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Right-wing extremism in the Nordic countries – analysing threat assessments by the security police

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ABSTRACT

The right-wing extremism (RWE) milieu in the Nordic region is arguably becoming increasingly transnational in nature. Nordic groups, networks, and individuals have been inspired by global narratives and followed their foreign idols. The terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011 have also inspired criminality globally.

In this chapter, we explore the threat landscape and relevant groups and actors primarily in the light of security police reports from four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The reports were studied following the changing threat assessments, caused, among other things, by COVID-19 and most recently by the war in Ukraine. We look into which organizations and actors have been considered most relevant in each country, which kind of activities are expected to cause a threat, and how these threats link to the pan-Nordic movement and also to international far-right activism. The analysis is supplemented with recent academic literature on right-wing extremism in the Nordic countries.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

According to security police in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, the threat of right-wing extremism (RWE) has risen during the last five years in all respective countries and is currently at the same level as the threat of jihadism. By nature, as per reports, the threat is mostly caused by individual actors or small groups. Some pan-Nordic organizations, however, are also cause for security concerns. Among these is the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), a neo-Nazi organization active in all Nordic countries until 2019, when it was proscribed by order of the Finnish Supreme Court.

A recent study (Kotonen et al. 2023) which charted the current and historical forms of right-wing extremism in the Nordic countries emphasised, however, that there have been active groups and individuals in all the countries for more than the past hundred years, with their ebbs and flows, and the phenomenon is thus not a new one. Furthermore, right-wing extremism across Nordic countries has shared similar ideological traits, especially seen in endeavours to build a joint Nordic movement and more generally in a shared common understanding of the mythical “Nordicness and The North as an idealised past and a desired future” (Karcher and Lundström 2022). Also notable is that the RWE groups have become more interconnected, transnational or pan-Nordic. Like other far-right phenomena, such as (right-wing) populism that intentionally seeks to exploit and push a sense of crisis to advance political agendas (Moffit 2015). Right-wing extremism is also fed by crises, which often are external, such as global finance crises or, most recently, a pandemic. In this article, RWE refers to movements, organizations and actors with authoritarian, anti-immigrant, ethno-nationalist and/or national socialist ideologies who consider violence as legitimate means to achieve societal change (e.g., Kotonen et al. 2023; Bjørge & Ravndal 2019).

Considering all four countries are relatively similar, following the societal model of the Nordic welfare-state, it may be assumed that they react to external crises in somewhat similar fashion, although the countries have also their own historical differences (cf. Bjørge 1995). In addition, when it comes to tackling right-wing extremism, the models used have been developed in tandem to some extent (cf. Kotonen et al. 2023) and therefore, we find it justified to analyse them together here.

In this analysis, we explore how domestic or transnational threats have been anticipated by the security police, and how they affected subsequent analysis. The threats presented in the governments’

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reports are not only descriptions of the empirical reality but, obviously, as pointed out in previous studies (Rostami & Askanius 2021; Warrington 2018), discursive constructions as well. For example, as Rostami and Askanius (2021, p. 371) argue, it is in political interests to present the “threat as coming from the “outside”” (cf. also Malkki and Sallamaa 2018). As we will analyse in more detail below, external events and threats indeed contribute considerably to the changes we see in threat assessments.

Although more general studies on the threats of terrorism are abundant, studies on security police assessments in particular are relatively scarce (cf. Rostami & Askanius 2021; for a historical perspective, see also Kotonen 2020) and, as in the case of the Norwegian mosque shooting in 2019, often launched only as a reaction to a violent event (cf. Dalgaard-Nilsen 2020; Anderson 2017). More detailed analyses of the right-wing extremist milieu produced by security police are also rare. For our analysis, only single analyses by Swedish and Norwegian police are available (PST 2019a; Ranstorp and Ahlin 2020).

The chapter begins with a brief summary of the evolution of the RWE landscape, followed by an analysis of each country based on security police reports and a look at the changing RWE threats, and ends with a comparative analysis charting differences or similarities, both in light of reports as well as academic literature.

METHODS AND DATA

This study is carried out as a contextualized and thematic qualitative analysis (Clarke et al. 2015) based on the yearbooks and terrorism threat assessments produced by security police in Nordic countries covering the five-year period from 2018 to 2022.

The analysis includes an examination of the yearly national threat assessment reports produced by the Norwegian Police Security Service (in Norwegian *Politiets sikkerhetstjeneste*, abbreviated hereafter PST) between 2018 and 2022 and the Yearbooks published by the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (in Finnish *Suojelupoliisi*, Supo) within the same timeframe.

To examine the Swedish threat assessments, Yearbooks by the Swedish Security Service (in Swedish *Säkerhetspolisen*, Säpo) 2018—2022/2023 were included. Additionally, a one-year assessment for 2021 from the National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT) was included, while assessments for other years were either not available or published. The NCT serves as a connecting hub for experts from the National Defence Radio Establishment (FRA), the Military Intelligence and Security Directorate (MUST) and the Swedish Security Service.

