Recent Trends in German Right-Wing Violence and Terrorism: What are the Contextual Factors behind 'Hive Terrorism'?

by Daniel Koehler

Abstract

Germany experienced in recent years a resurgence of several forms of organized and unorganized extreme right-wing violence, including lone-actor attacks, pogrom-like mass violence or clandestine cells plotting and executing attacks. A new and puzzling development, according to the German authorities, is the increasing involvement of individuals with no previous ties to the extreme right-wing environment, i.e. 'ordinary citizens', in terror plots or severe acts of violence (e.g. arson and explosive attacks). To address this puzzle, this article follows the development of extreme right-wing violence and terrorism in Germany between the detection of the 'National Socialist Underground' (NSU) terrorist cell in 2011 via the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and 2016 to the data currently available in 2018. The goal is not to explore causal pathways to right-wing violence in Germany but to explain the nature of the phenomenon, using the most recent theoretical literature. It is argued that a combination of significant refugee influx, the struggle of the legal system to label severe acts of extreme right-wing violence clearly as terrorism and a subcultural change (i.e. the decreased importance of extreme right-wing political parties in favour of subcultural forms of mobilization) might in theory have resulted in lowering the threshold for contact between 'ordinary' citizens and highly radicalized extremists. In addition, this combination of factors might also have encouraged 'ordinary' citizens to engage in severe acts of extreme right-wing-motivated violence by facilitating the transmission of grievances, opportunities, and polarization.

Keywords: Germany; extreme right-wing terrorism; violence; hive terrorism

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2016, more than one million refugees came to Germany, making it the height of what was called the 'refugee crisis' by the German and European press. At the same time, acts of terrorism and violence motivated by extreme right-wing ideologies surged in Germany. By 2018, numerous trials had resulted in dozens of individuals charged and convicted for crimes motivated by extreme right-wing ideologies, such as attempted murder, explosive attacks, arson or forming criminal and terrorist organizations. This development became visible four years after the detection of the 'National Socialist Underground' (NSU) cell, which was uncovered in 2011 after having engaged for more than a decade in clandestine assassinations and bombings, resulting in one of the longest court trials in German post-Second World War history (from 6 May 2013 to 11 July 2018). In itself, this is nothing new, given the long history in Germany of extreme right-wing violence and terrorism.[1] However, this increase in several forms of right-wing political violence, ranging from lone-actor attacks, through clandestine cells of long-term neo-Nazis plotting explosive attacks and assassinations, to spontaneous attacks arising from anti-immigration grass-roots and street-based mass movements, involved not only individuals who had been long-term members of the extreme right-wing milieu, but also persons with no previous background in extreme right-wing activism.

Recently, the German authorities have started to observe what they found to be a new development within extreme right-wing terrorism. As a result of an intelligence analysis on the biographical backgrounds of 77 individuals, both from 16 groups and including lone actors, involved in the most recent cases of extreme right-wing terrorism or severe violent acts (e.g. arson, attempted and completed homicides, explosives and firearms attacks), the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz - BfV) found that the perpetrators were mostly male (92 percent) and between 30 and 35 years of age, which was not unexpected. However, the sample displayed an unusual mix of long-term and highly radicalized extreme right-wing activists on the one hand, and individuals with no previous ties to the organized extreme right-wing

movement on the other.[2] In fact, the majority of the perpetrators belonged to the second group and were completely unknown to the security agencies before the attacks or their involvement in plots. These attacks were also mostly carried out impulsively, with a distinct lack of preparation and sophistication, leading to tactical errors. The analysis also found an unspecified notion of 'resistance' to be among the main ideological driving factors, and that those persons with a long-term involvement in the extreme right took on leading positions in the plots and attacks.[3]

It therefore appears that, for some reason, more or less ordinary persons without previous ties to extremist groups and movements got caught up in severe, but more or less spontaneous, plots or acts of violence in such a short period that the authorities did not appear to pick up signals that put them up as at high risk of violent radicalization. This development (i.e. the involvement of individuals with no previous ties to extremist groups and networks in severe acts of violence and terrorism) has previously been described as 'hive terrorism'[4] but there has not been an in-depth case study exploring the various potential factors influencing the individuals' involvement. This article therefore closes a theoretical gap by applying the 'hive terrorism' concept to the development of right-wing violence and terrorism in present-day Germany.

A number of violent incidents with an extreme right-wing motive in Germany, involving persons without a known connection to the extreme-right environment, have received wide public attention in recent years. For example, a 48-year-old music teacher committed eight arson attacks against government buildings in Berlin in 2015 before being apprehended. He had left letters claiming responsibility and using the name of a 'German Resistance Movement' (Deutsche Widerstandsbewegung) and blamed pro-immigration politics for the attacks.[5] In February 2015, a government tax employee in Hamburg conducted an arson attack against a refugee home and was convicted; his motive was identified as xenophobia.[6] Another example happened in November 2017, when an unemployed painter attempted to stab to death a pro-immigration mayor, who survived the knife attack.[7] Finally, in March 2018, a 71-year-old woman was sentenced to nine years in prison for two arson attacks in October 2016 and March 2017, one of which caused a fatality. The court determined that her goal was to stage a false flag attack so that an Iranian refugee would be blamed for the fires; the motive was again xenophobia.[8] None of the perpetrators of these incidents had any known contact with established extremist groups or networks. In addition, the German intelligence report cited above (see endnote 2) indicates that that the number of mixed groups (those that include both known right-wing extremists and outsiders) plotting and executing acts of terrorism also seems to have been increasing.

This article aims to explore the most recent cases of extreme right-wing violence and terrorism in Germany (post-NSU detection 2012–2018), using the theoretical concept of 'hive terrorism', as well as contextual developments in Germany. This is done to answer the main question of this article: How can the development by which 'ordinary' citizens come to be involved in severe forms of extreme right-wing violence without previous connections to extremist milieus and groups, i.e. 'hive terrorism', be explained theoretically?

Regarding the main research question, it is argued that a combination of the influx of refugees, the struggle of the legal system to identify and label severe acts of extreme right-wing violence clearly as terrorism and a subcultural change (i.e. the decreased importance of extreme right-wing political parties in favour of subcultural forms of mobilization) has resulted in a significant lowering of the threshold for contact between 'ordinary' citizens and highly radicalized extremists. In addition, this development might have encouraged 'ordinary' citizens to engage in severe acts of extreme right-wing motivated violence by facilitating the transmission of grievances, opportunities, and polarization. These factors have been found crucial for increased levels of extreme right-wing violence and terrorism by Ravndal (see endnote 13). This facilitation was in turn made possible through a critical mix of individuals willing to deploy and accustomed to deploying violence for political aims (i.e. highly radicalized long-term members of the extreme right-wing milieu) with a larger pool of new potential followers who were not at risk of being on the radar of the security agencies.

Methodology, Sources and Definitions

The following analysis is a theoretical reflection about the potential factors involved in the involvement of individuals with no previous ties to the extreme right-wing environment in extreme right-wing terrorism and violence. As a base for this reflection, this article uses case studies of the most recent (2012–2018) entries in the 'Database on Terrorism in Germany (DTG)' by the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS).[9] As the most recent entries are naturally the ones where there is the least extensive information available, the case studies are mainly based on press reports. Government documents, such as for example annual intelligence reports or parliamentary inquiries, were used to complement the existing information. Court documents (i.e. verdicts) were used whenever available to complement the sample. However, as trials focusing on severe crimes (e.g. forming a terrorist or criminal organization) typically take years to be completed and the verdicts are usually appealed, so that there can be more years before the original verdict finally enters into force, or the case has to be tried again, very few verdicts were available for the years since 2012.

