

# RTV Trend Report 2023

## Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990 - 2022

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## Preface

C-REX and the RTV steering group would like to thank the research assistants involved in the present update of the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset: Cristina Elsa Fernandez Gjelsten and Hedda Stang Lund. In addition, we would like to thank our network of national experts, who have provided country-specific information and assisted the RTV team with assessing difficult cases. A special thanks also goes to RTV steering group member Madeleine Thorstensen for commenting on multiple drafts of this report.

## 2022 Key Point Summary

### The RTV Dataset 2022

#### Total

110 fatal and non-fatal events (attacks, plots, and arms discoveries).

#### Fatal Attacks

4 fatal attacks (2 in France, 1 in Sweden and 1 in Italy) resulting in 6 fatalities.

#### Non-Fatal Attacks

89 non-fatal attacks resulting in at least 125 persons being severely injured.

#### Attack plots

11 attack plots detected across 6 countries.

#### Arms discoveries

6 major bomb- or arms repositories uncovered.

#### Most completed attacks in absolute numbers

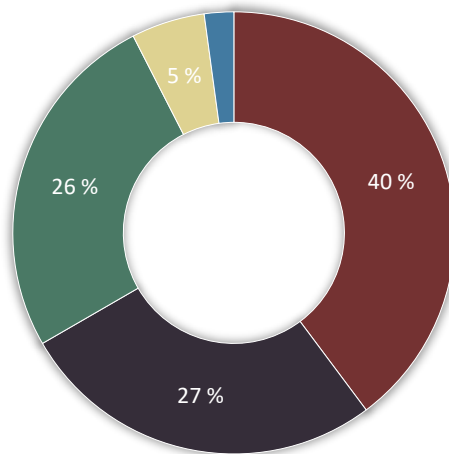
1. Germany (n=30)
2. Italy (n=16)
3. Greece (n=15)
4. United Kingdom (n=12)
5. France (n=9)

#### Most completed attacks per million inhabitants

1. Greece (1,42)
2. Sweden (0,38)
3. Germany (0,36)
4. Italy (0,27)
5. Portugal (0,19)

### The RTV Dataset 1990-2022 in Western Europe

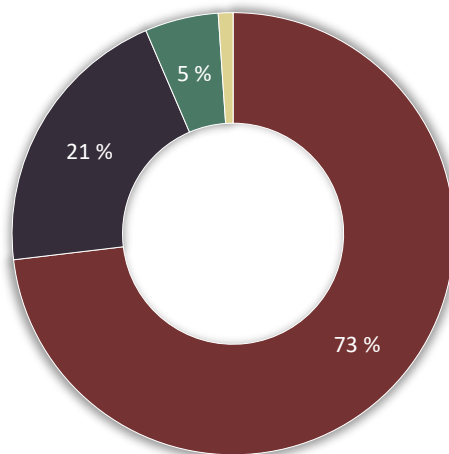
2001 events  
231 fatal attacks  
1577 non-fatal attacks  
114 plots  
79 major arms discoveries



### Completed attacks in 2022 (n=93)

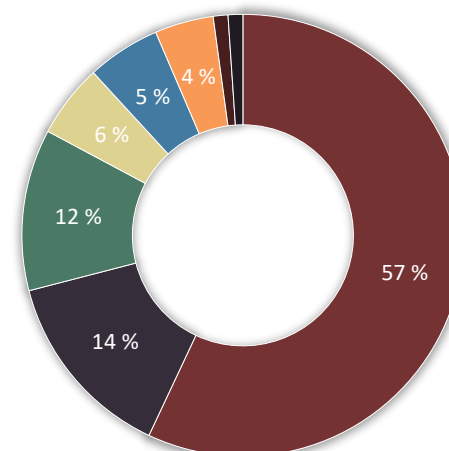
#### Perpetrators

**40%** of the perpetrators acted alone, including in the 4 fatal attacks.  
**27%** of the perpetrators were members, suspected members or affiliated with organized groups.  
**26%** of the perpetrators acted as part of a gang, or an informal or unorganized group.  
**5%** of the perpetrators were unknown.  
**2%** of the perpetrators operated in their professional capacity.



#### Target groups

**73%** of the attacks targeted ethnic and religious minorities, mainly people perceived as immigrants or foreigners.  
**21%** of the attacks targeted political opponents, mainly left-wing and anti-fascists activists.  
**5%** of the attacks targeted state institutions.  
**1%** of the attacks targeted other target groups.



#### Weapons

**57%** of the perpetrators used beating/kicking.  
**14%** of the perpetrators used blunt instruments.  
**12%** of the perpetrators used knives, bladed weapons, or other sharp objects.  
**6%** of the perpetrators used arson or firebombs.  
**5%** of the perpetrators used firearms.  
**4%** of the perpetrators used other types of weapons.  
**1%** of the perpetrators used explosives.

## Contents

List of Tables.....	iv
List of Boxes.....	iv
List of Figures .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Key features of the RTV dataset.....	2
Key findings from 2022 .....	4
1. Fatal attacks and fatalities.....	4
2. Severe, non-fatal attacks.....	7
3. Country comparisons .....	8
4. Perpetrators of far-right violence.....	11
5. Targets of far-right violence .....	14
6. Weapon types.....	17
7. Attack plots.....	20
Selected topics .....	23
Violent anti-government extremism: Plots and attacks against politicians and state institutions .....	23
To what extent should attack plots be taken into consideration when assessing terrorist threats? ....	26
Country case studies .....	31
France: far-right violence in a politically polarized country.....	31
Conclusion .....	36
Appendix 1: Distribution of completed attacks (absolute numbers) per country, 2015-2022.....	38

## List of Tables

Table 1. Plot maturity hierarchy .....	20
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## List of Boxes

Box 1. The RTV dataset .....	2
Box 2. Perpetrator types .....	11
Box 3. Target groups of far-right violence .....	14
Box 4. Weapons used in far-right violence .....	17

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Number of fatal events, 1990-2022 .....	6
Figure 2. Fatalities per fatal attack, 1990-2022 .....	6
Figure 3. Completed non-fatal attacks by type of incident, 2015-2022 .....	7
Figure 4. Absolute numbers of completed attacks by country, yearly average 2015-2021 vs. 2022 .....	8
Figure 5. Completed attacks in absolute and relative numbers by country, 2015-2022 .....	9
Figure 6. Top three countries of fatal attacks per (m) capita, 1991-2022 .....	10
Figure 7. Perpetrators of completed attacks, 2022 .....	12
Figure 8. Perpetrators of fatal attacks, 1991-2022 .....	13
Figure 9. Perpetrators of completed attacks by country, 2022 .....	14
Figure 10. Target groups of completed attacks, 2022 .....	15
Figure 11. Target groups of completed attacks by country, 2022 .....	15
Figure 12. Target groups of fatal attacks, 1991-2022 .....	17
Figure 13. Weapons used in completed attacks, 2022 .....	18
Figure 14. Weapons used in completed attacks by perpetrator type, 2015-2022 .....	19
Figure 15. Weapons used in fatal attacks, 1991-2022 .....	20
Figure 16. Number and maturity of plots, 2015-2022 .....	21
Figure 17. Perpetrators of plots, 2015-2022 .....	21
Figure 18. Target groups in plots, 2015-2022 .....	22
Figure 19. Number of plots by type and country, 2022 .....	22
Figure 20. Plots and attacks targeting political representatives or state institutions, 2015-2022 .....	24
Figure 21. Attacks and plots targeting political representatives or state institutions by country, 2015-2022 .....	25
Figure 22. Attack frequency and target selection in French fatal and non-fatal attacks, 2015-2022 .....	32
Figure 23. Perpetrators of violence against ethnic/religious minorities and political opponents in France, 2015-2022 ...	34

## Introduction

The Right-wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset systematically documents severe right-wing attacks and attack plots in Western Europe. Each year, the dataset is updated by research assistants working at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). Key findings from this update are presented in the annual RTV Trend Report, which presents and compares trends over time and between countries concerning attack frequencies, fatalities, perpetrator types, target groups, weapon types and attack plot characteristics. This year's update covers incidents from 2022.

When it comes to attack frequencies, 2022 was the year with the lowest number of recorded attacks since 2015, which is when our systematic coverage of non-fatal events begins. This finding may come as surprise to those expecting more violence because of Covid-restrictions being lifted in many countries in 2022 and people returning to the streets. However, the finding is in line with a more general decline in levels of violence over time in Western Europe as a whole, as well as in nearly all countries. That said, there is reason to believe that 2015 and the following couple of years were marked by unusually high numbers of attacks due to grievances on the far right in relation to the number of refugees arriving to Western Europe at that time. Furthermore, while the number of fatal attacks has decreased considerably since it peaked during the early 1990s, it appears to have stabilized over the past ten years at a comparatively low level of about four attacks per year, which was also the case in 2022.

With regard to perpetrator types, our findings from 2022 are largely consistent with previous years. While the majority of severe but non-fatal attacks are perpetrated by groups, nearly all fatal attacks are perpetrated by lone actors. All four fatal attacks from 2022 were also committed by lone actors. Furthermore, the share of all completed attacks (fatal and non-fatal) perpetrated by lone actors increased in 2022, being responsible for as much as 40 % of all attacks in 2022 compared to 35 % in 2021 and 28 % in 2020.

The year 2022 was also in line with previous years when it comes to target groups and weapon types. Most attacks targeted ethnic and religious minorities using beating, kicking, blunt instruments and knives. That said, 2022 also saw a small uptick in attacks against state institutions, particularly in Germany, which may reflect a more general surge in anti-government extremism following the pandemic both in Germany and elsewhere.

Finally, the number of detected attack plots declined considerably from 19 in 2021 to 11 in 2022. This sudden decline breaks with a trend of increasing numbers of detected plots over the past three years. Furthermore, of the 11 attack plots that were detected in 2022, as many as five were detected in Germany. This is in line with previous years, as Germany had the highest share of recorded attack plots also in 2021 and in 2020.

The report begins by briefly outlining some key features of the RTV dataset, including its case inclusion criteria, its data sources, and its methodological limitations. Next, we present key findings from this year's update regarding attack frequencies, cross-national variation, targeting, perpetrators, weapons, and plots. We then move on to discuss two selected topics; first, the threat from anti-government extremism; and second, the degree to which attack plots should be taken into consideration when assessing terrorist threats. Finally, we present a case study of far-right violence in France, one of few countries in Western Europe where right-wing terrorism and violence may be on the rise.

## Key features of the RTV dataset

The RTV dataset systematically documents right-wing terrorism and violence in 18 Western European countries since 1990.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this aim, the dataset only includes the most severe completed attacks in addition to attack plots and discoveries of major arms repositories (see Box 1 for more details about the RTV inclusion criteria). The reason for excluding less severe attacks is not that they are considered any less important, but rather that such events are too many to be covered systematically and exhaustively. In fact, even coverage of the most severe attacks can be biased towards certain countries and time periods.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, for events prior to 2015, we strongly advise users of the current version of the RTV dataset to only use fatal events when comparing levels of violence across time or between countries. Such events receive broad news coverage, and we can therefore confidently assume that the RTV dataset covers most, if not all, fatal attacks between 1990 and 2022. However, due to technological and methodological advances over the last few years, our ability to cover non-fatal events has improved considerably. With these improvements, we believe we are approaching sufficient coverage for making inferences also about severe non-fatal events from 2015 onwards. This assumption is supported by a strong correlation (0.92) between fatal and non-fatal events recorded after 2015. For more information about inherent biases in the RTV dataset that may lead to measurement error, please consult our [RTV Error Profile](#).

### Box 1. The RTV dataset

The current version of the RTV dataset covers the period 1990-2022 and contains a total of 2001 events. Of these, 231 were fatal attacks, causing a total of 361 fatalities. In addition, the dataset contains 1577 non-fatal (but severe) completed attacks, 114 attack plots, and 79 major arms discoveries.

Each event included in the RTV dataset is coded on a range of variables, including time and location, perpetrator and victim characteristics, organizational affiliations, weapon types, number of casualties and wounded, and a qualitative description of each event. Detailed information about our coding practices can be found in our [RTV Codebook](#).