In Denmark, yearly assessments are produced by the Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA), which connects the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Emergency Management Agency. This study examined the terror threat assessment reports for Denmark from the years 2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

The nature of these reports as public documents based on intelligence sources has obvious limitations for an analysis. Often, the threats described in the reports have already been described or anticipated in research literature. Considering, for example, the fact that the security police mentioning some group may have consequences for an organization, or even, when anticipating their future actions might turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, future orientation of the reports is limited. Furthermore, standardized data collection, analysis and reporting practices may produce gaps in knowledge and information (cf. Eriksson 2016). Finally, the focus of the activities in the scope of the security police is often set from the outside, for example, by respective ministries. Priorities are thus often not entirely data driven, but based on, for example, the needs of the end users of the reports (cf. Vehmaskoski 2023). Therefore, comparison with academic literature is warranted.

THE EVOLUTION OF RWE TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Based on findings in previous literature on RWE in Nordic countries, it is clear that right-wing extremist violence has changed in nature, in Nordic countries as well as elsewhere in Western Europe, since the 1990s. Originating from British white supremacist, homosocial, working-class youth subculture with racist, anti-Semitic, queerphobic ideologies and nostalgic attachment to Odinist symbols and heroic mythologies (Pollard 2016), skinhead movements, which emerged in the Nordic countries in the 1980s, were the main perpetrators of anti-immigration violence in the 1990s. During the 1990s, skinhead groups perpetrated violent attacks, sometimes almost on a daily basis. In the early 1990s, Nordic countries also experienced a wave of arson attacks targeting refugee reception centres. After the skinhead movement lost its wider appeal by the early 2000s, the frequency of violence has also diminished (Ravndal 2018). According to Mattson and Johansson (2023), while neo-Nazis and skinheads share ideological similarities, particularly in their perceptions of the out-group, their approaches towards violence differ. In comparison with the relatively random acts of violence perpetrated by skinheads, the violence perpetrated by neo-Nazis is driven by a struggle for a utopian vision of a homogenous white society and is strongly shaped by complex ideological narratives and theories. More organised neo-Nazi groups, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, have, even if militant and racist, committed comparably less violent attacks and in general, the NRM limits its use of violence (see Bjørge and Ravndal 2020; cf. also Busher, Holbrook and Macklin 2019).

There are several factors explaining this development, partly related to the changing forms of organising activities and partly more focused on strategy (Ravndal 2021). It is notable that new forms of communication, especially social media, has also affected the organisation and mobilisation of right-wing extremism. Whereas neo-Nazi groups were often related to certain online forums, and later Identitarian and counter-jihadist groups effectively used web-blogs, more loosely organised franchise-type groups, such as the vigilante organization Soldiers of Odin, have relied on Facebook groups for mobilisation (Kotonen 2019). Establishing a local support group was cost-effective but also meant that control from higher up was not as strict as it has been, for example, in the NRM. More recently, although originating from online discussion forums such as the now-defunct Iron March and Fascist Forge, which were favoured by some of the most extreme neo-Nazi and far-right users, accelerationist groups adhering to the goal of hastening society's presumed inevitable collapse through violence and race-based conflicts (e.g., Ware 2020, p. 85) have opted for more a clandestine type of organisation and have mobilised using different messaging groups, such as Discord, Wire and Telegram.

Previous studies have paid relatively little attention to comparisons between Nordic countries (cf. Ravndal 2018) and to pan-Nordic dimensions of threats to an even lesser degree, despite the fact that, for example, Soldiers of Odin and the Nordic Resistance Movement have been active in all countries and have a pan-Nordic character. In this chapter, we therefore decided to rely on material which may show how threats emerge in tandem in all Nordic countries, and attempt to pinpoint the pan-Nordic dimension. It is known, however, that at the practical level, police forces often collaborate across borders when targeting extremist groups, by, for example, stopping extremists at borders and preventing them from travelling to demonstrations in other countries (Närhi 2017).

During the past ten years in Norway and Sweden, right-wing extremists have committed attacks which, at least from an academic perspective, can be classified as terrorism, and in some cases also charged as terrorist crimes, and which all have pan-Nordic or transnational links. The legal definitions of what constitutes a terrorist crime in both countries refer to them as serious acts that threaten the national interests or security or cause serious fear in population (see Terrorist Crime Act 2022:666; Penal Code of Norway 2005, Ch. 18; cf. also Penal Code of Finland 2021, Ch. 34a).