This article uses various contested terms, most importantly 'right-wing extremism' and 'terrorism'. As it is not the goal here to discuss the nature and definitions of these terms in detail, the following reflection is based on the Academic Consensus Definition of terrorism by Alex Schmid, which understands terrorism as a:

> doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.[10]

Based on the definition of Heitmeyer[11], 'right-wing extremism' is understood as a combination of ideologies involving acceptance of inequality, on the one hand, and acceptance of violence on the other.

Together, 'extreme right-wing terrorism' as a concept has also been debated, especially in relation to other approaches to understanding the phenomenon, such as (for example) 'hate crimes'. Further, extreme right-wing violent acts can be a tactic of terrorism, but also of non-terrorist political crimes or even be committed by right-wing extremists without a political motive. Hence, the role of violence for right-wing extremists is fluid. [12] As a consequence, the following reflection uses the term 'extreme right-wing terrorism and violence' in accordance with Ravndal[13] to include those acts, although they have not been identified as 'terrorist' by law enforcement or courts in Germany. As will be shown below, relying on the legal classification only would be problematic, and this classification procedure is in itself an aspect of the theoretical explanation for 'hive terrorism' proposed in this study.

Literature Review and the Concept of 'Hive Terrorism'

'Hive terrorism' as a theoretical concept was defined by Koehler[14] as fluid networks centred around shared opposition to democratic government and immigration and mobilizing activists from mainstream society more or less spontaneously for terrorist and other violent acts. The term "hive" points to the continuously changing nature of the group involved, with dynamic and constantly shifting compositions. Thus, the lack of strategic long-term planning or organizational embeddedness of (the majority of) perpetrators is an essential part of 'hive terrorism'. The phenomenon can have two different manifestations: a) 'ordinary' individuals with no ties to extremist groups or persons deciding seemingly spontaneously to use severe forms of violence (e.g. arson, explosives, knife attacks) to fight what they might perceive as an existential threat posed by refugees, minorities, or politicians who are seen as responsible for the threat (usually with a left-wing and pro-immigration agenda); or b) the involvement of 'ordinary' individuals without previous ties to extremist groups or persons in terrorist plots, together with long-term members of the extremist environment. While the first form of hive terrorism is spontaneous and guided by emotions such as fear and panic, the second manifestation might be a conscious and deliberate recruitment and mobilization strategy on the part of extremist groups to involve persons in violent plots and actions who are not at high risk of being known to the authorities. For both manifesta-

tions, an opportunity to interact, either with the physical side of extremist networks (e.g. long-term members, literature, appearances at concerts or demonstrations), or with the psychological aspects of it (e.g. its ideology defining the threat, the enemy, and the proposed violent solutions) seems theoretically to be a necessary condition. This interaction occurs within what was called "radical contrast society" by Koehler[15], defined as "the mechanisms involved within the social system (including infrastructure and ideology) of interaction between Radical Social Movements and their surrounding societies."[16] This theory posits that extremist groups which belong to radical social movements have two social targets: a positive one, which they aim to win over and control, and a negative one, which they aim to destroy. The theory of radical contrast societies is based on various entry and exit points into the radical social movement, where the radical or extremist group interacts with, or 'touches', its positive and negative target societies. These entry points could be, for example, extremist rallies, concerts, literature, or personal interaction with violent extremists. The more fluid and open this sphere of interaction is, the more likely it will be that persons without previous contact with the extremist milieu will end up internalizing its ideology or participating in its activities, without necessarily becoming committed insiders.

There are essentially two ways to approach the search for relevant literature on the phenomenon of 'hive terrorism': first, one could look at literature on individual radicalization processes, to shed light on questions regarding which individuals without ties to extremist milieus become involved in certain acts of ideologically driven violence, or participate in terrorist plots, together with hardened extremists, and why they do so. However, this would require extensive and detailed knowledge about the life history and decision-making processes of the perpetrators in question, which is naturally rarely available since they have not been involved in extremist milieus prior to the incidents. In addition, the scientific basis for risk factors associated with involvement in terrorism is contested, and some authors do not find that there are any significant factors.[17] Second, it would be possible to approach the 'hive terrorism' phenomenon through existing knowledge about the operational and structural characteristics of extreme right-wing terrorist groups and tactics of violence, although this literature is scarce when compared with that on other forms of political violence, especially jihadist violence.

Recently, new efforts by some scholars in Europe and the United States have led to some significant advances in the field.[18] According to Ravndal's seminal study[19], two different factor combinations – of a) high immigration, low electoral support for anti-immigration (radical right) parties, and extensive public repression of radical-right actors and opinions, and of b) socioeconomic hardship, authoritarian legacies, and extensive left-wing terrorism and militancy – facilitate right-wing terrorism and violence. Both combinations contain three main elements: grievances, opportunities, and polarization. As will be shown in the course of this analysis, these three factors can be found in German cases as well and are useful to apply to the 'hive terrorism' concept.

Furthermore, Simi, Windisch and Karyn[20] pointed out the importance of extreme right-wing subcultural scenes for the recruitment and indoctrination of right-wing terrorists, in addition to other factors such as exposure to racist beliefs in the person's upbringing. The role of subculture in extreme right-wing terrorism has also been highlighted in other detailed studies.[21]

At the operational level, several scholars found a strong preference for lone-actor or small-cell tactics by right-wing extremist terrorists. Perliger's[22] dataset, for example, shows that 54 percent of all 4,420 extreme right-wing violent incidents between 1990 and 2012 in the United States of America were committed by single perpetrators, and 20 percent by groups consisting of only two-persons. The Southern Poverty Law Center looked at 63 incidents in the United States between April 2009 and February 2015 and found that 74 percent of the attacks were carried out by lone actors.[23] Additional international studies seem to support that notion. Analyzing 198 lone-actor attacks, Spaaij[24] found that right-wing actors constituted the second largest category (17 percent), next to attacks in which the perpetrator's ideological conviction remains unknown. A similar study of 119 lone actors found that 34 percent had an extreme right-wing background.[25] A subsequent, more detailed, analysis by Gill[26] of 111 European and American lone-actor terrorists showed that right-wing attackers constituted the largest group (39 percent), ahead of al-Qaeda-inspired attackers (34 percent). This holds true in other country-specific studies, for example in Germany, where Koehler[27] showed that lone-actor and small-cell tactics are by far the most widespread organizational form of right-wing terrorism. Hence, it appears that – albeit far from exclusively right-wing – lone-actor and small-cell terrorism are the main modes

of operation for right-wing terrorists. Lone actors and small-cell members, however, usually had at least some previous connection to extreme right-wing groups and were found to have been ideologically or behaviourally influenced by them.[28] Paul Gill, for example, found, that 51.2 percent of his sample of extreme right-wing lone-actor terrorists had face-to-face interactions with members of a wider extreme right-wing network before the attack.[29] This points to the importance of even short-term contact with extremist movement insiders to incite or mobilize outsiders to severe acts of violence.