While many events included in the RTV dataset satisfy standard definitions of terrorism, we do not explicitly code for whether an attack should be considered as terrorism or not. Such considerations require specific details about the perpetrator's motive, which in many cases are lacking in the source material. However, we do distinguish between premeditated and spontaneous attacks and between different weapon types. Thus, by selecting premeditated attacks using lethal weapons such as explosives, firearms, knives, and vehicles, users may easily identify events that may qualify as terrorism, depending on one's definition of the term.

#### Inclusion criteria

The RTV dataset includes all *severe* attacks and plots whose target selection is premised on a form of *right-wing beliefs* associated with *far-right ideology*.

By "severe", we mean cases in which the perpetrator(s) appear determined or willing to inflict deadly or physically disabling injury on the victim(s). More specifically, to satisfy this criterion, at least one of the

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<sup>1</sup> These 18 countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. For a more detailed introduction to the RTV dataset, see Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Introducing the RTV Dataset", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of coverage and representativity, see our [RTV Methodology](#) and Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Anders Ravik Jupskås, "Methods for Mapping Far Right Violence", in *Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice*, Stephen Ashe et al. (eds) (Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

following three severity thresholds must be met: (1) the attack had a fatal, or near fatal outcome; (2) the perpetrator(s) proactively used potentially lethal weapons, such as knives, heavy blunt instruments, guns, or bombs, including attacks causing minor injuries only; (3) the attack caused major and/or disabling injuries, such as coma, unconsciousness, broken bones or other physical trauma, typically requiring hospitalization or medical treatment.

By “right-wing beliefs”, we mean beliefs that are rooted in anti-egalitarianism. Anti-egalitarianism is understood as a politically right-wing ideology, supported by those who regard social inequality as inevitable, natural, or even desirable.<sup>3</sup> This includes ideas that certain races are superior to other races, that certain ethnic groups are entitled to dominate other ethnic groups in certain territories, or that men are superior to women. However, the dataset only includes violent attacks whose motivation can be linked to a specific form of anti-egalitarianism associated with *far-right* ideology. Besides anti-egalitarianism, the ideological core of the far right consists of exclusionary nationalism (or nativism) and authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> Exclusionary nationalism holds that the nation-state should be inhabited by natives only, and that non-natives are considered a fundamental threat to the survival of the nation. Authoritarianism holds that society should be strictly ordered and that those violating the order should be punished severely. On an individual level, authoritarianism refers to those who have the most extreme preferences for oneness and sameness.<sup>5</sup>

These ideological constructs (anti-egalitarianism, exclusionary nationalism, and authoritarianism) – and beliefs that are strongly associated with them such as racism and conspiratorial thinking – produce a set of political and social groups considered enemies of, and thus legitimate targets for, the far right. Most notably, these target groups include *ethnic minorities, religious minorities, sexual minorities, political opponents, liberal-democratic state institutions, and other marginalized groups*. The RTV dataset includes attacks against these groups in cases where the target selection was indeed premised on far-right beliefs, but excludes for example attacks against sexual minorities committed by religious fundamentalists, since the perpetrators are not driven by exclusionary nationalism. Perpetrators included in the RTV dataset do not necessarily subscribe to a coherent and comprehensive far-right ideology, such as Fascism or Nazism, but often espouse more general racist beliefs.

### Methodology

Each year, the RTV dataset is updated by a team of research assistants working at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) under the supervision of the [RTV Steering Group](#). After the RTV dataset was initially launched in 2015, the methods used for data collection have developed further, thereby improving our coverage of relevant events for the period 2015 onwards. We are also continuously revising and improving our codebook and implementing all coding changes in the dataset. See our [RTV Methodology](#) for a more detailed description of past and current methods.

Cases that have been reviewed but excluded because they do not satisfy the inclusion criteria, or because relevant information is lacking, have since 2020 been saved in an internal “RTV Excluded Cases” dataset. This dataset currently contains 1304 events. See our [RTV Methodology](#) for more information.

### Sources

The RTV dataset is based on open or publicly available sources, predominantly news articles, but also other written material such as court documents, books, and information published by non-governmental organizations and anti-fascist groups. To ensure full coverage of the most important cases, a [network of national experts](#) has also been established. When consulted, our national experts provide country-specific information that assists the RTV team in coding difficult cases and identifying relevant source materials.

### Availability

The full version of the dataset, containing all information except for our source material (excluded to comply with GDPR regulations) is available for download to the public free of charge. The RTV dataset can be downloaded [here](#). You may also explore the RTV dataset visually using our [RTV Map Tool](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Bobbio, Norberto, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Mudde, Cas, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Stenner, Karen, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).



## Key findings from 2022

This section presents key findings from the 2022-update about 1) fatal attacks and fatalities, 2) severe, non-fatal attacks, 3) country comparisons, 4) perpetrator types, 5) target groups, 6) weapon types, and 7) attack plots. Note that we use fatal events only when comparing trends over time prior to 2015.

### 1. Fatal attacks and fatalities

In 2022, we registered four fatal attacks, two in France, one in Sweden, and one in Italy. All four attacks were carried out by lone actors. Three of the attacks resulted in one fatality, whereas one attack in France resulted in three fatalities. This last attack in France and the one from Sweden both appear to qualify for a standard definition of terrorism. In both cases, the perpetrators appear to have intentionally used force to evoke fear and affect a political outcome.<sup>6</sup>

The first fatal attack that may qualify as terrorism occurred in Visby, Sweden on 6 July during an annual political festival on the Swedish island Gotland. Here, a 32-year-old man with links to the national socialist organization The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) stabbed a 64-year-old psychiatry coordinator for the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions in front of multiple witnesses. According to the prosecutor, the perpetrator was planning to commit more murders, including killing the leader of the Centre Party, Annie Lööf, known for her liberal views on immigration. The perpetrator had participated in NRM-demonstrations in the past and, in his own notebook, called himself “Swedish Breivik”. The perpetrator claimed he attacked the victim because she was an easier target than politicians normally surrounded by security personnel, and that he chose to attack at the event to symbolically “attack the whole society”. According to the forensic psychiatric evaluation, the perpetrator suffered from severe mental illness during and after the attack. He was therefore sentenced to psychiatric treatment.<sup>7</sup>

The second fatal attack that may qualify as terrorism occurred on 23 December in Paris, France. A 69-year-old French pensioner killed three people and injured three others in an attack targeting a Kurdish cultural centre, a Kurdish restaurant, and a Kurdish hairdressing salon. The perpetrator first went to Saint-Denis, known to be a racially mixed area in the outskirts of Paris, planning to “kill foreigners” but did not do so allegedly because “no one was around”. He then went back home, walked to the Kurdish cultural centre located close by, and shot the victims using an illegally obtained Colt 45mm handgun. All victims were of Kurdish ethnicity. The perpetrator admitted that the attack was racially motivated and declared that he “didn't like the Kurds”. In 2021, the same perpetrator carried out an attack on a migrant camp primarily inhabited by men of Sudanese origin, injuring two migrants using a machete.

A third fatal attack occurred in Paris on 14 May. In this attack, a 50-year-old man known for his adherence to far-right beliefs and conspiracies killed a 27-year-old man of Moroccan and Spanish origin. Before the fatal attack, the perpetrator had stopped and gotten out of his car after

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<sup>6</sup> Terrorism can be defined as “the intentional use or threat of force by a nonstate actor to evoke fear in a population to affect a political outcome”. See Chenoweth, Erica, and Pauline L. Moore. *The Politics of Terror*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> The RTV dataset purposefully includes attacks carried out by mentally disturbed perpetrators if the target selection is indeed premised on far-right beliefs. The reason is that the threat against targets of far-right terrorism and violence remains the same, regardless of the mental profile of those attacking them.

witnessing a street fight. The victim, who was part of the fight, told the perpetrator to go away. The perpetrator responded by pulling out his gun and shooting the victim in the head, causing instant death. The perpetrator had praised racist violence online only hours prior to the incident, posted videos titled “Unwanted immigration” and “Save France”, and had previously intervened in a TV show to spew conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and health policy.

The fourth fatal attack occurred on 2 November in Genoa, Italy, where a 63-year-old man killed a 41-year-old Peruvian man using a bow and an arrow. The victim was watching a football match with a friend at a bar near his house, celebrating the birth of his second son. The perpetrator first shouted at them from the window of his apartment and ordered them to stop talking loudly, before racially insulting them with phrases like “go away dirty immigrants” and “dirty foreigners”. The perpetrator then grabbed his bow and arrow and shot from the window, hitting the victim on the side. After the shot, the perpetrator shouted, “I told you”. Thereafter, the perpetrator went down to the victim and tried to remove and collect the arrow from his body, making the situation worse by doing so. The victim later died at the hospital.

These four fatal attacks fall in line with several trends that we have commented on in previous trend reports. First, they were all committed by lone actors. In fact, the last fatal attack committed by a *group* in Western Europe happened in 2019. Second, most fatal attacks from recent years are committed by older men, which was also the case in three of the four fatal attacks from 2022, whose perpetrators were 50, 63 and 69 years old. This contrasts with much media reporting about the terrorist threat from the far-right, often pointing to young boys or men radicalized in online spaces as a primary threat. Third, a larger share of fatal attacks is being committed using firearms. This was also the case in two of the four fatal attacks from 2022, both of which occurred in France. In addition, one attack was committed using a bow-and-arrow, which, just like firearms, enables attacks from a distance.

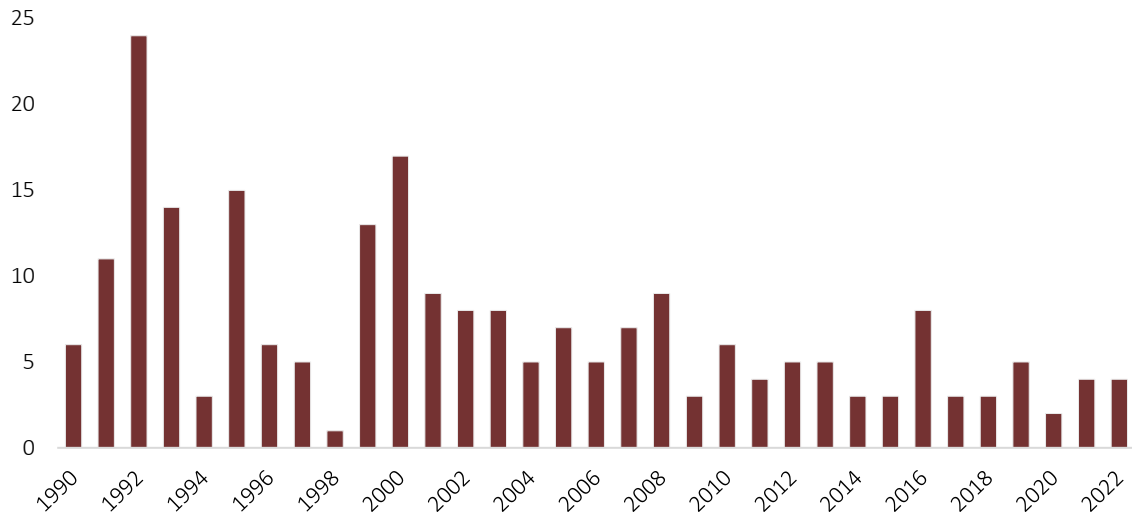
### **Fatal attacks over time**

With four fatal attacks, 2022 matches 2021 and fits into a decade-long trend of comparatively low and stable numbers of fatal attacks in Western Europe, as illustrated by Figure 1.<sup>8</sup> In fact, since 2010, both the average and the median number of fatal attacks per year has been four.

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<sup>8</sup> Note that we in last year’s trend report only reported two fatal attacks for 2021. This number has now been adjusted to four following new information received after last year’s report was published. Both of these attacks occurred in the United Kingdom and were committed by lone actors.