Emerging from accelerationist networks, in Sweden, members of a US-Swedish ecofascist group Green Brigade conducted an arson attack at a mink farm in 2020, drawing inspiration, among others,

from Unabomber (Nacka District Court 2022; Loadenthal 2022). In Sweden, in July 2022, a person with links to the NRM killed a psychiatrist and planned to kill leading politicians and was later convicted of terrorism crimes. In his diaries, he called himself a “Swedish Breivik” (Gotland District Court 2022). In Norway, in August 2019, an attacker linked to accelerationist ideas (Thorleifsson 2022) targeted a local mosque. The perpetrator, who was especially inspired by the Christchurch mosque shooter Tarrant, as well as to a minor extent by Breivik (Macklin and Bjørgo 2021), had previously sought membership in the NRM and was found guilty of murder and terrorism crimes. More direct links to the NRM were present in the Gothenburg bomb campaign, during which three men carried out bomb attacks on a left-wing bookstore and an asylum centre. All convicted were previously NRM members and had taken part in paramilitary training in Russia (Gothenburg District Court 2017).

NORWEGIAN THREAT ASSESSMENTS 2018—22

An increasing number of right-wing terrorist attacks in the West as well as the rising numbers of RWE supporters in Norway have contributed to the rise of the terror threat level in Norway. Attacks more than doubled in the West from 2018 to 2019 (16 attacks in the West in 2019, 14 were prevented). In 2019, Norway itself had one attack. Especially the Christchurch attack in 2019 in New Zealand contributed to the reassessment of the threat level as the event was considered to be an inspiration for RWE extremists elsewhere.

The PST considers that, since 2019, RWE ideology and networks have become more transnational and terror-oriented. This development caused the RWE terror threat level to be increased from "unlikely" (10-40% probability) in 2018-19 to "even chance" (40-60%) in 2020, and it remained at that level in 2022 even though the number of attacks carried out has decreased significantly from the 2019 level. In 2022, the PST introduced a terrorism threat scale in which the overall terror threat level was assessed as moderate – Islamic extremists and right-wing extremists posing the greatest threats of terror against Norway.

KEY ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, ACTORS

According to reports, RWE in Norway falls into two main groups: those inspired by traditional Neo-Nazism and those with anti-Islam and anti-immigration mindsets (PST 2019). RWE movements in Norway are characterised as unorganised and loosely connected with the exception of the most central and visible RWE organization, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM, in Norway *Nordiske Motstandsbevegelsen*, DNM) (PST 2018). The DNM has close ties to the Swedish faction, which has a larger capacity and more resources, and depends on its support to organise large demonstrations and develop the organization further in Norway.

In the 2019 report, RWE activity in Norway was estimated to centre around organisation building and radicalisation, with the probability for terrorist acts not being very high. Due to a lack of support for their ideology among the general public, the NRM is not expected to grow but will continue to spread its ideology through activism both online and offline with an aim to influence, radicalise and recruit new members and thus remain the most active neo-Nazi group in Norway (PST 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). However, they are not expected to radicalise and recruit new members on a large scale, unless the movement capitalises on societal phenomena such as an unexpected, significant increase in non-Western immigration to Norway. However, they will continue to spread their ideology and narratives and potentially succeed in recruiting some individuals (PST 2020, 2022). COVID-19 was considered a factor that hindered physical networking between RWE organizations such as the NRM, and a phenomena that was used by RWE actors to propagate conspiracies supporting their perceptions of political opponents (PST 2022). Physical cross-border networking between RWE organizations and actors is expected to start up again once COVID restrictions are

eased (PST 2021). COVID-19 has also strengthened the role of authorities as one of the key enemies of RWE and, at least momentarily, increased the risk of being a potential target for attacks (ibid.). Aligning with the emerging scholarly attention towards the post-organisational nature of the RWE milieu (c.f. Guhl & Davey 2020; Thorleifsson & Düker 2021; Thorleifsson 2022), in the aftermath of 2019, the focus of the reports has largely shifted from organised groups and individuals on the fringes of established RWE organizations to the growing numbers of RWE sympathisers online, and to individuals radicalised through online platforms and RWE propaganda on social media. The most likely perpetrator in reports after 2020 is a lone actor radicalised through RWE propaganda online — a man with little education, loose affiliation with working life, potentially a criminal background, mental health problems and a history of substance abuse.

FINLAND: THREAT ASSESSMENTS 2018—22

In Finland, the terrorist threat has remained at an elevated level (2 on a scale from 1 to 4) throughout the scoping period (Supo 2018-22). While RWE and other nationalist movements are mentioned in the 2018 report, and the descriptions of the milieu have become gradually more detailed in the following reports of 2019 and 2020, the RWE milieu was not seen to pose a threat in Finland before the 2021 report. Instead, until 2020, the threat was mainly individual actors or small groups of radical Islamists (Supo 2018, 2019, 2020) and the threat from RWE was mainly connected to other Western countries and potential international influences reaching domestic actors. During that time, there were only general descriptions about the international RWE milieu and mentions of tensions arising from migration, social exclusion, racism and nationalism.