Manifestations of 'Hive Terrorism'

After the country's reunification, between 1991 and 1994, the involvement of individuals without ties to extremist milieus in what were nevertheless severe acts of extreme right-wing-motivated violence was for the first time observed on a significant scale in Germany. At this time, the fall of the Iron Curtain and civil wars in Yugoslavia and other former Soviet-ruled countries resulted in record numbers of refugees coming to Germany.[30] During that period, 1,499 extreme right-wing-motivated arson attacks were counted by the German authorities over two years. In 60 percent of the cases, the authorities started official investigations, leading to verdicts against 295 individuals between 1990 and 1995.[31] A total of 63.3 percent of the perpetrators had not been previously convicted of any crime, and only 21 percent were known to be active in a right-wing party or skinhead group. In 30.9 percent of the cases, the attack was directly carried out by two persons, in 41.2 percent by three to five persons, and in 15.4 percent by more than 10 persons. A total of 68.5 percent of the perpetrators were intoxicated (mostly with alcohol) during the attack and, in 60 percent of the cases documented by courts, there was almost no time invested in planning or preparing the attack.[32]

The available data on the perpetrators' intent, even given that the attacks were spontaneous and the perpetrators intoxicated, gives a strong indication about the nature of 'hive terrorism': in the majority of cases, the relationship between victim and perpetrator was non-existent or irrelevant, while the main motive was to achieve a high media impact to send a signal to the government and to the hated target group of immigrants.[33] Although the quality of the political message and signal was not sophisticated or embedded in a long-term group-based strategy, the combination of (violent) protest against immigration and an attempt to force refugees to leave the country through fear combines the archetypical elements of the "Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism".[34]

During the second wave of extreme right-wing crimes against refugees between 2015 and 2016 (see Figure 1 in the following section), this pattern changed somewhat. First, tactics diversified and included attacks against politicians, violent clashes with the police protecting refugee shelters, car bombs, explosions and others. Nevertheless, the twofold aim of the attacks stayed the same – to protest against the immigration policies of the government and to force refugees out of the location or threaten other refugees no to come to Germany . Second, although scientific studies about this wave of large-scale extreme right-wing violence do not exist yet, the initial data suggests at least some similarities with the wave of violence in the early 1990s. For example, out of 148 perpetrators identified by the authorities in one preliminary analysis, only 41 (27.7 percent) had been convicted of previous crimes while the majority were not active in any organized right-wing group.[35] The role of intoxication, however, seems to be different. Only 32 perpetrators (21.6 percent) were intoxicated during the attacks.[36] This picture was supported by a subsequent police analysis looking at 228 perpetrators.[37] Only 14 persons had comitted two or more of these attacks, 167 lived in close proximity to the attack sites, the average age was between 20 and 25 and alcohol was very rarely involved. Although about 50 percent of the perpetrators were known to the police from previous crimes, only 33 percent had committed right-wing crimes of any sort before attacking a refugee's home. Although the majority of perpetrators did not participate actively in right-wing extremist organizations before their attacks, most of them did nevertheless display clear right-wing extremist ideologies on social media or otherwise,[38] showing that the ideological motivations behind the attacks might indeed have overlapped with organized extreme right-wing groups and are more serious than, for example, acts of vandalism caused by group pressure or situational dynamics.

These numbers relate to the first aspect of 'hive terrorism', namely acts of extreme right-wing-motivated vio-

lence or terrorism, with no connection to the established extreme-right-wing environment perpetrated by a mob, small groups, or lone actors. The second aspect, involvement of milieu outsiders in terror plots together with milieu insiders, might be a new development of right-wing terrorism in Germany, as pointed out by the previously cited German intelligence analysis from the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV).[39]

As this BfV study is classified and not available to the public beyond some limited press reports about its content, a smaller duplication study was done for this article, using the biographical information of right-wing terrorist actors in the DTG database. All post-2012 entries (after the discovery of the NSU) that either involved an actual act of violence being committed or individuals being charged by the authorities (e.g. with attempted murder, forming a criminal or terrorist organization, crimes involving explosives, or arson) were included. Individuals not yet charged but under investigation, or merely suspected of having plotted an attack, were excluded from the analysis. In total, data on the biographical backgrounds of 55 individuals in 14 DTG entries were assessed, focusing on any known ties to the extreme right-wing milieu before the violent incident or arrest and charges. The sample consisted of seven lone-actor attacks or plots, one group of two, one group of three, two groups of four, one of six, two of eight, and one of thirteen members. Acts of violence committed by these actors include a total of two knife attacks, 10 arson attacks, and eight explosive attacks, mostly against refugees, pro-immigration politicians, and left-wing activists. Of these 55 individuals, 17 (30.9 percent) had no previously known ties to the extreme right-wing milieu. For 13 individuals (23.6 percent), not enough information was available to determine that factor, even though it is likely that a known extreme-right-wing background would have been reported in the press. It is significant that, of the lone-actor attacks, only two individuals had known ties to extreme-right-wing milieus in their pasts, meaning that five (71.4 percent) had no such background. Of the group-based sample entries, one was completely composed of individuals with no known ties to the extremist milieu (a group of three). The sample also included two groups that were charged and convicted of forming a terrorist organization (the so called 'Old School Society' - OSS) with six persons charged and/or convicted, and the 'Freital' group with eight members charged and convicted). While the OSS consisted mainly of long-term right-wing extremists (a female member was the girlfriend of one of them but had no record of previous involvement in the milieu herself), the Freital group's leader was the only one with known previous ties to the organized extreme right.

Of those 17 individuals without ties to extremist milieus, at least nine (52.9 percent) consumed extreme right-wing subcultural products like music and literature and voiced xenophobic or racist views, for example on social media or by taking part in anti-immigration rallies (e.g. PEGIDA - Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident), before the incident or arrest and charges. These anti-immigration rallies seem to be a particularly important space for establishing contacts between individuals with and without ties to the organized extreme-right-wing movement, or served as an effective facilitator of grievances, polarization, and opportunities. In the autumn of 2016, for example, a regular PEGIDA participant without ties to the extreme right-wing milieu was arrested for conducting two bomb attacks against a mosque and conference centre in Dresden and was charged with attempted murder and severe cases of arson.[40] Other cases from the DTG database show the significance of attending PEGIDA rallies and connecting to long-term extremists as well. Of the Freital terrorist organization, at least three of the eight members got in touch with each other and the group's leader via PEGIDA rallies.[41] Another group currently on trial for forming a criminal organization and executing multiple assaults on refugees as well as an explosive attack (the Freie Kameradschaft Dresden) developed in 2015 out of bar meetings between neo-Nazis and PEGIDA participants right after attending in demonstrations.[42]

So far, this article has looked at the individual-level manifestations of 'hive terrorism', namely what is known about the biographies of perpetrators and plotters of extreme right-wing violence during the latest wave of attacks, in comparison to the situation in the early 1990s. Based on this part of the analysis, the potential importance of subcultural products and anti-immigration rallies as a space in which to make contact with more extremist activists was noted. The following section will widen the scope and look at the broader contextual factors.