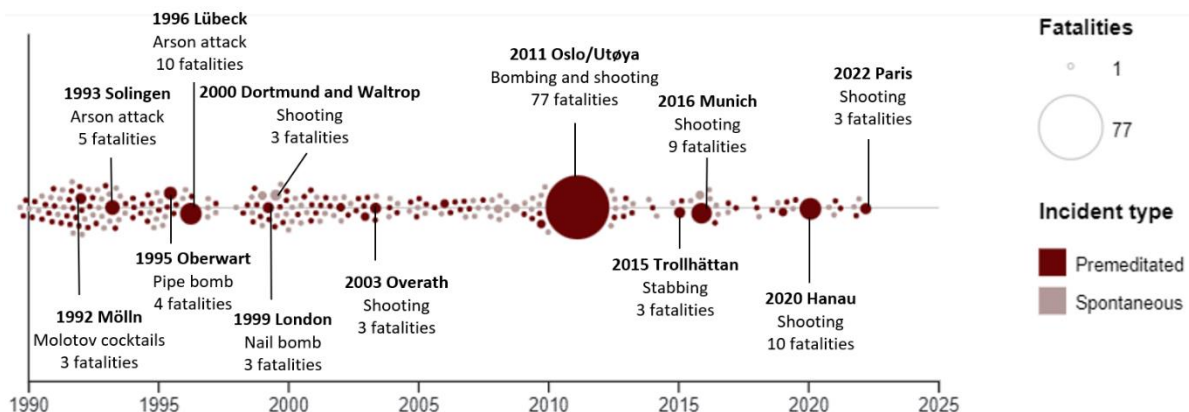
Figure 1. Number of fatal events, 1990-2022 (n=231)



### Fatalities over time

Furthermore, with six persons killed, 2022 is also in line with the average number of fatalities from the past 10 years, which is six. Figure 2 illustrates the number of fatalities per fatal attack in Western Europe since 1990. Each circle represents a fatal attack, and the circle size indicates the number of persons killed in each attack. The annotations highlight all fatal attacks resulting in three or more fatalities.

Figure 2. Fatalities per fatal attack, 1990-2022 (n=231)



As Figure 2 shows, while the frequency of fatal attacks has dropped considerably since the 1990s and 2010s in Western Europe, the number of fatalities per attack has increased since 2010 due to a handful of mass-casualty attacks, most notably the 22 July from 2011, resulting in as many as 77 fatalities. The second Paris-shooting from 2022, which resulted in three fatalities, fits into this trend as the perpetrator aimed to kill many foreigners at multiple locations. The perpetrator from the 2022-killing in Sweden apparently also had plans of killing more than one victim. That said,

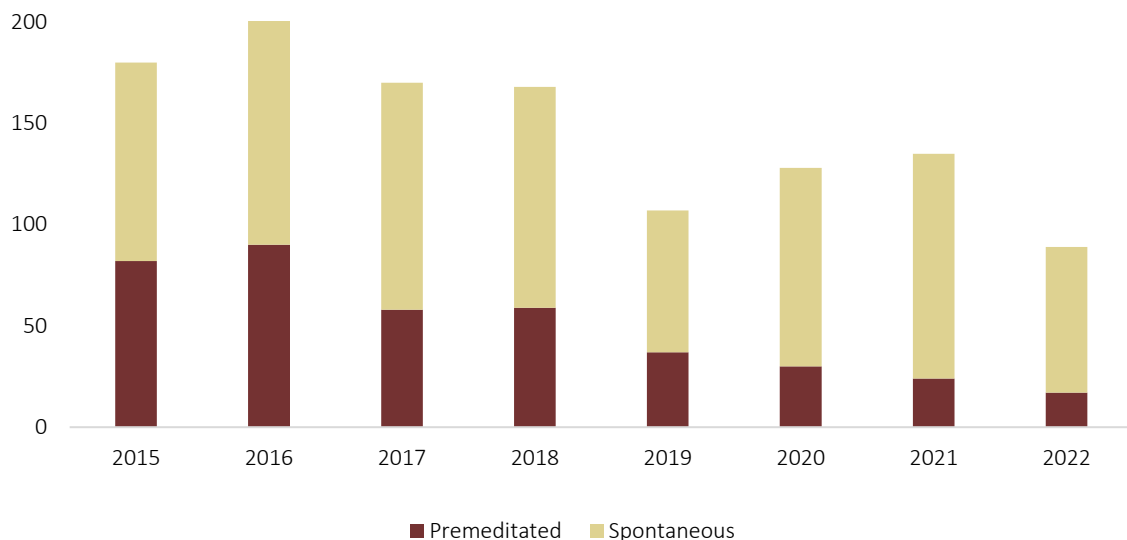
mass-casualty attacks committed by far-right actors remain relatively rare in Western Europe, also when compared to the frequency of such attacks in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Severe, non-fatal attacks

In 2022, we registered 89 severe but non-fatal attacks, making 2022 the first year (since we implemented our new coding methodology in 2015) with less than 100 such attacks. Thus, in line with the overall trend of declining numbers of fatal attacks per year over time, we also find that the number of severe but non-fatal attacks has been declining since 2015, with a notable peak of 205 non-fatal attacks in 2016 – a year marked by high levels of refugees arriving to Europe, generating anti-immigrant sentiment in parts of the populations.

Furthermore, we find that this decline is mainly driven by a significant decline in premeditated attacks, as illustrated by Figure 3 (although spontaneous attacks declined more than premeditated attacks between 2021 to 2022). Consequently, the most common right-wing violent threat in Western Europe today comes from spontaneous attacks.

Figure 3. Completed non-fatal attacks by type of incident, 2015-2022 (n=1182)



While a large majority of the 89 non-fatal attacks from 2022 resulted in one or two persons being injured (n=74), some attacks resulted in three (n=5), four (n=2) and even six (n=2) persons being injured.<sup>10</sup> For example, on the Greek island of Lesbos, 22 migrants who had arrived on the island illegally were approached by a group of seven or eight people falsely claiming they were doctors and that they had food. Then, they started beating and handcuffing the migrants. Four of the victims were hospitalized as a result of the beating.

In another attack that occurred in Paris, France, two journalists and their two security guards were attacked by a group of 20 to 50 people who participated in a protest against the COVID-19 pass,

<sup>9</sup> See Chermak, Steven, Joshua D. Freilich, William S. Parkin, Jeff Gruenewald, Colleen Mills, Brent Klein, Leevia Dillon, and Celine Duran. "Far-right extremist violence in the United States," pp. 311, in Perry, Barbara; Scrivens, Ryan; Gruenewald, Jeff. *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Six non-fatal attacks did not result in any people getting injured but were still included because a potential for severe injury was clearly present.

organized by the far-right movement “Patriots” (Les Patriotes) of pro-Frexit presidential candidate Philippot. A protester with a balaclava and a megaphone insulted and shouted death threats towards the victims, who were covering the protest, before inciting a group to detach from the protest and attack the victims. The journalists and their security guards were subsequently beaten, and two of them were hit with batons and on the head with a glass bottle.

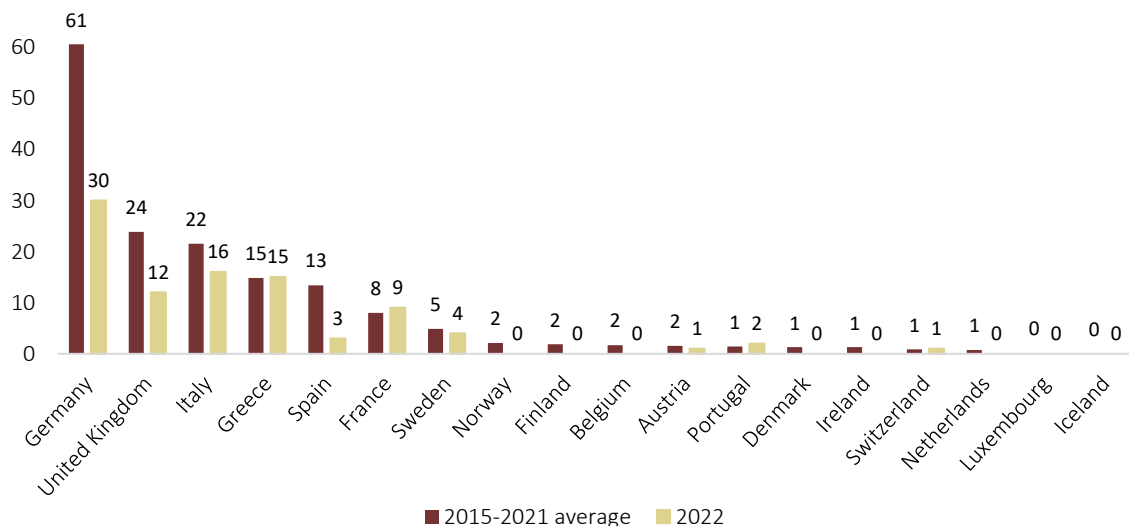
In Rome, Italy, as many as six police officers were injured during the evacuation of a building that was illegally occupied by the far-right organization CasaPound. Upon arriving at the building, the police officers were attacked by CasaPound members who were trying to stop the evacuation by throwing paper bombs, by physically attacking the officers, and by setting fire to trash cans.

A common denominator for these attacks, besides resulting in multiple people being injured, is that the perpetrators were acting as a group, and in some cases on behalf of organized far-right groups. As we describe more in detail when discussing perpetrator types further below, most attacks committed by far-right actors are group-based. Before that, however, the next section compares attack frequencies between countries.

### 3. Country comparisons

Although some general trends in right-wing terrorism and violence may be derived from Western Europe as a whole, cross-national comparisons reveal substantial variation between countries when it comes to attack frequencies, perpetrator types, and targeting. While Figure 4 shows the absolute number of all completed attacks (fatal and non-fatal) in each country, Figures 5 and 6 show the relative number of completed attacks per million inhabitants in each country.

Figure 4. Absolute numbers of completed attacks by country, yearly average 2015-2021 vs. 2022 (n=1214)

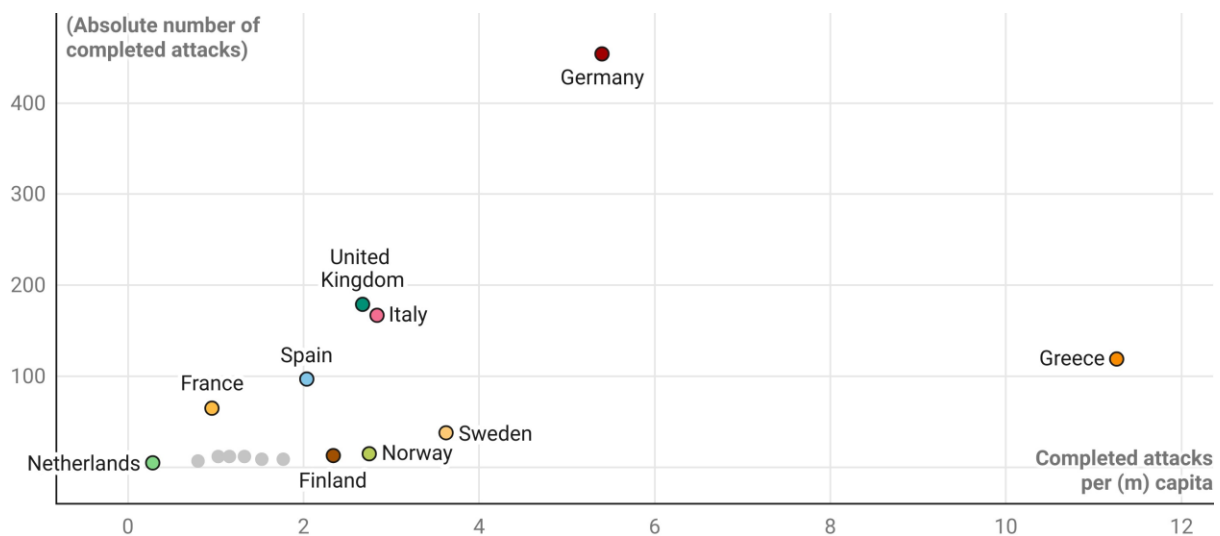


As Figure 4 shows, most countries experienced fewer attacks in 2022 compared to their average from the 2015-2021 period. Only France and Portugal experienced a slight uptick, with one more attack recorded in 2022 compared to their own average from the past seven years.

As expected, Germany stands out with the highest absolute number of completed attacks, with 30 completed attacks in 2022. However, compared to Germany's average of 61 completed attacks per year between 2015 and 2021, 2022 was a substantially less violent year for Germany.