The 2020 Yearbook highlights the interconnection between radical Islamist and right-wing terrorism, with each ideology fuelling the other (cf. on reciprocal radicalization Lygren & Ravndal 2023). Muslim communities have been a target of RWE violence around the world, and since the far-right attack in Christchurch, radical Islamists have the motivation to retaliate against the far-right. SUPO notes that trends in European terrorism tend to reach Finland with a slight delay and in a somewhat diminished form (2020, p. 6). Consequently, it provides an overview of the expanding right-wing extremist milieu, its targets, and its ideology within the Western world as a whole. The impact of RWE propaganda on online platforms, accelerationism, and copycat attacks, as well as the decreased number of RWE terrorist attacks but simultaneously increased numbers of sympathisers of RWE ideologies online due to COVID-19 restrictions, are discussed. The online platforms are not specified by SUPO, although a reference is made to social media. In a report on recruitment of youth to extremist movements published the same year, messaging platform Telegram is however specifically mentioned (Pelastakaa Lapset 2021, 19; cf. Kotonen 2020). The report also mentions the role of COVID-19 conspiracy theories as one element of online radicalization (ibid. 28).

Even though the most significant terrorist threat in Finland in 2020 was still posed by radical Islamists, there is also increasing concern about the rise of far-right activity. The 2021 Yearbook notes an investigation that escalated into a counter-terrorism operation when a small far-right group was discovered with firearms, explosives, and bomb-making materials. Despite the terrorism assessment level remaining at 2 (out of 4) (Supo 2022), the threat of far-right terrorism has increased. The 2021 Yearbook highlights the influence of international trends in RWE milieus which have made their way into Finland via online platforms. Despite the limited presence of organised far-right groups and actors in Finland, sympathisers are united by the extremist ideology and rhetoric within online communities. So far, there has been no far-right terror attacks in Finland, but SUPO has identified certain individuals associated with the far-right movement who possess the capability and motivation to carry out terrorist acts (2020, 2021, 2022). These individuals are typically not affiliated with organised far-right groups but draw inspiration from the global online RWE community.

KEY ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, ACTORS

The 2019 Yearbook describes the Finnish RWE milieu in a more detailed manner. In 2019, the most prominent RWE organization in Finland, the Finnish branch of the Nordic Resistance Movement (in Finland *Pohjoismainen Vastarintaliike*, PVL), was banned by decision of the Supreme Court. After this, a PVL-linked movement called "Towards Freedom" began to organise activities previously organised by PVL. Even though there were no violent incidents committed by PVL or Towards Freedom in 2019, both groups are under criminal investigation. In the 2022 Yearbook, Supo reports individuals associated with the disbanded PVL having continued similar activities with new arrangements.

Even though the threat level assessment has remained the same, the overall picture of extremism in Finland has changed. Travel to conflict zones has contributed to developed networking and increased capacity to conduct terrorist attacks, the threat from RWE has grown, and lone actors drawing inspiration from previous attacks elsewhere and finding encouragement from like-minded actors online form the greatest threat, irrespective of ideology. The perpetrator(s) is/are likely to use readily available weapons and conduct unsophisticated attacks on crowds. Lone actors often draw inspiration from previous RWE terrorist attacks.

SWEDEN: THREAT ASSESSMENTS 2018—22

In 2018, despite the general terrorist threat assessment being 3 out of 5 (elevated), the threat posed by the RWE milieu in Sweden was connected mainly with systematic street campaigning, demonstrations, attempts to change the public opinion as well as sabotage and targeting, intimidating, harassing and threatening politicians, representatives and authorities, rather than terrorist attacks (Säpo 2018). During that period, the primary terrorist threat stemmed from the violent Islamist milieu, while white supremacist and left-wing extremist milieus were considered capable of committing acts that could potentially fall under the scope of terrorism legislation.

In the aftermath of increased attacks in the West in 2019, the total terror threat to Sweden remained at an elevated level (3/5) throughout the scoping period, but the threat posed by RWE from 2021 onwards is equal to violent Islamist extremists (NCT 2021; Säpo 2021). The main threat comes from individuals on the fringes of extremist environments acting alone and drawing inspiration from social media and previous attacks, who, in addition to an ideological driving force, may have personal reasons for their actions. Violent and non-violent RWE groups are becoming more and more intertwined as the rhetoric glorifying violence and affirming RWE values becomes increasingly common. Moreover, there is a simultaneous growth in societal polarisation accompanied by an increase in the number of foiled RWE attacks across Europe (Säpo 2020, 2021; NCT 2021). A small number of individuals in extremist environments could possibly develop the intent and capacity to carry out a terrorist attack in Sweden. In addition to RWE propaganda, mental health problems, global changes and personal circumstances are seen as potentially radicalising factors (NCT 2021).

The Swedish reports voice concerns over the polarisation of society, increasing amount of online hate speech and harassment, and the consequences of normalising and legitimising dehumanisation and violence-glorifying narratives online (Säpo 2022/2023, 2021). Racist, xenophobic, nationalist, anti-LGBTQ+ and misogynist attitudes and conspiracies are mentioned as central features of online RWE ideologies and the RWE milieu (Säpo 2021, 2019). In recent years, the RWE environment has changed as the discussion has partly moved to encrypted platforms where information is only available for a limited time.