Contextual Factors and Development of German Right-Wing Violence and Terrorism between 2012 and 2017

'Hive terrorism' theory posits that 'ordinary' individuals with no previous ties to extremist groups and networks either come to participate in terrorist plots together with long-term movement members or decide to use serious forms of violence (e.g. arson, explosives, or knife attacks) on their own. This logically requires a low threshold for contact with long-term extremists and their groups, on the one hand, and/or a lack of deterrence, combined with existential threat perception, on the other. In essence, the factors found by Ravndal[43], namely grievances, opportunity, and polarization, are key to understand the dynamics of 'hive terrorism'. This article argues that the influx of refugees, the struggle of the legal system to label severe acts of extreme right-wing violence clearly as terrorism, and a subcultural change (i.e. the decreased importance of extreme-right-wing political parties in favour of subcultural forms of mobilization) result in these two outcomes (i.e. a low threshold for contact and a lack of deterrence), essentially enabling 'hive terrorism'. This, in turn, directly facilitates grievances, opportunities, and polarization. The following section will identify contextual developments in Germany, partially using proxy indicators, which support these theoretical enablers.

Referring to Ravndal's analysis,[44] Germany seems to belong to the first factor combination: high immigration, low electoral support for anti-immigration (radical right) parties, and extensive public repression of radical right actors and opinions. With the exception of some local state parliament entities for the extreme right-wing NPD party, Germany has a strong tradition of not voting for the extreme right. Right-wing populist and anti-immigration parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland AfD) party, which entered the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) in 2017, might, however, have an impact here. In addition, extreme right-wing forms of expression are criminalized to an unusual degree for a Western democracy. This includes the public display of the swastika or other Nazi symbols. Extreme right-wing associations can be (and are) quickly banned as anti-constitutional in many cases. As will be seen below, the number of refugees coming to Germany also significantly increased in 2015 and 2016, a period dubbed the 'refugee crisis' by the German press.

As the most important data source for this analysis, the German authorities (police and intelligence services) publish annual numbers within its 'politically motivated crimes' framework. Even though these numbers are also contested (mostly by civil society watchdogs regularly criticizing underreported crime levels), they provide a comparatively detailed reference point, based on a coherent definitional system. As Figure 1 shows, the influx of refugees to Germany coincided with a significant increase in anti-refugee housing attacks with an extreme right-wing motive. An overview of the refugee influx to Germany as seen through the annual numbers of asylum applications is provided below (Figure 2). The comparative number of attacks against refugee homes by civil society watchdog organizations includes all recorded crimes, regardless of the perpetrator's motive. These attacks include acts of violence (e.g. arson, use of explosives, stone throwing) as well as extreme right-wing vandalism and propaganda (e.g. swastika graffiti).

This significant increase in refugees coming to Germany in 2015 and 2016 was a highly polarizing event for the German population, as indicated by the widely used term 'refugee crisis'. Right-wing populist parties and grassroots movements capitalized on this polarization. In parts of Germany (e.g. Heidenau, Freital), pogrom-like anti-immigration riots that lasted several days showed the intensity of this polarization. Furthermore, the increased presence of refugees, often placed in specially designated refugee centres, provided the extreme right and anti-immigration movements with an ideal opportunity, i.e. a target, to mobilize against. Grievances based on propaganda portraying refugees as security, economic, or even health threats (e.g. the widely used 'rapefugee' slur) became an essential element of anti-immigration rallies and extreme right-wing mobilization. In addition, the significant gap between overall crimes against refugee homes recorded by civil society organizations in 2017 and extreme-right-wing motivated crimes listed by the police could potentially signal a highly unusual normalization of crimes against refugee homes, if this gap is not the result of different definitions, unidentified perpetrators, or other distorting effects.
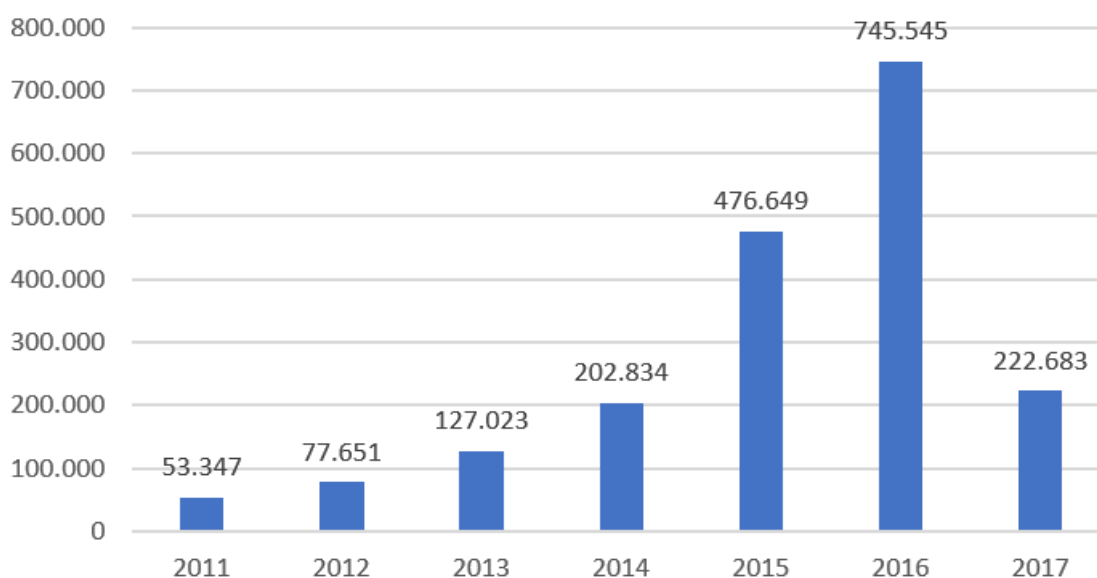
Figure 1

Extreme Right-Wing Motivated Crimes Against Refugee Homes and Centers in Germany
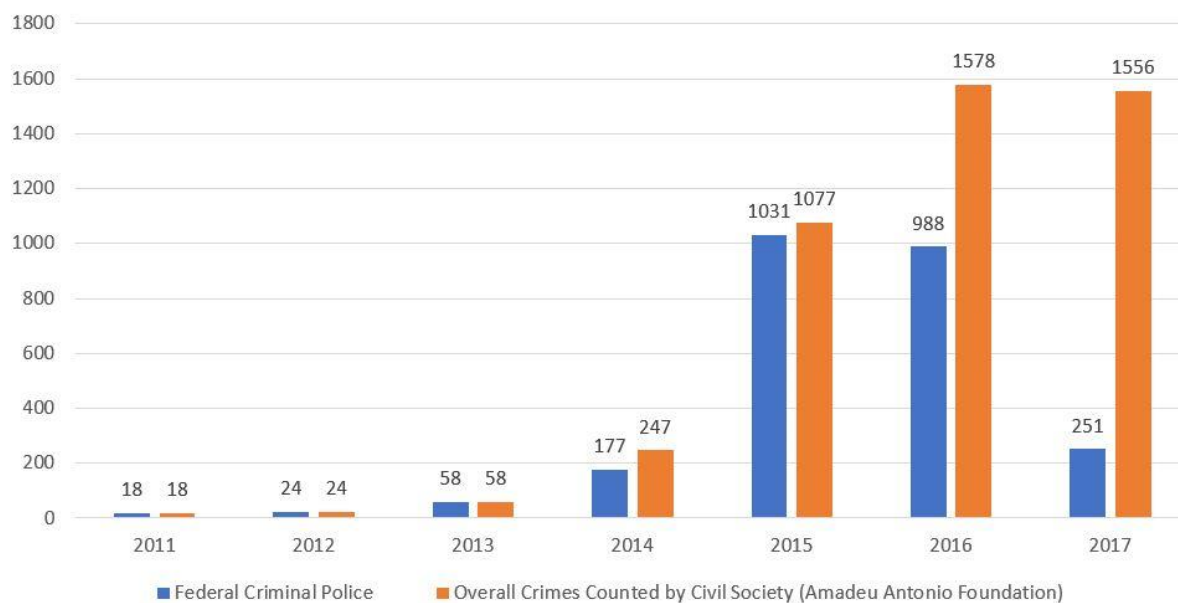
Source: Annual Crime Statistics (Kriminalstatistik) and Amadeu Antonio Foundation

Figure 2

Annual Applications for Asylum in Germany

Source: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees

Germany experienced increases in all types of extreme right-wing violent crimes beyond attacks on refugee centres, during the same time period (2015 and 2016). Attacks using explosives, for example, tripled between 2014 and 2015 (Figure 3). Although extreme right-wing bomb attacks decreased again, the level is still significantly higher than in any year prior to 2015.