When controlling for population size, the cross-national ranking alters, as shown by Figure 5. Note that Figure 5 shows the total number of completed attacks per million inhabitants not for 2022, but for the entire period between 2015 and 2022. The reason for doing so is that the number of attacks for one year is too low in many countries to make meaningful comparisons of such relative numbers. The X-axis (horizontal) corresponds to completed attacks per (m) capita, and the Y-axis (vertical) corresponds to the absolute number of completed attacks. This means that the further a country is positioned toward the upper right corner, the more violence it has experienced on both these measures.

Figure 5. Completed attacks in absolute and relative numbers by country, 2015-2022 (n=1214)

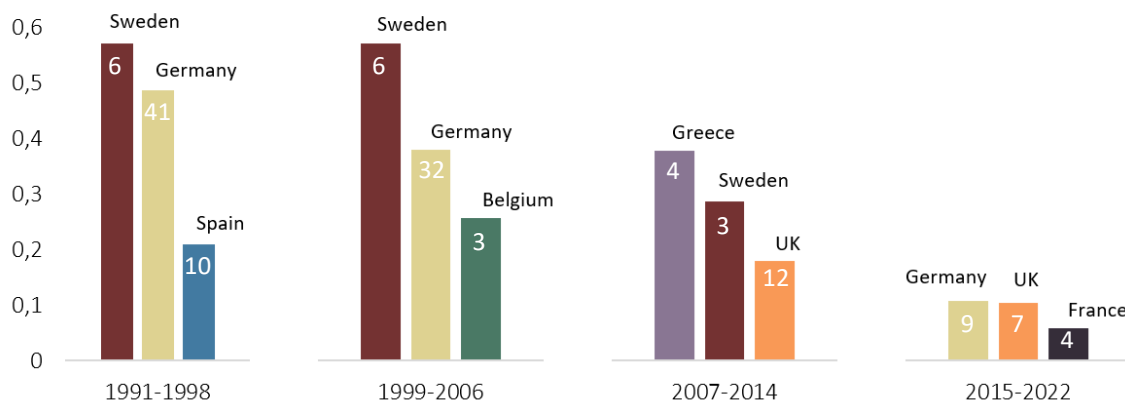


As we can see, Greece by far exceeds any other country in Western Europe when controlling for population size. This is partly a result of a relatively high number of completed attacks in Greece between 2015 and 2022 (n=119), but also of Greece's relatively small population (approximately 10 million). When interpreting this figure, one should therefore be mindful about the effect from population size on this measure. For instance, Norway receives a relatively high score of completed attacks per (m) capita despite a fairly low number of absolute attacks during this period (n=15) because of its small population (approximately five million). By contrast, France receives a relatively low score despite a considerable number of attacks during this period (n=65) because of its large population (approximately 65 million).<sup>11</sup>

Looking further back in time, and counting fatal attacks only, Figure 6 shows the countries with the highest count of fatal attacks per million inhabitants over four eight-year periods.

<sup>11</sup> Countries with very low population size such as Iceland (approximately 0,4 million) and Luxemburg (approximately 0,6 million) are excluded from this measure.

Figure 6. Top three countries of fatal attacks per (m) capita, 1991-2022 (n=225)



Note: Countries with two or less fatal attacks over an eight-year period are excluded from this figure to avoid disproportionate scores for countries with smaller populations. The absolute number of fatal attacks for each country is provided inside each column.

By jointly considering the scores provided by Figures 5 and 6, several observations can be made. One is that Germany scores high on all measures and nearly all periods, both for fatal and non-fatal attacks, even when controlling for its large population size (approximately 83 million). This shows that Germany is the country in Western Europe experiencing the most persistent threat of violence from the far right. That said, Germany's per capita score has reduced considerably over time, as has the absolute number of attacks in Germany, both fatal and non-fatal.<sup>12</sup>

A second observation is that Sweden scores remarkably high on the initial three eight-year periods in Figure 6, but then disappears from the ranking for the 2015-2022 period. While ranking third in Figure 5 on the number of completed attacks between 2015 and 2022, Sweden is still positioned rather far from Germany and Greece in this figure, and closer to the cluster of remaining countries. Seen together, this suggests that Sweden has experienced a notable decline in levels of violence over time, shifting from being the country in Western Europe with the highest score of fatal attacks per million capita, to being positioned closer to the middle together with its neighbouring countries.

A third observation is that the UK is among the top three countries in Figure 6 for the two most recent periods. While falling further behind in Figure 5, the UK still ranks second in this figure on the absolute number of attacks between 2015 and 2022. Similarly, the UK did indeed experience a substantial number of fatal attacks during the initial two periods from Figure 6, with 12 fatal attacks between 1991 and 1998, and eight fatal attack between 1999 and 2006. Thus, while not being in a top position when controlling for population size, the UK still faces a rather persistent and considerable threat of severe violence from the far right.

A final observation is that France assumes opposite positions for the 2015-2022 period in Figures 5 and 6. In Figure 5, France is among the countries with the lowest score on the number of completed attacks (fatal and non-fatal) per million capita. Yet in Figure 6, France is among the top

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1 for an overview of the number of all completed attacks per year in all West European countries between 2015 and 2022.

three countries for the 2015-2022 period with four fatal attacks, two of which occurred in 2022. Furthermore, when looking more closely at the number of completed attacks per year, France is one of few countries in Western Europe whose number of completed attacks has in fact *increased* between 2015 and 2022.<sup>13</sup> Could France be facing an increasing threat of violence from the far right while most other countries are experiencing a decline? If so, why? To provide answers to these questions, we offer a case study of France towards the end of this report.

#### 4. Perpetrators of far-right violence

The RTV dataset distinguishes between 10 different perpetrator types according to their type of commitment, degree of organization, and the number of people involved. A brief description of each perpetrator type is presented in Box 2.<sup>14</sup>

Box 2. Perpetrator types	
<i>Organized groups</i>	Known entities with five or more members whose association primarily relies on a strong commitment to far-right politics.
<i>Affiliated members</i>	Two or more members of organised groups acting on their own initiative.
<i>Autonomous cells</i>	Clandestine entities of two to four members whose association primarily relies on a strong commitment to far-right politics.
<i>Gangs/informal groups</i>	Three or more acquaintances with a general far-right commitment, but whose association primarily relies on social bonds.
<i>Unorganized groups</i>	Two or more perpetrators with unknown or no association to any specific far-right group, cell, or gang.
<i>Lone actors</i>	Single perpetrators who prepare and carry out attacks alone at their own initiative.
<i>Shadow groups</i>	Attacks claimed by formerly unknown groups.
<i>Coordinated entities</i>	Constellations of two or more people with a suspected far-right affiliation acting in a coordinated manner, but where information about their specific organizational affiliation is missing.
<i>Professional entities</i>	One or more perpetrators operating in capacity of their professional affiliation, typically the police, military, or private security firms.
<i>Unknown</i>	Unidentified perpetrator(s), but where targeting or other factors strongly indicate a far-right motivation.

Figure 7 illustrates the types of perpetrators behind completed attacks in 2022. Note that we have merged the types “organized groups”, “affiliated members” and “coordinated entities” into one category named “Organized groups and their affiliates”. This is to give a clearer impression of the share of attacks most likely committed by organized members of the far right. Similarly, we have merged the types “gangs/informal groups” and “unorganized” into one category named “Gangs

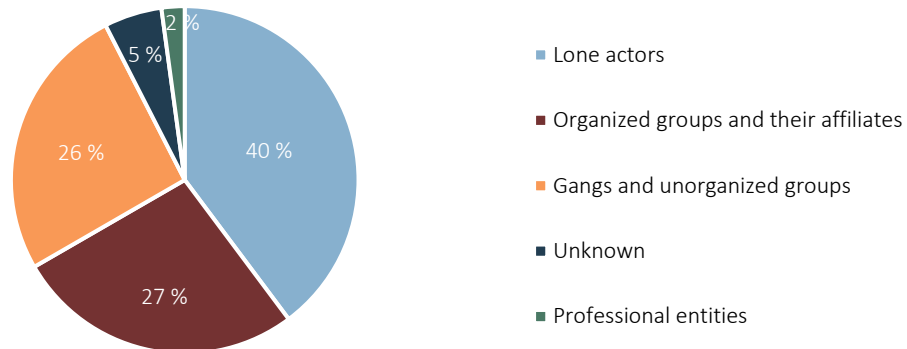
<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 1 for an overview of the number of all completed attacks per year in all West European countries between 2015 and 2022.

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the classification of perpetrators, see Appendix 2 in the [RTV Codebook](#).



and unorganized groups” to give a clearer impression of the share of attacks committed by groups with a less formal, or even no organization.

Figure 7. Perpetrators of completed attacks, 2022 (n=93)



As Figure 7 shows, organized and unorganized group-based violence jointly account for more than half (n=49) of all attacks. Most of this group-based violence from 2022 was of spontaneous nature (n=42). For example, in Chemnitz, Germany, the 47-year-old General Director of the Chemnitz Art Collections confronted a group of young neo-Nazis aged between 15 and 20 performing Nazi salutes and shouting "Sieg Heil" and was subsequently beaten and kicked.

In Basingstoke, England, a 33-year-old man was subject to an unprovoked and racially aggravated assault by three boys, aged 16 or 17, while he was out running. The victim was approached by one of the perpetrators riding an e-scooter who slapped him in the face while passing. The victim chased after the three perpetrators who were all riding e-scooters. When he caught up with them, all three attacked the victim, punching him repeatedly and hitting him with what has been described as a walking stick or something similar. During the assault one of the teenagers shouted racial abuse at the victim. The victim suffered bruising to his head, legs, arms, and shoulders.

In Athens, Greece, a 23-year-old migrant and farm worker was brutally beaten by a group of nationalists, numbering six to seven people. The victim was surrounded by the perpetrators, who asked "Where are you from?" Upon replying "Muslim Pakistan", the group immediately started beating him using fists and brass knuckles, threw him on the ground, and kicked him. The victim suffered head, knee, and shoulder injuries and was hospitalized.

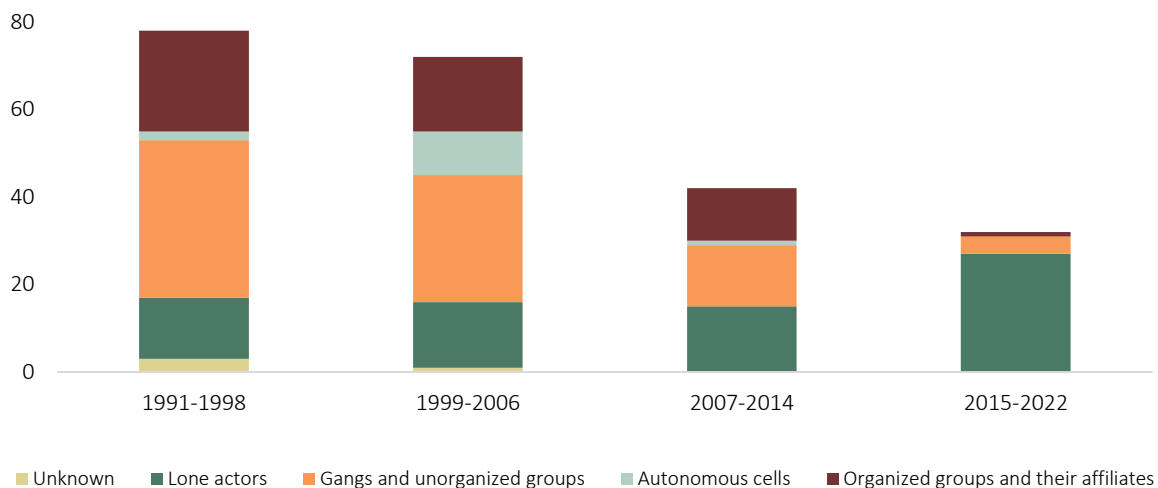
Although group-based attacks jointly account for more than half of all completed attacks, lone actors were behind as much as 40 % of all completed attacks in 2022, which is a notable increase from 35 % in 2021 and 28 % in 2020. However, the nature of these lone actor attacks varies considerably. In one case from Kristianstad, Sweden for example, a 16-year-old boy stepped into his school with a bag containing four knives and attacked a teacher and a student. The teacher's injuries were described as milder, while the student's injuries were described as severe, caused by kicking and stabbing. The attack was labelled attempted murder, and the perpetrator allegedly left a manifesto which included references to Nordic mythology, refugee policy and crime in Sweden.