KEY ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS

In line with trends observed in other Western countries, radicalisation through online platforms has become increasingly prevalent. However, radicalisation and recruitment also happen in offline interactions and physical spaces. The NCT report and Säpo Yearbooks do not mention specific RWE organizations or actors, but state that the common denominator is often dissatisfaction with the development of society, especially changes connected to Sweden's immigration policy (NCT 2021; Säpo 2018, 2019). RWE organizations are actively identifying and recruiting new members and organising propaganda-spreading activities in public places to attract new members.

Säpo reports that violent extremist organizations (both Islamist and RWE) have been able to use government money to fund their activities (NCT 2021, Säpo 2019, 2020). However, the RWE environment in Sweden is largely financed through membership fees and funds raised among members and adherents. In the past, they also received some financing from abroad but this was not significant. Extremism is also linked to criminality and organised crime (NCT 2021; Säpo 2020). Parallel societal structures and social exclusion create a breeding ground for extremism and criminality. Therefore, preventive measures, including social and educational measures, are needed.

DENMARK: THREAT ASSESSMENTS 2018—20

In Denmark, the terrorist threat from RWE grew from “limited” in 2018 to “general” in 2019 and remained on that level between 2019 and 2022. Previously, the terrorist threat was primarily attributed to militant Islamism. The growing number of RWE ideology sympathisers was already mentioned in the 2018 report, but the milieu was not seen to pose a terrorist threat at the time. The phenomenon was mainly connected to increasing antipathies towards immigration policies and refugees, as well as individual encounters with left-wing extremists, although violence and vandalism against asylum seekers, immigrants and asylum centres were seen as incidents that could be considered terrorism (CTA 2020).

The general threat level has remained significant during the whole scoping period 2018-22, while the threat level of RWE was reassessed and raised from “limited” to “general” in the 2019 report. In 2019, Denmark witnessed incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism, including the desecration of Jewish symbols and graves. Arson attacks against asylum seekers were also reported. Like elsewhere in the Nordics, the increase in attacks in the West during 2019 also affected the threat landscape in Denmark, with previous attacks and online propaganda serving as inspiration for potential copycat incidents. Militant Islamist attacks were viewed as a potential source of inspiration for right-wing extremists as well (CTA 2019, 2020, 2022). According to CTA, RWE currently has both the capacity and intention for a terrorist attack. The threat primarily stems from lone actors or small groups on the fringe of or outside a far-right milieu and an attack is less likely to be carried out by organised groups.

The most recent report (CTA 2022) takes a wider approach and, similar to Sweden, notes that conspiracy theories, polarisation, hate speech and anti-establishment narratives could challenge the pillars of democracy. Online propaganda might also inspire violent attacks and thus serve as a breeding ground for radicalisation – also for those not previously associated with extremism. According to CTA, the increased threats towards politicians, public officials, and certain professional experts may result in individuals choosing to withdraw from their public duties. Counter-terrorism efforts targeting radicalised individuals across ideologies and narratives increasingly acknowledge mental health as a factor potentially contributing to individuals engaging in violent extremism (CTA 2022).

KEY ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS

Activities have largely moved to online environments, and even though face-to-face meetings in the right-wing extremist community might continue to play a role in building trust, particularly between individuals whose affiliation has started online, physical groups and networks have difficulties retaining their members (CTA 2022). The assessment does not specify the nature of the offline meetings, although in a recent research report, the continued importance of demonstration has been stressed in this respect (B'nai B'rith International 2023).

The 2022 CTA assessment notes, similar to the Swedish reports, that minors are increasingly being recruited and radicalised in RWE organizations and activities. Often these recruitments are connected to accelerationism. In April 2022, a 15-year-old was arrested and charged for recruiting for a RWE group and promoting a terrorist organization, Feuerkrieg Division. The overall picture of the RWE threat is affected by developments in the online space where new groups and meeting places continuously emerge and ever more extreme, violence-promoting narratives are disseminated. These narratives are increasingly inspired by conspiracy theories.

The 2021 report notes that the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions have limited the physical activities of far-right extremists across national borders, but activity has continued and intensified in online environments.

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

Considering the public nature of the reports studied here, it is not surprising that they mostly include information already confirmed elsewhere. In this sense, they appear as reactive and future scenarios are seldom discussed in detail. In this comparative section, we will discuss the key findings regarding the security police reports, also reflecting on whether they are in line with academic studies and reports on topic. We will first explore the reports' perspectives on the potential sources of threats, focusing on the shift in likely perpetrators, and the transition from organised right-wing extremist (RWE) groups and individuals to lone actors who are inspired by RWE propaganda and previous attacks. We will then compare the approaches taken by the security police reports in addressing the threat of the RWE milieu. Following that, we will delve into the change in enemy image, analysing its diversification and increasing level of detail especially in the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish reports, and ultimately conclude with a comparison of emerging trends and changes in concepts and definitions.