Figure 3

XRW Explosive Attacks 2001-2017
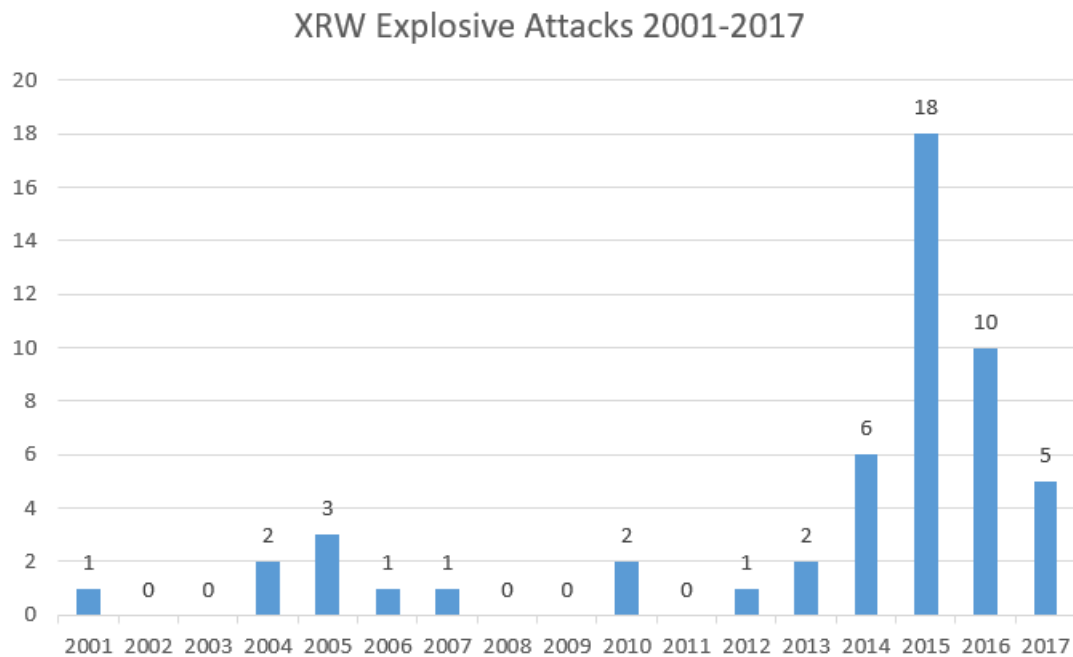
Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

Arson attacks, another form of severe violence with specific terroristic psychological effects, also increased significantly in 2015 and 2016 by about 540 percent compared to 2014. In contrast to explosive attacks, arson did not decrease in 2016 but only in 2017.

Figure 4

XRW Arson Attacks 2001-2017
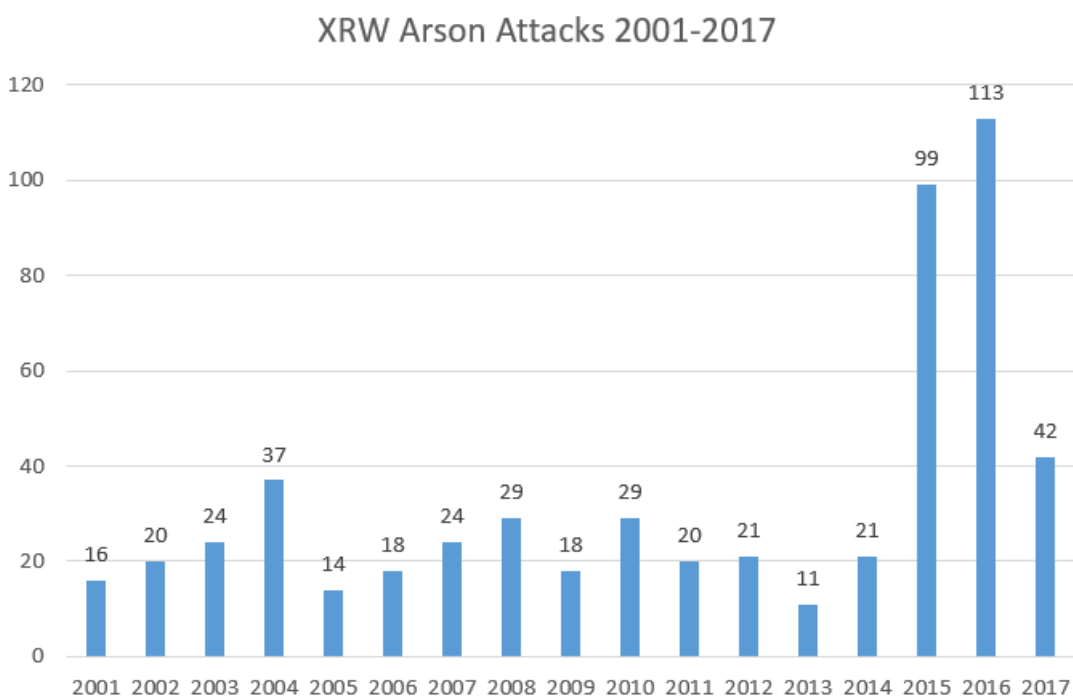
Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

Table 1: Distribution of Extreme Right-Wing Arson and Explosive Attacks by Targets.

	Arson Attacks			Explosive Attacks		
	Overall	Against Refugee Homes	Percent of Overall	Overall	Against Refugee Homes	Percentage of Overall
2015	99	94	94.9%	18	8	44,4%
2016	113	66	58.4%	10	4	40%
2017	42	17	40.48%	5	2	40%

Source: Annual Crime Statistics (Kriminalstatistik) and Annual Intelligence Reports

Breaking down extreme right-wing arson and explosive attacks between 2015 and 2017 into attacks directed against refugee centres and other targets, it becomes clear that arson in particular was used to attack buildings designated as future refugee centres or inhabited by refugees, while explosive attacks were used against more a variety of targets (Table 1). Arson attacks, however, did diversify from 2016 onwards as well.