In Thüringen, Germany, a 71-year-old man attacked an 8-year-old Iraqi child in the changing rooms of a swimming facility. The perpetrator first shouted xenophobic insults to the child before pushing and kicking him. The severity threshold for our inclusion of this case was lowered due to the targeting of children, in line with the RTV codebook.

A final example illustrating the heterogeneity of these lone actor attacks comes from Berlin, Germany, where a 40-year-old woman was arrested for attempted arson on a 39-year-old neighbour and his family of Syrian-Tunisian-German origin's house. The victim called the fire brigade at 4 AM after discovering the fire on the terrace, which had damaged doors and windows. The perpetrator had racially insulted the family multiple times before.

Lone actors were also behind all fatal attacks from 2022.<sup>15</sup> In fact, since 2015, all but four fatal attacks (n=32) have been committed by lone actors, as illustrated by Figure 8.<sup>16</sup> This means that both organized and unorganized groups have more or less disappeared as perpetrators of fatal attacks since their peak during the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet they remain the largest threat when it comes to non-fatal, severe day-to-day violence.

Figure 8. Perpetrators of fatal attacks, 1991-2022 (n=224)



By implication, we are facing two qualitatively different types of violent threats from the far-right in Western Europe today. On the one hand, most fatal attacks are committed by lone actors, in some cases trying to commit spectacular mass-casualty attacks. On the other hand, most non-fatal attacks, which constitutes the overwhelming majority of all RTV attacks, are committed by various group-constellations, are typically spontaneous in nature, and only rarely injure more than one or two persons.

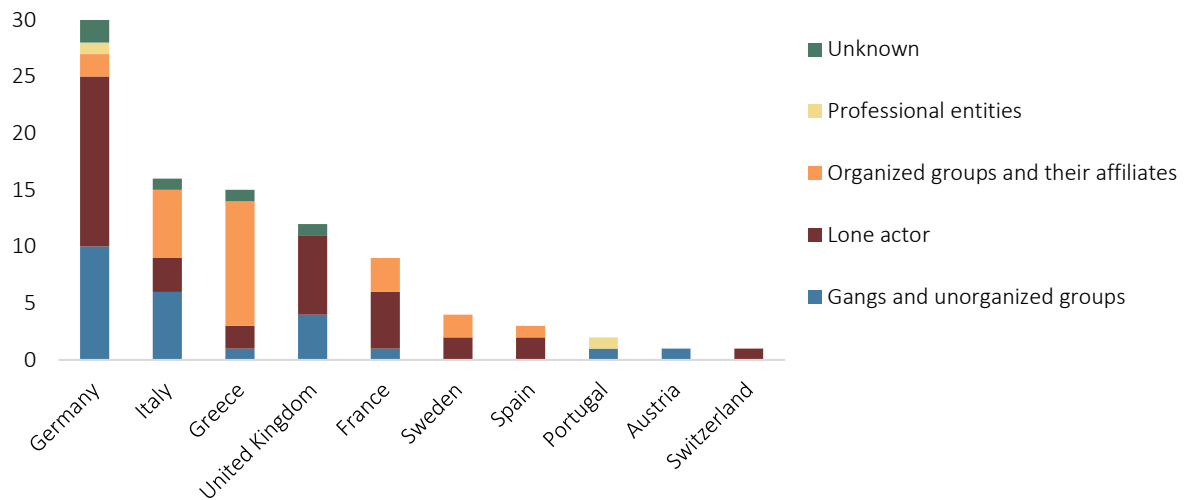
Finally, some countries experience considerably more organized violence than others do. For instance, as can be seen from Figure 9, Greece stands out when it comes to violence perpetrated by organized groups and their affiliates. In 2022, 73% of all completed attacks in Greece were committed by organized groups and their affiliates. By comparison, lone actors constituted at least 50% of perpetrators in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France in 2022. Italy has the most diverse set of perpetrators. Here, gangs and informal groups carried out six attacks, organized or

<sup>15</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the profiles of lone actors, see the RTV Trend Report 2021.

<sup>16</sup> The perpetrator type "Shadow group" is excluded from this figure (n=1).

suspected organized groups were behind another six attacks, followed by lone actors with three attacks.

Figure 9. Perpetrators of completed attacks by country, 2022 (n=93)



## 5. Targets of far-right violence

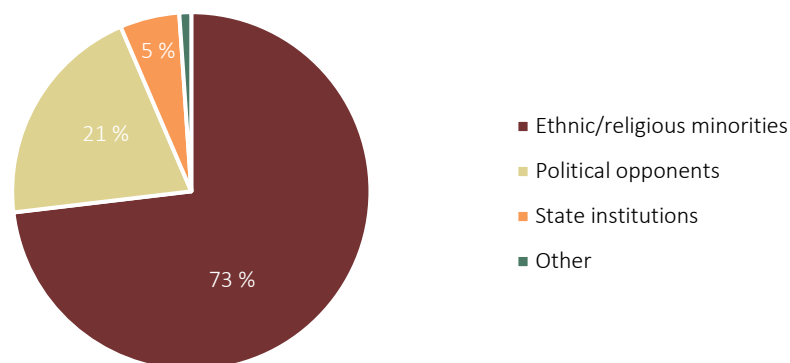
The RTV dataset includes 23 different target groups that may be grouped into five main categories, reflecting common enemies of the far right, as shown by Box 3.

### Box 3. Target groups of far-right violence

<i>Ethnic/religious minorities</i>	Includes immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, black persons, Muslims, Jews and Romas.
<i>Political opponents</i>	Includes left-wing-, anti-fascist-, and pro-immigration activists, political representatives (who are not part of the central government), the media, separatists, deserters, persons in inter-racial relationships, and interveners.
<i>State institutions</i>	Includes the police, government structures and incumbent political representatives at the national level.
<i>Marginalized groups</i>	Includes sexual minorities, women, mentally/physically disabled persons, and people perceived as having a lower social status by the perpetrator(s) such as homeless persons.
<i>Other</i>	Includes targets that do not naturally take part of any of the previous categories, such as international organizations and randomly targeted civilians.

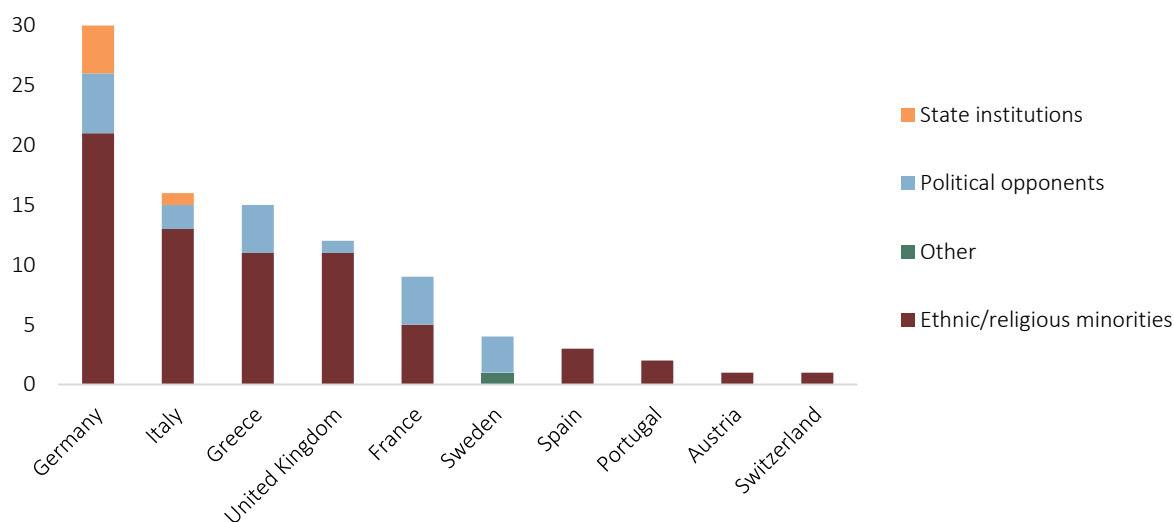
Figure 10 presents the target groups of all completed attacks in 2022. Consistent with previous years, ethnic and religious minorities was the most frequently targeted group in 2022, making up 73% (n=68) of all completed attacks. Among the attacks targeting ethnic and religious minorities, 84% (n=57) targeted people perceived as foreigners, such as immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, 9% (n=6) targeted Muslims, 6% (n=4) targeted black persons, whereas one attack from 2022 targeted Jews.

Figure 10. Target groups of completed attacks, 2022 (n=93)



The second major target group from Figure 10 were people *perceived* as political opponents by those holding far-right beliefs, constituting 21% (n=19) of all completed attacks. Political opponents are not necessarily organized political actors but include civilians who in some way openly oppose people espousing far-right beliefs by for example confronting them verbally or tearing down their political posters. Sweden (75%), France (44%), and Greece (27%) had the highest relative share of completed attacks directed against political opponents in 2022, as illustrated by Figure 11.

Figure 11. Target groups of completed attacks by country, 2022 (n=93)



Furthermore, different types of political opponents were targeted across these countries. In Sweden, three out of the four completed attacks from 2022 targeted political opponents and were perpetrated by affiliates of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). One of these attacks resulted in a fatal outcome. In two of the three non-fatal cases, the targets were attacked in Örskelljunga, one of four municipalities in which NRM ran for office, in connection to the Swedish general election in September. The reason for the attacks appears to be that the (civilian) victims, two of which were minors, were tearing down NRM-posters. One person was attacked because he intervened.

In France, one of the four cases targeting people perceived as political opponents involved a man violently attacking a woman and her mother in their own house following an exchange of Facebook messages after one of the victims had commented the perpetrator's racist and white supremacist online posts. In two other cases, left-wing militants were beaten and kicked by people linked to the far right when distributing flyers in the street.

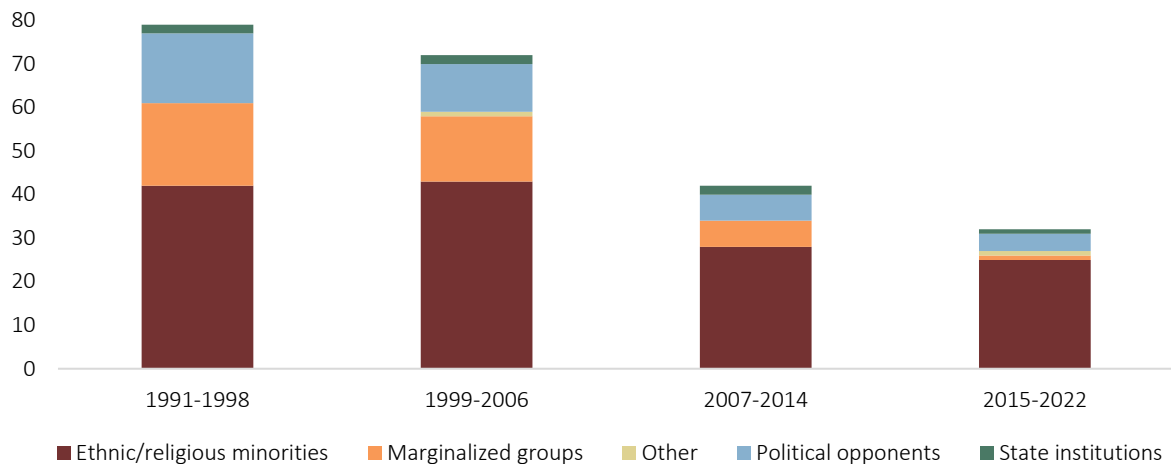
In Greece, all four attacks against political opponents targeted left-wing militants or members of the left-wing party SYRIZA's youth movement. For instance, on 8 December in Corfu, left-wing militants were attacked by nine far-right militants after three of the perpetrators entered a left-wing social space. Upon asking the far-right militants to leave, the left-wingers followed them outside to ensure that they really left. Right after, the left-wingers were attacked by the group and six other perpetrators who joined in. One of the victims was hit in the face with a helmet and consequently suffered a broken jaw which required surgery. During the attack, the perpetrators shouted "we will slaughter you" and "we will kill you."