Especially the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019 is noted as an event feared to spark copycat attacks elsewhere in the West and made security actors turn their gaze to the normalisation of RWE narratives online, lone actors consuming and engaging in RWE online propaganda, and those on the fringes of organised RWE movements. While Norway raised its RWE terrorist threat level in its 2020 assessment due to increased international attacks, Denmark had already done so in 2019, potentially due to the wave of anti-Semitic violence and growing antipathies towards immigration policies and refugees. In Finland and Sweden, international attacks did not affect the overall threat level, but RWE and especially lone actors connected to RWE milieus are now described as an equally serious threat to militant Islamist terrorism (Supo 2020, 2021, 2022; Säpo 2020, 2021, 2022).

Before the international increase in RWE attacks in 2019, the threat was mainly connected to traditional neo-Nazi movements and especially centring on the Nordic Resistance Movement's organisation building, recruitment and radicalisation of new members (PST 2018, 2019), random acts of violence committed by right-wing extremist individuals (Supo 2018, 2019), as well as loosely connected groups and individuals with anti-Islam, anti-immigration, or anti-Semitic (CTA 2020) and white supremacist mindsets (Säpo 2018, 2019). Denmark, Norway and Finland continue to emphasise the role of the Nordic Resistance Movement as the most significant RWE organization and closely

monitor and report its development, while Sweden does not mention any organizations per se. Despite being active, during the scoping period 2018-22, the NRM and other organised RWE movements were not considered likely to grow due to a lack of widespread support for their ideologies among the general public. The present significance of organised movements lies primarily in the establishment of trust with potential recruits. While dissemination of extremist material and planning of activities have largely moved to online environments, research indicates that social bonds in extremist organizations, groups and milieus remain essential in the radicalisation process of lone actors and are especially central in fostering the motivation and capability to engage in extremist violence (Schuurman et al. 2018; 2017; Bouhana et al. p. 158).

Despite existing research on the ideological and organizational connections between the branches of the NRM (e.g., Ravndal & Bjørge 2020; Kotonen et al. 2023, pp. 73-75; Ravndal 2020), the transnational and pan-Nordic nature of the movement is only vaguely mentioned. The 2018 Norwegian report describes the Nordic cooperation among the branches of the NRM, highlighting the close ties between the Norwegian NRM and its Swedish counterpart, which depends on its organizational support, while in other assessments, the pan-Nordic dimension is either disregarded or addressed by acknowledging that national RWE organizations are internationally connected through online spaces and personal communication. International connections are also implicitly acknowledged in the recognition of COVID-19 restrictions that have hindered physical networking between RWE organizations (PST 2021, CTA 2021) and the notion that activities are expected to restart after the restrictions are lifted. Furthermore, societal and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are seen to contribute to the growth of RWE activity, particularly in online spaces.

In line with findings about the Swedish approach towards prevention by Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros (2019, pp. 133-141; 2023) and Kotonen et al. (2023, pp. 65, 86-87, 101), the Swedish discourse on RWE in Säpo assessments depicts *RWE as a danger to society and democracy as a whole*. Differing from the other Nordics, Säpo discusses the development of the "three extremist milieus" (right-wing, militant Islamism and left-wing), rarely separating the three when discussing extremist threats to society. According to Andersson Malmros (2022), the framing of extremist milieus changed in Sweden during the 2010s to adopt a "whole-society approach" and develop a shared vocabulary and terminology for preventing terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. The intention was to reduce fragmentation, increase collaboration, and establish institutional infrastructure between different actors in the field. The Swedish approach emphasises the importance of recognising the broader societal impacts of extremism, including its role in increasing polarisation and promoting hate speech and targeted harassment against individuals. In its most recent reports, Sweden, as well as Denmark, stresses prevention and the role of early interference in countering extremism. Sweden further describes the structures enabling and fostering extremism by assessing the role of financing, societal structures, and social exclusion in facilitating and nurturing radicalisation. Within this context, educational institutes, regional and local actors, and social services are recognised as critical actors in preventing radicalisation.

Initially, in the beginning of the scoping period, RWE antipathies were described as mainly targeted towards refugees, political adversaries and left-wing extremists. Since 2019, the *enemy image* has diversified in Scandinavian countries. For example, in line with an ongoing trend of increasing anti-gender hate speech and violence specifically targeted against LGBTI communities and individuals (e.g., ILGA-Europe 2023), Sweden and Denmark recognise the threat against LGBTI as a growing trend from 2019 and 2020 onwards, and Norway already did in 2018. Furthermore, while Denmark's 2021 and 2022 reports are the only ones to mention incel (involuntary celibacy) communities as a potential source of violence, they treat the phenomenon as distinct from RWE. On the other hand, Sweden repeatedly notes misogyny and anti-feminism as key components in white supremacist ideologies, which can be seen as an indirect reference to incel-related communities (Säpo 2019, 2020, 2021). Throughout the scoping period of 2018-22, Finland's list of potential targets of RWE violence are limited to ethnic and religious minorities and political adversaries. In general, the Finnish reports

approach the phenomenon by discussing the overall situation in the West instead of sharing detailed information about the milieu within Finland, except for the Nordic Resistance Movement and related movements and their development. International trends within the RWE milieus are said to reach Finland with a slight delay (Supo 2020, p. 6). Although scrutinizing the veracity of that statement goes beyond the scope of this article, it is nevertheless interesting that also in general, the trends in violent extremism are often seen as somewhat alien to Finland which is depicted as a “bird’s nest immune to outside turmoils” (Malkki & Sallamaa 2018, p. 875).