Finally, extreme-right-wing motivated violent crimes (against all targets) in Germany in recent years display a much stronger variance, and also increased significantly to a 16-year overall record high in 2016, compared with 2001, when the current definition system for the crime statistics was introduced (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**
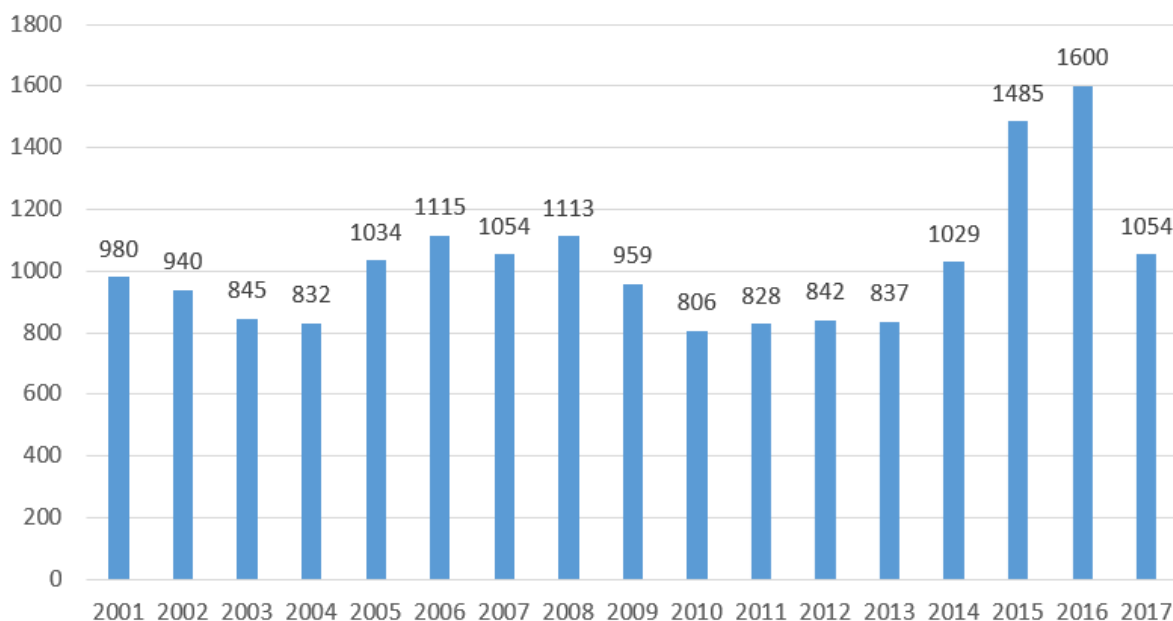
Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

In sum, it is fair to say that a significant increase in refugees coming to Germany between 2014 and 2016 co-incided with an equally significant rise in extreme-right-wing violence and, using attacks involving arson and explosives as proxy indicators, in terrorism. Even though refugee housing accounts for a large share (between 40 and 94 percent) of the targets for these acts of severe violence (i.e. by arson or explosives), one can assume that the refugee influx might have unleashed more potential for violence against many different targets. It may have acted as a catalyst, by providing an ideal mobilization opportunity for extreme right-wing and anti-immigration groups, as well as have intensified perceived grievances among those critical of immigration in what became a highly polarized population. To explore further the proportion of targets of extreme right-wing

violence that have a connection to the so-called refugee crisis beyond attacks against refugee homes (i.e. volunteers, pro-refugee politicians, civil society organizations working with refugees) more data need to be collected.

Numbers of acts of violence motivated by an extremist ideology need to be compared with numbers of judicial proceedings against individuals for extreme right-wing terrorism by the German Federal Prosecutor General (Generalbundesanwalt GBA). These numbers can be used as another proxy indicator to see whether (severe) extreme-right-wing-motivated violence has been perceived as terrorism in the legal system in Germany and labelled as such. Investigations by the GBA, the highest German prosecution office, carry a strong public and political weight, as well as typically receiving substantial press coverage. Being investigated and charged by the GBA in Germany automatically carries the effect of being associated with the most serious forms of crime (e.g. international and domestic terrorism). If they lead to convictions, GBA charges have a high chance of resulting in long-term prison sentences and significant social stigmatization (e.g. of being a 'convicted terrorist'). Especially for individuals without previous criminal records with the authorities or without previous contacts with extremist environments (i.e. 'ordinary citizens'), the effect of GBA investigations and charges could theoretically mean increased consequences following a crime, as well as serve as a significant, morally normative, marker against such actions. However, the real effects of anti-terrorist legislations and any deterrence is disputed. The numbers of initial investigations (Ermittlungsverfahren), charges, verdicts, and closings of proceedings without legal action arising from paragraphs 129, 129a and 129b of the German criminal code (i.e. forming of, or membership in, a criminal or terrorist organization within or outside Germany) have been regularly reported by the German government in parliament, responding to opposition party information requests. Figure 6 shows the numbers for each factor (which does not equal the number of suspects, since each investigation, verdict etc. can encompass multiple persons) over the last 16 years. It is clear that there has been an increase in terrorism investigations and verdicts in parallel to the recent spike in serious extreme-right-wing violence. However, even if keeping in mind that one group could have been responsible for more than one arson or explosive attack, the number of new investigations (four in 2016 and six in 2017) still falls short of the overall level of serious violence. It is also striking that the unusual spike in new investigations in 2012 (15) clearly happened before the so-called refugee crisis began and during a phase of comparatively little violent activity by the extreme right. This number was most likely a reaction to the discovery of the NSU cell in 2011, triggered by political and popular pressure. This is also supported by the fact that almost all of the investigations starting in 2012 have been closed without any further action such as terrorism charges being taken.[45]

Figure 6

Judicial Proceedings on §129, 129a, 129b Criminal Code by Federal Prosecutor General Against Right-Wing Extremists in Germany
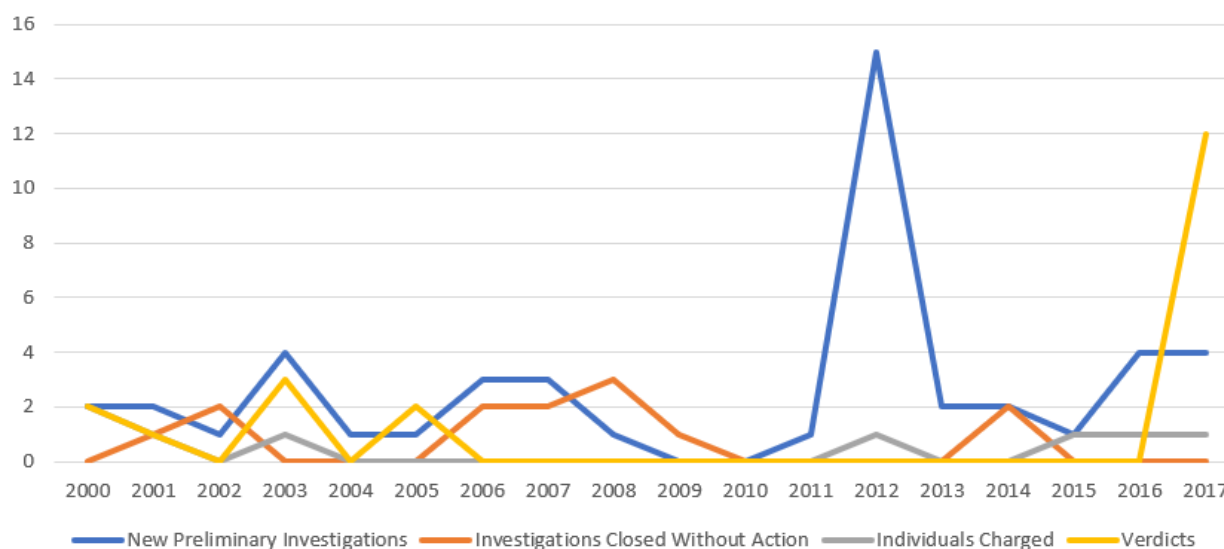
Source: Parliamentary Inquiries and Governmental Replies