State institutions were targeted in 5% (n=5) of the completed attacks in 2022. All of these attacks were directed against the police, and four of the five cases occurred in Germany. Moreover, all four attacks targeting the police in Germany were perpetrated by persons affiliated with the Reichsbürger movement. Supporters of this movement deny the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany in favour of the "German Reich" and do not recognize the sovereign powers of its political and civil representatives. Its members are frequently known to be in possession of large (and illegal) weapon depots and have, especially over the last eight years, frequently been involved in violent clashes with the police. The German Reichsbürger movement is described more in detail in our selected topic about anti-government extremism, further below.

Marginalized groups were not targets of severe violence from the far-right in 2022. Note, however, that far-right attacks targeting sexual minorities may be underreported because they are also targeted by other forms of political violence, most notably from Islamists and Christian fundamentalists. Therefore, we only include attacks targeting sexual minorities in cases with sufficient information about an explicit far-right motive. In many cases, the perpetrator's background and/or possible motive is not reported, and the case is therefore not included. Furthermore, media reporting about attacks targeting sexual minorities appear to vary considerably across countries, suggesting that even severe attacks of this kind may go unnoticed.

Looking further back in time, and counting fatal attacks only, Figure 12 shows the target groups of fatal attacks over the past decades. As we noted in last year's trend report, ethnic and religious minorities is not only the most frequently targeted group across time and space, but also increasingly dominant relative to other target groups. Since 2015, 25 out of 32 fatal attacks targeted ethnic and religious minorities. Of these 25 fatal attacks, 60% targeted people perceived as foreigners such as immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees, 16% targeted Muslims, and another 16% targeted black persons. One fatal attack targeted Jews.

Figure 12. Target groups of fatal attacks, 1991-2022 (n=225)



While marginalized groups, especially homeless persons and sexual minorities, were frequent targets of fatal attacks during the 1990s and early 2000s, they have with one exception since 2013 not been registered as targets of fatal attacks motivated by far-right beliefs. This is not to say that these marginalized groups do not experience serious harassment, threats, or even violence. What is clear from the data, however, is that these groups are no longer as common targets of fatal attacks in Western Europe perpetrated by people holding far-right beliefs.

## 6. Weapon types

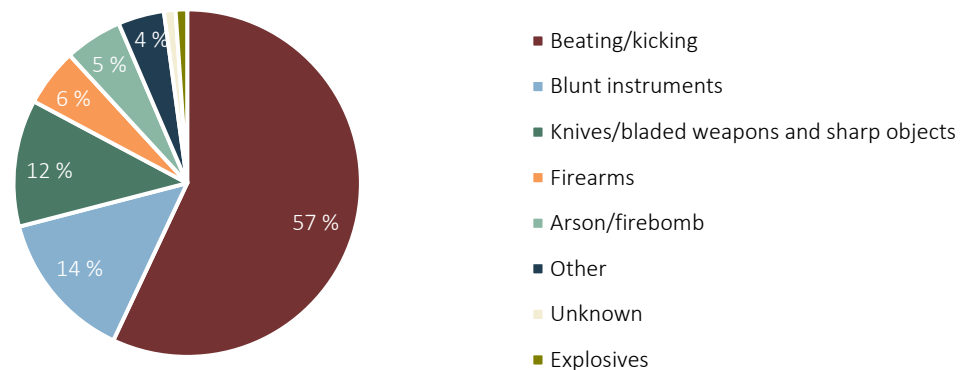
The RTV dataset codes for 37 different weapon types that may be grouped into eight main categories, as described in Box 4.

### Box 4. Weapons used in far-right violence

<i>Explosives</i>	Includes improvised explosive devices (IEDs), letter bombs, rocket launchers, grenades, paper bombs/cherry bombs, firecrackers and explosive materials.
<i>Arson/firebomb</i>	Includes arson and petrol bombs, Molotov cocktails and firebombs when used for the purpose of arson.
<i>Firearm</i>	Includes automatic and semi-automatic firearms, shotguns and rifles, handguns, and unspecified firearms.
<i>Knives/bladed weapons and sharp objects</i>	Includes knives, machetes, broken glass and bottles when used for the purpose of stabbing or cutting, axes and hachets, and other/unspecified sharp objects.
<i>Blunt instruments</i>	Includes baseball bats, sticks, poles and pipes, brass knuckles, stones and bricks, batons, glass and bottles when used as a blunt instrument, and other/unspecified blunt instruments.
<i>Beating/kicking</i>	Includes severe beating and severe kicking.
<i>Other</i>	Includes for example cars, tear gas, pepper spray, smoke bombs, dogs and other animals, sexual assaults, and fireworks.
<i>Unknown</i>	Unknown weapon.

Figure 13 presents the weapon types used in completed attacks in 2022. Consistent with previous years, the most prominent weapon type used in completed attacks was “beating/kicking”, which was the primary weapon type in 57% (n=53) of all completed attacks. The majority of the attacks using beating/kicking were spontaneous in nature, and predominantly perpetrated by gangs, informal groups or unorganized groups.

Figure 13. Weapons used in completed attacks, 2022 (n=93)

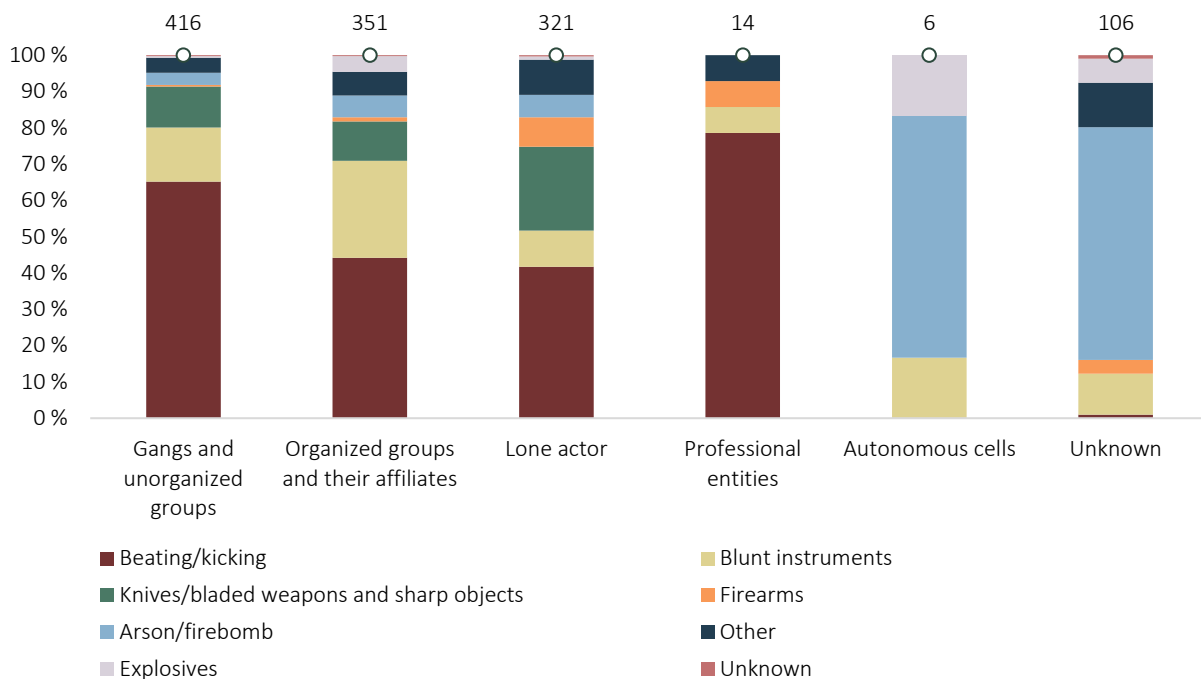


Moreover, blunt instruments were used in 14% (n=13) of the completed attacks, whereas knives and other bladed weapons were used in 12% (n=11) of the completed attacks. Note that explosives were only used in one completed attack. In this case from Athens, Greece, an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in front of a mosque. The IED had screws and nails in it, and other metal objects acted as shrapnel. The imam of the mosque was inside the building at the time but was not injured.

Firearms were used in 5% (n=5) of the attacks, including the two fatal attacks from France. Two of the three remaining shooting attacks occurred in Germany and involved members of the Reichsbürger movement and are described more in detail in our selected topic section. The final shooting attack occurred in Greece, where a 26-year-old Pakistani man was shot at by a taxi driver. The victim was returning from a religious Muslim holiday with some friends, wearing traditional clothes. Upon seeing them, the perpetrator slowed down and shot from a distance of about three meters in their direction, shouting "f\*\*\* the Muslims". The victim was hit near his eye and on the side of the head, which required three stitches. The attack came in the context of a series of attacks in Athens targeting Pakistani Muslims celebrating the end of Ramadan.

As one might expect, there is a high correlation between perpetrator types and weapon types, as illustrated by Figure 14.

Figure 14. Weapons used in completed attacks by perpetrator type, 2015-2022 (n=1214)

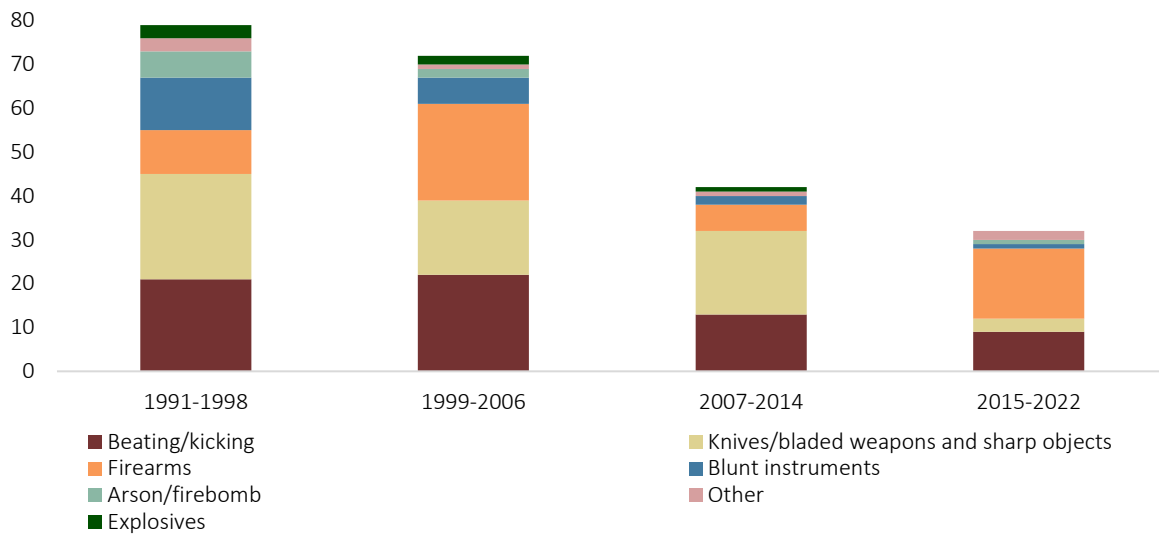


As Figure 14 shows, lone actors use the most diverse sets of weapons, underscoring the heterogeneity of this perpetrator type. Nevertheless, lone actors have a stronger tendency to use either firearms or knives/bladed weapons and sharp objects than do for example unorganized or organized groups. Moreover, organized groups and their affiliates are more inclined to use blunt instruments as their primary weapon, and perpetrators of arson/firebomb-related attacks are far more likely to escape unrecognized and remain unknown. The latter association is inherent to the nature of these attacks, as many arson attacks are carried out at night when the victims are sleeping, thus making identification of the perpetrator(s) more difficult. Autonomous cells and organized groups make up the known perpetrator groups who most often use explosives.

These patterns suggest that most far-right *groups* tend to carry out their violent attacks using easy-to-acquire weapons, such as sticks, bars, and stones, rather than more regulated difficult-to-obtain weapons, such as firearms. Lone actors too fit into this picture but are at the same time more inclined to use firearms. This is especially evident when looking at fatal attacks only, as shown by Figure 15.