The most significant rising trend identified in the threat assessments of all four countries is *accelerationism*. While Sweden was the first of the four Nordics to address the phenomenon in 2019 (p 51), it did not explicitly use the term yet. A year later, in the 2020 report, Säpo linked it with ecofascist ideology and the desire to hasten the collapse of society by promoting violence (2020, p. 39). Norway noted accelerationism only in 2021, and in 2022, it was already considered the most significant threat from the RWE milieu. Concurrent to the emergence of the term in the Norwegian assessments, Finland mentions “Siege Culture” and its connections to accelerationism in its 2021 and 2022 assessments. Despite being aware of the issue and providing support to police investigations (Supo, 2021), the Finnish security police only addressed the concept in their assessments after the arrest of five individuals with accelerationist motivations in Kankaanpää in early 2021. Additionally, in Finland, accelerationism is said to be connected only to a couple of individuals. These responses came considerably late, serving as another example of the reactive nature of intelligence production (Eriksson, 2016), considering that the first neo-fascist accelerationist group, Atomwaffen Division, was officially launched in 2015. Later, several similar groups were founded, among them also a Baltic-based group “Feuerkrieg Division” which was formed in 2018 (Newhouse 2021). In research literature, accelerationism has nevertheless already been analysed as a phenomenon and possible security threat. For example, a study conducted in 2020 mentioned the central role of a Finnish activist within some accelerationist networks (Kotonen 2020), somewhat contradicting the above-mentioned statement by the security police. One may also notice that accelerationist propaganda had been in circulation in Finland since at least 2019, and one person was convicted in the same year for incitement for online postings which included, among others, accelerationist material (District court of Kanta-Häme 09.05.2019). In Sweden, an arson attack was conducted by persons with links to accelerationist networks in 2019 (Nacka district court, 28.1.2021). The Danish reports introduce the concept even later, in line with the terrorism charges pressed against a young Feuerkrieg Division supporter in 2022 (CTA 2023).

Anti-establishment or *anti-government ideologies*, often loosely defined as phenomena ranging from attacks against politicians to spreading conspiracy theories (Bjørge and Braddock 2022), are expected to be a more prominent feature in radicalisation in the coming year. The Nordic security police, except for the PST in Norway in this context, has been rather cautious in introducing new concepts. Norway mentioned anti-state extremism already in 2018, although the terrorist threat is assessed as very low/unlikely (PST 2018-22). Sweden followed only in the latest report of the scoping period in the 2022 Yearbook, although the connection between the pandemic and the growing distrust towards the state and authorities and the use of conspiracy theories in exploiting this distrust was detected already in the 2020 and 2021 reports. Denmark (CTA 2021, 2022) addresses the issue through the hybridisation of narratives, the emergence of anti-establishment narratives, and the shift in enemy image. The scene is considered fragmented enough to only pose a limited threat, but future crises – for example, pandemics or the effects and political decisions connected to climate change – are noted to have the potential to unite the movements (CTA 2022, PST 2022, Säpo 2020). In the Finnish reports, the anti-establishment milieu emerged as a new concept in 2022. However, the milieu is characterised as posing no apparent threat to society as the activities so far have been limited to peaceful protests.

Given that by 2022, the anti-establishment milieu, along with accelerationist groups, has emerged as one of most significant growing trends within extremist milieus, the late introduction of anti-

establishment as a concept in Swedish, Danish and Finnish reports appears as an example of security actors' reluctance to deviate from previously published information and introduce emerging issues in search of continuity (Eriksson 2016, pp. 190-212). The most recent reports bring attention to the *hybridisation of narratives and RWE environments*. In this context, anti-establishment extremism is often connected with the transnational, conspiratorial and often anti-Semitic Great Replacement, white genocide, and deep state narratives that are disseminated in online spaces and effectively exploit crises, bringing together otherwise loosely connected groups (e.g., Supo 2022, Säpo 2021, CTA 2020, 2021, PST 2022). In the reports, the hybridisation of narratives is linked to lone actors engaging in, or drawing inspiration from, RWE online environments and selectively picking narratives that suit their worldview.