The legal definition of what constitutes a criminal or terrorist organization in Germany under paragraph 129 section 2 of the penal code is a "long-term, organised association of more than two persons, independent of the definition of roles of members, the continuity of membership and the development of the structure, for the purpose of pursuing an overriding common interest". This definition was introduced at the end of 2016, as a reaction to a European Union framework decision regarding the legal definitions of criminal and terrorist organizations. The difference regarding the previous German legal understanding of such an organization was the minimum number of persons involved (three) and the focus on the coherence of the structure, as well as subordination of the members' will to the group.[46] Notwithstanding the facts that these crimes are prosecuted under various different criminal statutes and that perpetrators, if identified, are charged and convicted accordingly, the legal label of 'terrorism' seems rarely to be applied to extreme right-wing violence. There could be two main reasons for this: a) the majority of the acts may have been perpetrated by fewer than two or three individuals (old German vs. new EU-based definition), i.e. by lone actors (for which there is a specific statutory provision, §89a, which is associated with exceptionally high evidence thresholds in court[47]); or b) group-based serious acts of violence did not fit the legal understanding of being connected to an 'organization' (e.g. with long-term strategy and organizational hierarchy). Referring back to the discussion on defining terrorism above, research has shown that the legal definition is too narrow to cover the diversity of terrorist actors, and especially fails to cover the fluid and loose nature of some of the network or organizational types used by terrorists.

In addition, the numbers presented above indicate that the legal definition, at least at the start of investigations, is applied inconsistently and in a way that does not reflect the actual level of violence. This leads to the first contextual factor that is possibly contributing to 'hive terrorism': a weak and inconsistent application of anti-terrorism criminal law, based on legal definitions that do not properly reflect the diversity of terrorist organizations. In essence, this might lead to a lack of legal (and thereby psychological) deterrence against extreme-right-wing terrorism through a perceived difference in costs and morally normative stigmatization between extreme-right-wing and other forms of violence and terrorism.

Furthermore, as was shown, for example, by the work of Simi et al.[48] regarding the importance of subculture in recruiting and radicalizing extreme-right-wing terrorists, 'hive terrorism' requires low thresholds for outsiders not in contact with extremist milieus to become involved in violent acts or terrorist plots. In other words, it must be relatively easy to make contact with extremists to become involved in such acts. Barriers to contact could, for example, be simply the lack of opportunity to get in touch with hardened and charismatic extremists or the perception that involvement might mean having to join highly stigmatized organizations that could jeopardize an individual's economic and social standing (e.g. joining an extreme-right-wing party). Proxy indicators for low thresholds for contact between extremist milieu members and outsiders and increased interaction between the two were membership numbers, extreme-right-wing concerts and music events, and rallies and demonstrations. A word of caution, however, must be applied to using concerts and demonstrations as proxy indicators for a low threshold for contact. It is possible that these events, especially extreme-right-wing music concerts, mainly target movement insiders and that, due to the significant stigma events such as extreme-right-wing skinhead concerts carry, they might constitute a deterrent to outsiders interacting with insiders, rather than an opportunity. Rallies and demonstrations might have been organized by, or linked to, official extreme-right-wing parties and, even though by their very nature they have high public visibility, they could also be seen as stigmatizing. Nevertheless, both concerts and demonstrations are undoubtedly among the most important recruitment and political advertisement tools for the extreme right. An increase in the use of these tools might therefore signify a stronger attempt to mobilize and recruit movement outsiders, as well as a potentially higher chance of interaction with sympathizers and would-be followers. The main components of this interaction, according to the 'radical contrast society' theory, are the conveying of key ideological elements and increased motivation to participate in physical activities (e.g. rallies, concerts). Especially at the time of the so-called refugee crisis, extremist groups were very likely to focus on an increase in grievances (e.g. anger against pro-immigration politics, fear of, and hatred against, refugees, the perception of relative deprivation), further polarization (e.g. of those against politicians and activists and those in favour of immigration and supporting refugees) and the provision of opportunities to voice and show dissent (e.g. rallies, acts of violence).

First, the membership ratio between subcultural groups and official parties in the extreme-right-wing milieu clearly indicates a subcultural change in recent years (Figure 7). A continued decrease in membership of traditional extreme-right political parties coincided with a moderate, but steady, increase in membership of subcultural groups. At a minimum, the subcultural milieu was not influenced by the diminishing of political party membership.

Figure 7
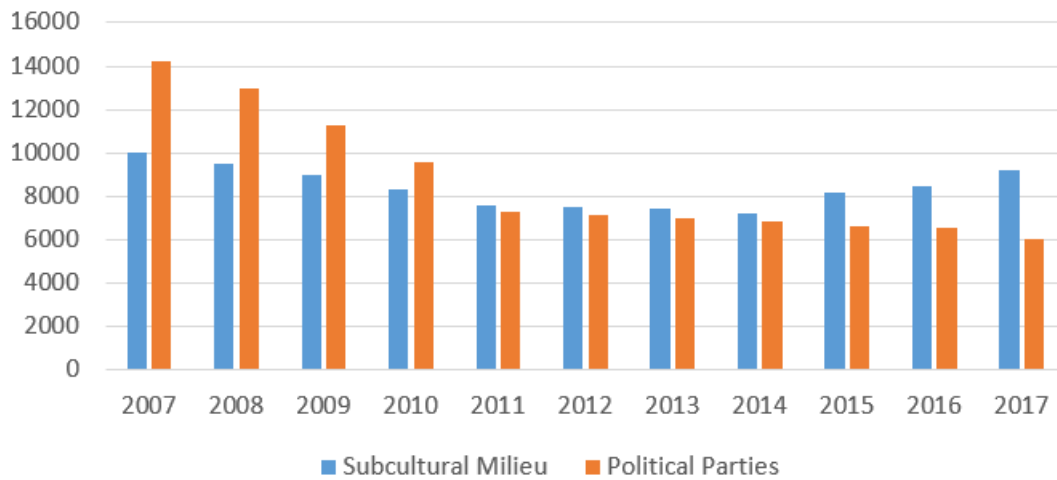
Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