Figure 15. Weapons used in fatal attacks, 1991-2022 (n=225)



Although the frequency of fatal right-wing violence has declined, the fatal violence that persists is increasingly committed using firearms, and as we know, almost exclusively committed by lone actors. Many of these cases involved older men with access to firearms. Thus, the relative growth of firearms as the primary weapon used in fatal attacks is coupled with the relative increase of lone actors perpetrating them. Similarly, the relative decrease in easy-to-require weapons such as knives and blunt instruments is coupled with a reduction of militant far-right groups willing to use fatal violence to further their political agenda.

## 7. Attack plots

This year, for the first time, the publicly available version of the RTV dataset contains several new variables that may be used to compare and analyse different types of attack plots. Notably, these variables include information about the targeting and operational planning of recorded plots, which, in turn, enables us to categorize recorded plots into five different plot types with different levels of maturity, as illustrated by Table 1 below.<sup>17</sup>

Table 1. Plot maturity hierarchy

		Targeting		
		Unknown	General	Specific
Operational planning	Complete	-	-	Mature
	Well-underway	Semi-vague	Intermediate	Semi-mature
	Initiated	Vague	Semi-vague	Intermediate
	None	-	Vague	Vague

We have applied these new plot variables to all attack plots recorded by the RTV dataset in the entire 1990-2022 period (n=114). However, in line with the recommendations outlined in the [RTV](#)

<sup>17</sup> A more detailed explanation of the various plot types and how they can be used analytically can be found in the *RTV Trend Report 2022*, pp. 26-27. Our operationalization of the plot variables “Targeting” and “Operational planning” is described in the *RTV Codebook*.

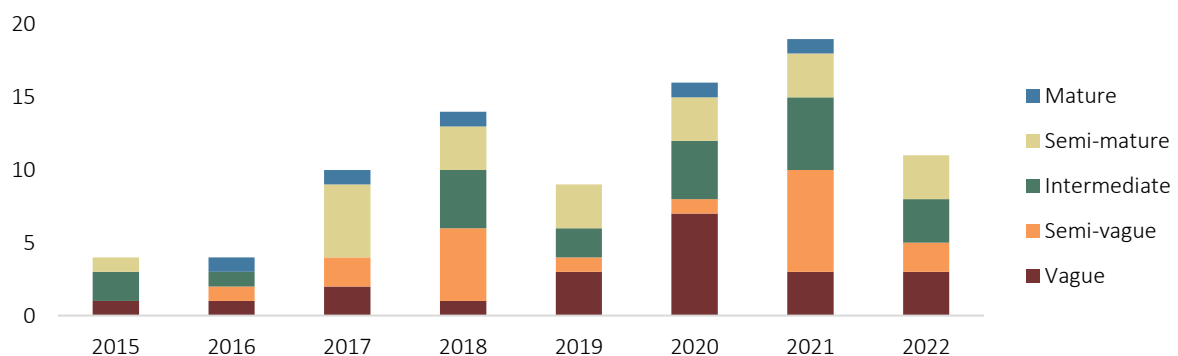
Error Profile, analysis of variation in plots over time and between places should only be conducted for plots that occurred from 2015 onwards (n=87).

Furthermore, now that we are including more plot information in the publicly available version of the RTV dataset, we also wish to underscore that these types of events should be considered fundamentally different from completed attacks. The reason is that many detected plots would likely never materialize into actual completed attacks, even with no government interference. We know this because in many cases initially reported as terrorist plots in the media, the ensuing investigations end up dropping the terrorism charges because an actual attack plan could not be proven or did not exist. Therefore, attack plots and completed attacks should as a general rule be analysed as separate events. For the same reason, one should also be careful about using attack plots as a basis for threat assessments, as we discuss more in detail in the selected topics section.

### Findings from 2022

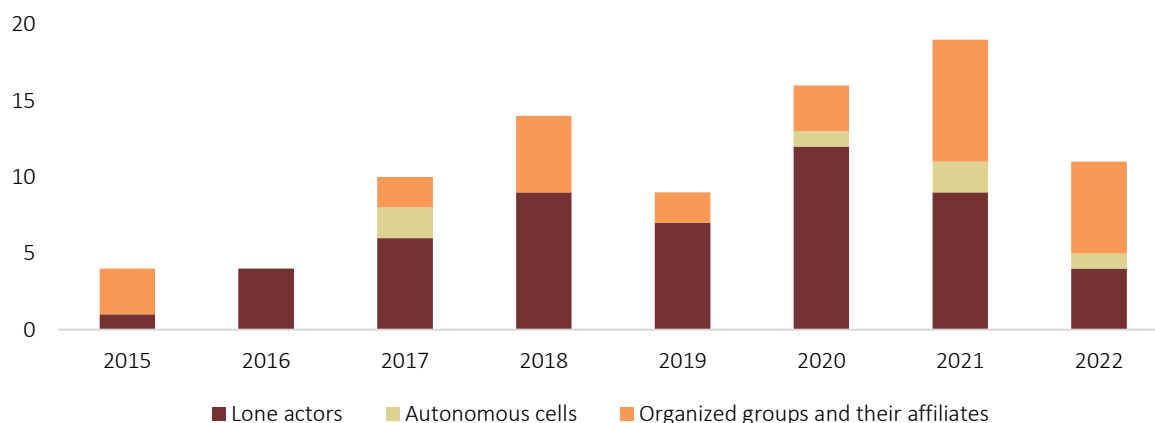
A total of 11 plots were recorded for 2022, comprising three semi-mature plots, three intermediate plots, two semi-vague plots and three vague plots. No mature plots were recorded. Compared to the two previous years, the total number of registered plots has decreased, as illustrated by Figure 16.

Figure 16. Number and maturity of plots, 2015-2022 (n=87)



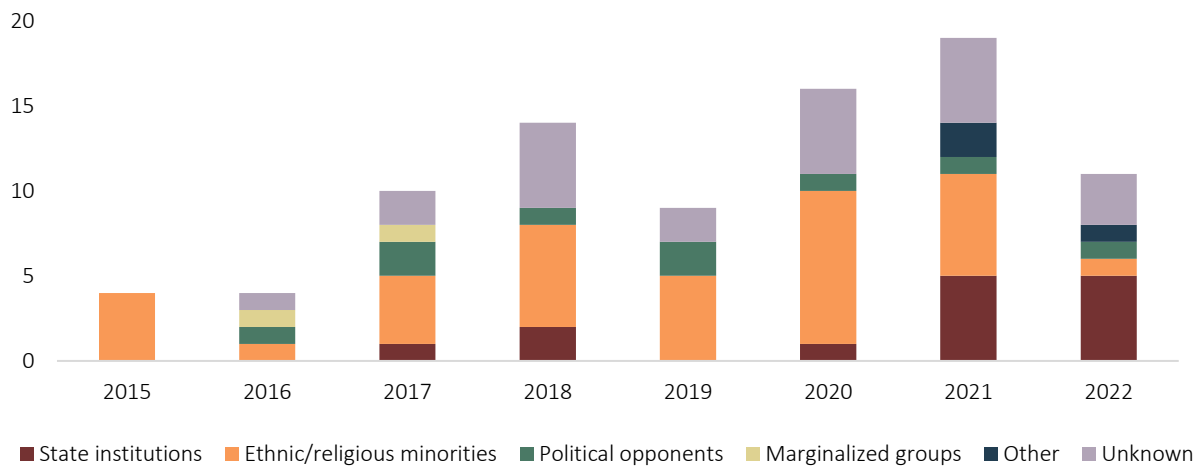
When looking at the perpetrators behind the plots, we see that 2021 and 2022 are the only years since 2015 in which there were more group-based plots than lone actor plots, as illustrated by Figure 17.

Figure 17. Perpetrators of plots, 2015-2022 (n=87)



These group-based plots appear to form part of a recent trend of increased targeting against state institutions, as illustrated by Figure 18. For example, in Spain, a clandestine neo-Nazi organization planned to attack politicians and prosecutors, in Italy the neo-Nazi and white supremacist organization *Ordine di Hagal* plotted to attack a police station, whereas in Germany, police rounded up several extremist networks in 2022 allegedly planning to overthrow the German government. You may read more about these plots in our selected topics section below.

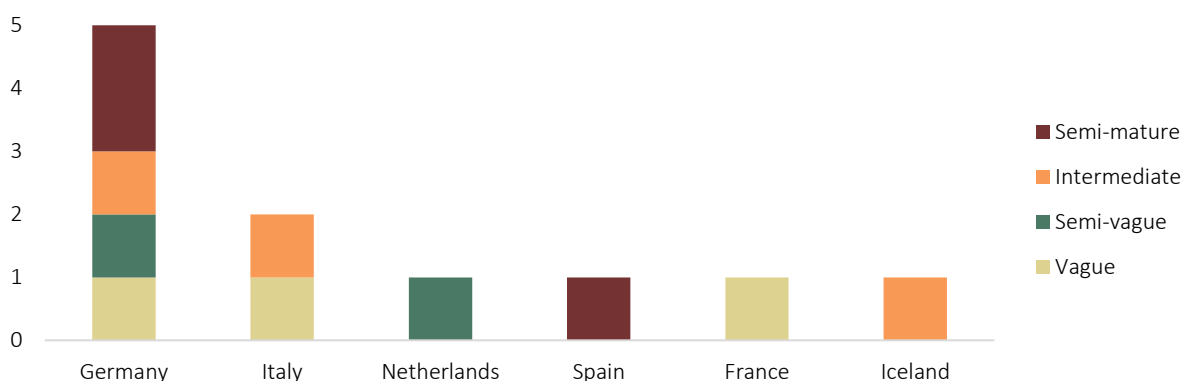
Figure 18. Target groups in plots, 2015-2022 (n=87)



Of the 11 plots registered in 2022, five were group-plots targeting state institutions, whereas five plots involved young boys/men radicalized via extreme online subcultures. The eleventh plot is an outlier – the very first incident ever registered from Iceland in the RTV dataset – involving an autonomous cell that was planning to attack public and government institutions, including the national PRIDE parade.

If we look at the country distribution of the 11 plots recorded in 2022, we see that almost half of the plots, including two of the three semi-mature plots, were recorded in Germany, as illustrated by Figure 19.

Figure 19. Number of plots by type and country, 2022 (n=11)



This last finding generates several questions. Why do so many plots occur in Germany? And to what extent should these plots in Germany and elsewhere be interpreted as actual terrorist

threats? We offer more detailed discussions of these two questions in the following selected topic section.

## Selected topics

Each year, the RTV Trend Report covers some selected topics that have been particularly salient to the year covered by the report. Selected topics from previous years have included vehicular attacks ([RTV Trend Report 2019](#)), online-inspired terrorism ([RTV Trend Report 2020](#)), and COVID-19 ([RTV Trend Report 2021](#)), to name a few.

This year, we address two selected topics. We begin by discussing the evolution of violent anti-government extremism in Western Europe with a particular emphasis on recent developments in Germany. Second, we discuss the extent to which attack plots should be taken into consideration when assessing terrorist threats from the far right.

### **Violent anti-government extremism: Plots and attacks against politicians and state institutions**

Whereas violence from the far right has mainly been directed against ethnic or religious minorities and political opponents, there has in recent years also been a number of violent attacks as well as plots directed against mainstream politicians (including conservatives) and governmental institutions and its representatives, in particular the police. These types of attacks often share a common trait in that they consider the government and/or the state as the main enemy to be defeated, as a form of anti-government extremism.

In general, anti-government extremism refers to movements, ideas and actors that reject the legitimacy of the state and governmental institutions as a matter of ideological principle, holding that violence might be considered as legitimate acts of resistance. However, anti-government extremism is a fuzzy phenomenon, as some actors attack (or plot to attack) governmental institutions or politicians because they reject the current form of state government, while others because they reject the outcome of specific democratic elections, and others again oppose specific policies (e.g., on immigration or COVID-19 restrictions). Previously, anti-government violence and terrorism was primarily associated with militant anarchists on the far left, especially from the 1880s onwards. However, in recent years, it has mainly been linked to movements and activists on the far right.<sup>18</sup>

In Europe, the far right has traditionally been in favor of a strong state ruled by a mighty dictator, whereas the far right in the United States has been strongly opposed to a strong federal state. However, American anti-government ideas and conspiracy theories have increasingly gained a foothold among the far right in Europe, including such notions as the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), Sovereign Citizens (or Freeman on the Land), and Qanon.

