beheaded) and, more generally, approximately 600 racially-motivated attacks and 80 murders linked to neo-Nazi and racist movements.

It is also worth stressing that right-wing extremists are engaged in high-frequency lower level acts of violence, which cumulatively are having a serious impact on communities across Europe but are less likely to make the national headlines. Neither do these kinds of incidents figure in traditional national security threat assessments, which means that those attempting to counter right-wing extremists often struggle to attract the funding, resources and political attention they need. These crimes are also hidden within complex and differing national crime reporting systems, which means it is difficult to track trends over time or across borders. Due to a lack of reliable and comparable data, it is virtually impossible to ascertain whether levels of right-wing extremism are increasing over time, or are more prevalent in particular European states (or even, for that matter, individual regions).

While we are beginning to understand the motivations behind AQ-inspired extremists, the relative dearth of social science research on right-wing extremist violence means we know a lot less about individual perpetrators and what drives them. But researchers, particularly in Germany and Scandinavia, are beginning to build up a picture. On the whole, perpetrators tend to be young men with average or low levels of education, few qualifications and are pessimistic about their economic prospects. However, rather than motivated by a comprehensive ideology there is evidence to suggest individuals are driven

more by a combination of 'thrill-seeking', opportunism, and often arrive at right-wing extremist violence following a long history of criminality and/or alcohol and drug abuse problems.

They are involved in a range of groupings and activities. First there are political parties that contest elections and who work within the law, but may have members who are involved in violence outside the confines of the party. Second, there are grassroots social movements that seek to recruit activists to their cause. While many such groups do not officially condone violence, again many have members that incite violence and some demonstrations lead to serious incidents of civil unrest and violence. Third, there are smaller groups and networks without formal membership or rigid structures, which tend to adopt more extreme ideological positions. And finally, there are so-called 'lone actors' that do not have formal links to established groups and tend to act in isolation.

Clearly, lots of research questions remain. One of the key knowledge gaps relates to the link – or not – between violent and non-violent forms of right-wing extremism. Is there a slippery slope from one to the other? Do violent movements necessarily need their non-violent equivalents to provide political cover and justification for their actions? What are the practical and logistical connections between the two? And could the presence of a strong far-right party within the political sphere actually divert support away from violent street movements? Another gap concerns the link – or not – between different forms of violent extremism, or what is described as *cumulative extremism*. In a similar fashion to earlier trends in cases such as Northern Ireland, are we beginning to see the emergence of a *spiral of violence* and intergroup conflict between more radical fringes of right-wing extremist groups, and radical Islamists?

Lastly, and at the individual level, what factors 'trip' some supporters of the electoral radical right into violence, or what some within the movement refer to as 'direct action'? One recent and *large scale survey* of the attitudes of extreme and radical right supporters in Britain reveals that the belief in a forthcoming 'clash of civilisations' and the need for violence to protect a wider group from perceived threats is relatively widespread among rank-and-file members. Yet at present the social science literature speaks only quietly to the question of what factors might 'push and pull' individuals toward more violent outcomes.

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