Second, mobilization activities on the extreme-right-wing also surged during the so-called refugee crisis. As Figure 8 shows, extreme-right-wing rallies and demonstrations significantly increased in 2015 and, although they decreased in 2016, they were still more than twice the number in 2014. It can be suspected that many of these rallies and demonstrations evolved around the 'refugee' theme, and might have been more open and accessible than rallies with a clearer extreme-right-wing motive.
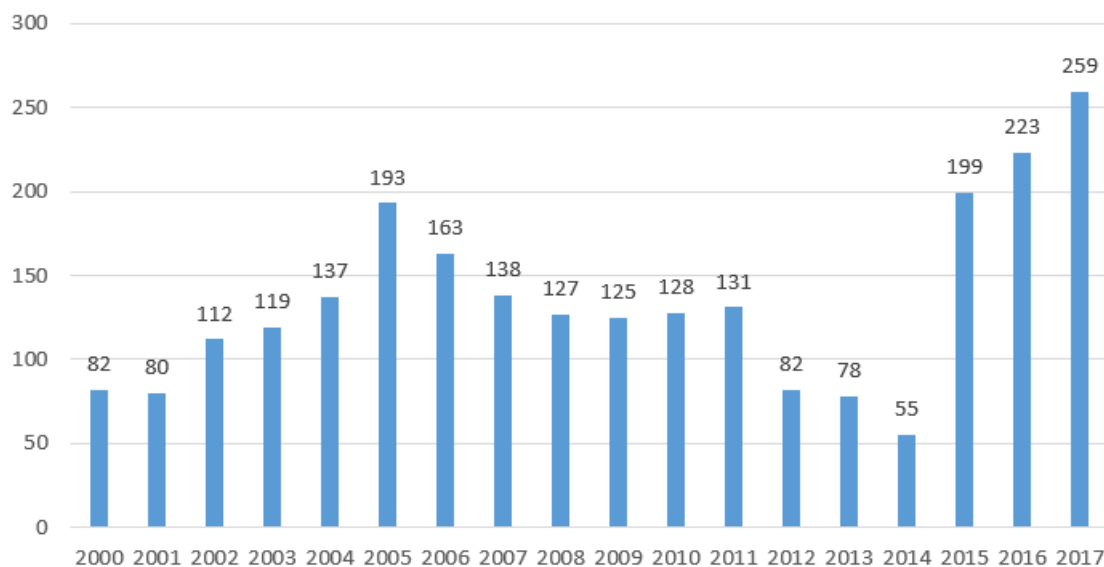
Figure 8
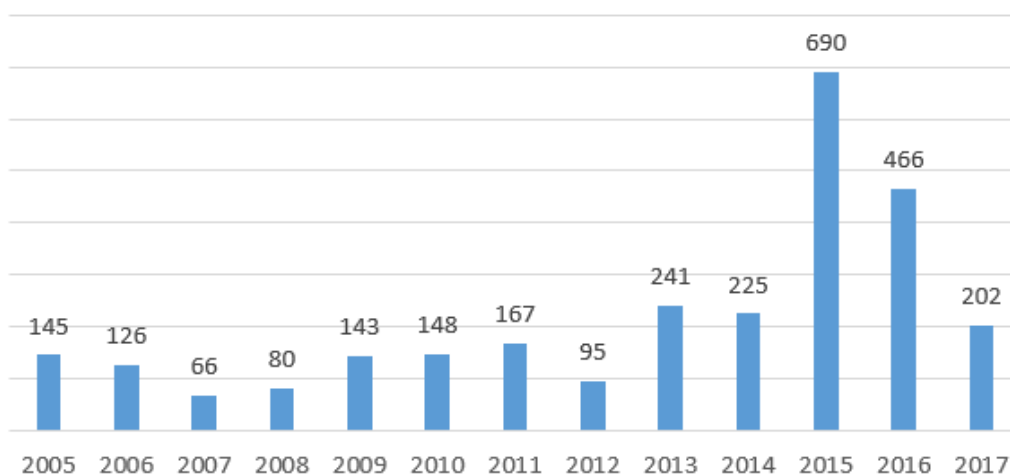
Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

Another key opportunity to interact with outsiders and potentially recruit new members were extreme-right-wing concerts and music events, which also significantly increased between 2015 and 2017 (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Source: Annual Intelligence Reports

Conclusion

Germany has experienced a surge in extreme-right-wing-motivated violence and terrorism in recent years, coinciding with a record number of refugees arriving in the country applying for asylum. This surge in political violence not only brought back traditional right-wing tactics (e.g. long-term members of extremist groups going underground and plotting attacks) but also appears to have led to the phenomenon of individuals without ties to extremist groups either directly committing serious violent acts (e.g. arson, attacks involving explosives) or joining hardened violent extremists in terrorist plots. While the first aspect of this phenomenon, called 'hive terrorism', already occurred to some degree in the Germany of the early 1990s, the second (i.e. mixed groups of plotters with or without ties to extremist networks) is new and makes law enforcement and violence prevention much more difficult.

It has been argued in this article that a combination of significant refugee influx, the struggle of the legal system to label serious acts of extreme right-wing violence clearly as terrorism and a subcultural change (i.e. the decreased importance of extreme-right-wing political parties in favour of subcultural forms of mobilization) has resulted in a significant lowering of the threshold for contacts between 'ordinary' citizens and highly radicalized extremists. In addition, this development has encouraged 'ordinary' citizens to engage in serious acts of extreme-right-wing-motivated violence, namely by facilitating the transmission of grievances, opportunities, and polarization. These three factors were found crucial for increased levels of extreme-right-wing violence and terrorism by Ravndal[49] and also contribute to 'hive terrorism'. However, the explanation presented here is theoretical in nature and aims to explore a new and under-studied topic by applying existing research and theories, as well as to suggest directions for further study. A solid statistical analysis, in combination with more qualitative evidence, is warranted. Although some empirical indications were presented here (e.g. the background of outsiders to extremist movements and some of their pathways into plots, taken from the DTG dataset), more analysis, both on the quantitative and the qualitative level, is necessary. More data will become available in the near future, for example when the court verdicts referred to above, which will include detailed information on the trajectories by which the plotters became radicalized, become accessible to researchers.

Another factor not taken into account here is the influence of right-wing populist parties or rhetoric on 'hive terrorism'. Deliberately using anti-establishment campaigning paired with inflammatory or derogatory rhetoric directed at immigrants, for example, can theoretically facilitate the lowering of thresholds for contact with the extreme right and also lower psychological barriers against using serious forms of violence. Hence, the relationship between right-wing populism and 'hive terrorism' ought to be closely examined in future research.

Furthermore, since this case study looked only at Germany, a closer investigation of the applicability of 'hive terrorism' in other countries and the potentially connected contextual factors discussed here would be an important next step.

Finally, the phenomenon of 'hive terrorism' in Germany points to the potential threat posed by the inflammatory combination of inadequate legal deterrents against extreme-right-wing terrorism (or the insufficient application of existing deterrents), a perceived existential threat, and increased extreme-right-wing subcultural forms of mobilization. This directly supports the notion that countering violent extremism and terrorism is indeed a 'whole of society' endeavour. Law enforcement, the judiciary, civil society, and the political realm must act together to prevent and counter a lowering of the barriers protecting societies from violent extremism. The 'hive terrorism' theory clearly shows, that using law enforcement and intelligence as the main strategy is bound to fail. Especially, when suspects involved in terrorist plots have no previous background in violent extremism, the authorities are very unlikely to detect them in time. In order to reduce the effect of lower contact thresholds between extremist networks and other parts of the society, both a widespread public awareness and a positive democratic culture are necessary.

About the Author: **Daniel Koehler** *is the Founding Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS) and Editor in Chief of the first peer reviewed open access journal on deradicalization (<http://www.journal-derad.com>). In June 2015 Dr. Koehler was named a Fellow of George Washington University's Program on Extremism at the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security. In 2016 he was appointed to be the first court expert on deradicalization in the United States of America at the District Court in Minneapolis. In July 2017 Daniel became a member of the Editorial Board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague.*

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