Other trends identified in the assessments are minors targeted through online RWE propaganda and growth in violent radicalisation among youth (Supo 2021, 2022, CTA 2022, Säpo 2021) as well as the gamification of RWE online propaganda (Säpo 2022/2023, PST 2020, 2021), which has also been noted by Europol (2021, pp. 90-91) as well as academia (see e.g., Crawford & Keen 2020, Lakhani 2021, Namdar et al. [forthcoming]). Despite the growing scholarly attention on radicalisation among youth, research on the demographics of RWE supporters calls for attention on adults, especially among those disseminating conspiratorial narratives (e.g., Fiebig & Koehler 2023, pp. 40-44; Kotonen et al. 2023, pp. 56, 97, 100). In the reports, mental health issues, personal circumstances, polarisation, and social exclusion are increasingly mentioned as contributing to the radicalisation of violent extremism. 3D-printed weapons are predicted to become more common among RWE perpetrators (Supo 2022, CTA 2021, Säpo 2022/2023). Notable however is that the security police reports refer to 3D-printing only after the Halle synagogue attack in Germany in 2019, which was "the first time a terrorist ever used homemade firearms, some with 3D-printed components" (Koehler 2019). RWE individuals participating in the war in Ukraine might also pose a threat in the future (CTA 2021, Supo 2022), with activists having received combat training and potentially access to unlicensed weapons from the warzone.

CONCLUSION

Despite certain differences in focus and timing, the threat of RWE, as understood by the security agencies, has developed in tandem in all Nordic countries. New transnational phenomena, such as accelerationism, have been given increasing attention in the reports. The same also applies to anti-establishment forms of extremism, although those may have been labelled differently in each country, reflecting the conceptual evolution of a new and growing type of extremism. Notable in both cases is that they also direct attention to looser networks and idea formations instead of established organizations.

With social media being one of the key drivers behind this evolution, formal organizations seem to have less relevance than previously. The ideological profile of the perpetrators of violent acts may also appear, referring to a category recently developed in the UK deradicalization programme, as "mixed, unclear, and unstable" (Brace et al. 2023). Nevertheless, the two most recent RWE terrorist attacks in Nordic countries, a mosque shooting in Norway in 2019 and a murder in Sweden 2022, had certain links to formal organizations as well. Furthermore, RWE activists sometimes find formal organizations quite useful. In Finland, the Blue-Black Movement, an openly fascist registered party founded in 2020, has, for example, substantially benefitted from its party status. Taking part in a televised party debate helped them to gain visibility and, as argued by the party members, a political party is also more difficult to proscribe than an association (field notes 28.1.2023).

A RWE landscape with blurred boundaries between individuals, networks, and formal organizations, online and offline activism, and even different ideological components is therefore also a growing concern for the Nordic countries. This presents analytical challenges as well. Based on the reports

analysed in this chapter, at least previously, to some extent they lacked a dimension of foresight and reports may often only be reactive or descriptive, perhaps not serving the purpose of policy planning as fully as hoped. Considering the preventive work, this lack of foresight is also somewhat reflected in that field. There are however differences between countries in this respect; in a recent report on Nordic RWE and preventive strategies and practices, it was noted that Sweden and Norway are “more prone to engage in early prevention”, building wider resilience “before any risks have occurred” (Kotonen et al. 2023, p. 82).

Gunilla Eriksson’s (2016, pp. 190-212) analysis on the knowledge production process and substance of the intelligence products revealed that analysts – and thus the estimates they produce – are heavily influenced by the social discursive practice (social context of intelligence) which prioritises continuity and adherence to established concepts. As a result, assessments often tend to fail to evaluate or reflect on previously published knowledge and instead analysts focus on adding new information that aligns with previously published information. This tendency to seek consensus and continuity in both social contexts and textual practices leads to methodological and analytical choices being left unarticulated and discourages change and new interpretations, downplaying the role of interpretation in deriving analytical conclusions.

Eriksson (2016, pp. 190-212) also observed that the knowledge production process is significantly shaped by an implicit political realist tradition of thought that influences the selection of issues, actors and framing, while prioritising state actors over non-state actors. Furthermore, in intelligence production, assumptions and valuations are presented as facts, while contradictory information is often referred to as an “indication of change” and seen as less credible when challenging the existing discourse.

In our study, we pointed out that, like in academic research (Kotonen et al. 2023), threat assessments are also often too focused within national boundaries, which influences foresight practices – threats are included only when concrete at the national level, although external influences are afterwards used to explain their manifestation (cf. Rostami & Askanius 2021). The transnational dimension is however growingly present in analyses, although the pan-Nordic aspects are often neglected. COVID-19 has drastically changed the RWE landscape, bringing in new actors, as well as breeding new forms of activism which have not been well anticipated, perhaps also partly because of the path-dependencies mentioned above. The war in Ukraine and its possible implications for the RWE environment however are present in all threat assessments. The risks are related to possible arrivals of the growing number of extremists with conflict experience and weapons possibly ending up outside the warzone. Modern technologies for self-made weapons, including 3-D printing, are also referred to, which may cause additional challenges in the future.

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