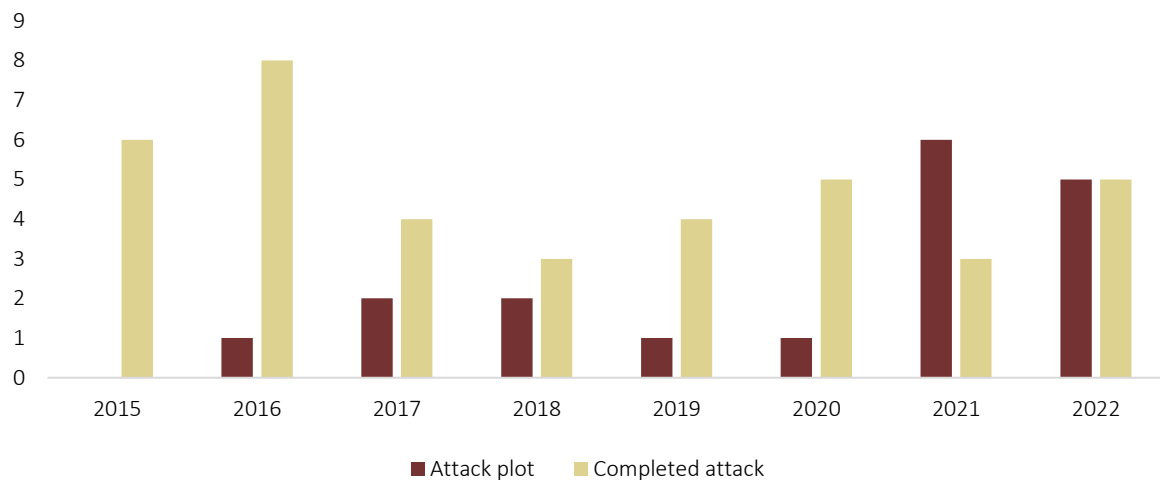
Between 2015 and 2022, we have registered 56 cases of completed attacks or attack plots where the target selection was either political representatives (i.e., politicians who are not part of the

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<sup>18</sup> See Special Issue on «Anti-Government Extremism» in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, December 2022 (<https://pt.icct.nl/issue/volume-xvi-issue-6-2022>) and a special section in the March 2023 issue (<https://pt.icct.nl/issue/volume-xvii-issue-1-2023>).

central government) or state institutions, including public authorities, members of government, and the police, as illustrated by Figure 20.

Figure 20. Plots and attacks targeting political representatives or state institutions, 2015-2022 (n=56)

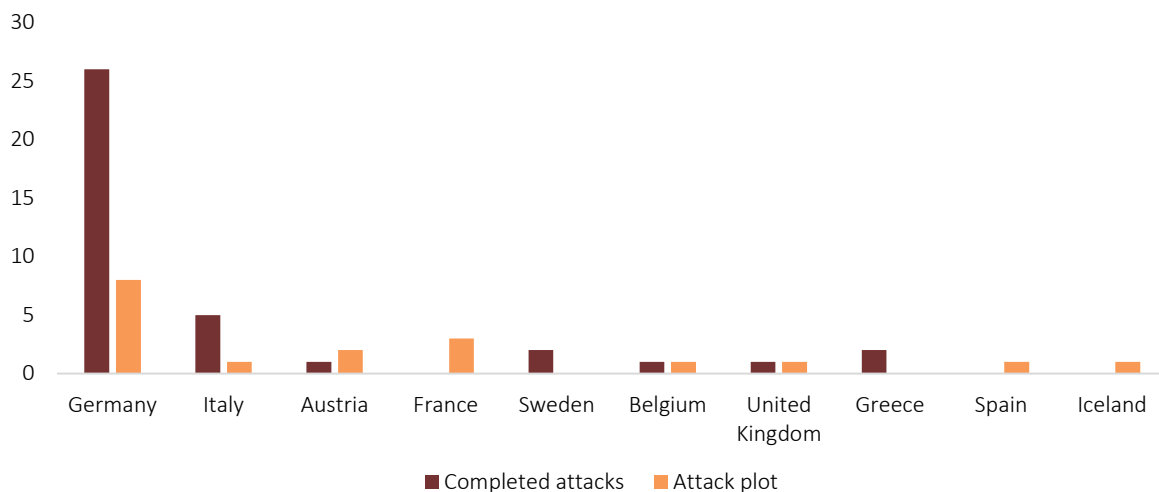


There were significant changes in terms of motives and targeting during this eight-year period. The first years were characterized by violent opposition to the reception of large numbers of refugees, resulting in violent attacks on the police in the context of anti-migrant demonstrations, and in particular, serious (sometimes near-fatal) attacks on local politicians known for their refugee-friendly positions. The fatal attack of the British Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016 was for example motivated by a combination of her pro-refugee and “Remain” standpoints shortly before the Brexit referendum. The regional president of Kessel, Germany, Walter Lübcke, was a CDU politician murdered in 2019 for his pro-migrant views. Both politicians were killed by neo-Nazi lone actors. Whereas most of the attacks during the first years of this period were mainly issue-oriented, violent plots against the state and central politicians later became more prominent, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a striking increase in detected and disrupted attack plots targeting these groups in 2021 and 2022 compared to the previous years. Some of these plots were rather immature and may have been detected at an early stage because of increased surveillance of the far-right by police and intelligence services. At the same time, this increase in detected plots happened during the pandemic, when there was intensified political tension in several countries due to resistance against governmental anti-pandemic measures, leading to mass demonstrations and in some cases, violent action.

Turning to cross-national variation in anti-government attacks and plots, Germany stands out as the country in Western Europe with the highest number of such events, as illustrated by Figure 21. To some extent, this reflects a general pattern that Germany is the country with the highest absolute number of RTV attacks compared to other countries in Western Europe. However, the difference is even more striking when it comes to attacks and plots directed against governmental targets.

Figure 21. Attacks and plots targeting political representatives or state institutions by country, 2015-2022 (n=56)



Many of these attacks and plots are linked to people affiliated with the Reichsbürger movement (literally “Citizens of the Empire”). They reject the legitimacy of the current German Federal Republic, which they claim is a corporation, not a real state. Many of their ideas and strategies are borrowed from the American Sovereign Citizens movement, but with a particular German twist: The Reichsbürger want to establish a new government in the tradition of the German Empire of 1871. Many adherents to the Reichsbürger movement have declared their homes and properties as independent states, claiming their legitimate right to defend it, with armed means if necessary.

If we take a closer look at the types of anti-government attacks and plots that have been registered, we find that the most common type (12 cases since 2015) was violent opposition by individual Reichsbürgers to various interventions by the police, such as traffic controls or house searches. For instance, in the first of four events from 2022 targeting police officers in Germany, a 61-year-old man affiliated with the Reichsbürger movement deliberately hit a police officer with his car after fleeing multiple failed police traffic stops. The police officer was thrown onto the hood of the moving car and then onto the road, resulting in serious head injuries.

In a second attack, two police officers were shot and injured by a 54-year-old Reichsbürger when members of the German special forces were searching the perpetrator’s house on suspicion of illegal possession of weapons. The perpetrator fired several dozen times with a fully automatic rifle.

In a third attack, six police officers were injured by two 55- and 57-year-old people belonging to the Reichsbürger movement. A police officer was about to conduct a cycling training for children of a local school and was walking the route beforehand. The perpetrators were parked with their company vehicle on the side of the road and loading scaffolding parts. When the officer asked them to use signal pylons, they refused, and further refused to provide their personal details. The officer then called for assistance. When an assisting police officer put her hand on a metal ladder carried by one of the perpetrators, he immediately attacked her. The situation then escalated, with the perpetrators attacking the officers and putting up massive resistance.

Lastly, a 67-year-old Reichsbürger shot at and injured a police officer who had been sent to the perpetrator’s property to confiscate his weapons. In the morning, police officers entered his

house following a court order to confiscate the perpetrator's weapons (26 items) and asked for the weapons to be handed over. The perpetrator managed to get a firearm and shoot at one of the officers and then barricaded himself in his house. In the evening, when the special forces stormed the apartment, he had committed suicide and killed his dog. The officer was hospitalized with severe injuries. Another police officer was slightly injured.

Such events where the police are perceived to “invade” the private properties (pseudo-states) of self-proclaimed Reichsbürger-citizens appear to be situations of particular high risk of violent confrontation. When the police come to search their houses for illegal weapons or to carry out an eviction order due to unpaid debts or taxes, they have sometimes been met by gunfire, causing deaths or injuries of police officers. Studies show that Reichsbürgers are typically middle-aged or older males with financial difficulties, and socially isolated. Their experiences of powerlessness are often explained by conspiracy theories, and ideas that reject the legitimacy of state authorities are attractive to them. Their violence is usually reactions to what they consider as government infringement.<sup>19</sup>

A new and different development from 2022 was two plots of *coup d'état* by larger groups inspired by Reichsbürger ideas. In contrast to the clashes with the police discussed above, these ambitious plots intended to target state institutions, leading politicians, and infrastructure, causing chaos and civil war, and thereby preparing the ground for a governmental takeover. These groups, and in particular the 25 people of the “Patriotic union” arrested in December 2022, included far more resourceful participants, including a judge and former MP for the far-right party AfD, several (former) members of elite military units and the police, and an aristocrat who was intended to become the future head of a monarchist state.<sup>20</sup>

Although it is highly unlikely that the plotters would have succeeded in their desired coup, it is possible that they (or parts of the group) could have carried out terrorist attacks and other attempts to destabilize German society. This brings us to our next selected topic.

### **To what extent should attack plots be taken into consideration when assessing terrorist threats?**

A key question when assessing terrorist threats is whether or not to take terrorist plots into account, i.e., planned attacks that were averted or for some other reason never materialized. Arguably, planned attacks that would have been carried out unless the authorities intervened do represent a real threat in the sense of perpetrators having both intent and capability to carry out an attack. Yet, one can never know for sure that an apparently existing intent to carry out an attack would persist all the way to the point of actually pulling a trigger or lightening a bomb fuse. Most people inhabit major emotional barriers against deliberately killing other human beings. Signalling intent of deliberate killing to ideological peers, especially under anonymous disguise online, is therefore quite different from actually attempting to kill someone.

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<sup>19</sup> See Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler, “Uncharted Territory: Towards an Evidence-Based Criminology of Sovereign Citizens Through a Systematic Literature Review”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2022); and Jan Rathje, “Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among ‘Reichsbürger’ and other Conspiracy Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>20</sup> The case including lists of the arrested members is described more in detail on German Wikipedia: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriotische\\_Union](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriotische_Union)

Furthermore, whether or not an event involving the arrests of political extremists is framed by the media as an attack plot is usually dependent on how the event is framed by those who arrested them, i.e., government agencies. In a considerable number of cases, people are arrested because they are *suspected* of planning an attack, and the arrest is subsequently framed as a terrorist plot in the media. Yet in many cases, further investigations often drop the terrorism charges because they were unable to prove that an attack plan was in fact in the making. What are we to make of such cases? Should they count as “real” terrorist plots, or not? And to what extent should they be taken into account when assessing terrorist threats? To answer that question, one needs to consider two key factors: plot maturity and plot credibility.

By plot maturity, we refer to the degree to which specific targets have been selected as well as the extent of operational planning relating to a given plot, such as weapons acquisition and target reconnaissance. Table 1 above illustrates how we have operationalised these two variables (target selection and operational planning) in our RTV plot typology, which includes the following five types: (1) mature plots, (2) semi-mature plots, (3) intermediate plots, (4) semi-vague plots, and (5) vague plots.<sup>21</sup>

By plot credibility, we refer to the extent to which actual intent to harm and possibly kill human targets is present among the plotter(s). While plot maturity can be seen as a relatively objective measure, referring specifically to target selection and operational planning, plot credibility is a more subjective measure, referring to the inner thoughts, motives, and emotional drivers of specific individuals. As such, while measuring plot maturity is a relatively straightforward exercise, provided sufficient information is available, measuring plot credibility is a more challenging and interpretative exercise, characterized by a higher degree of uncertainty and speculation. For that reason, the RTV dataset only codes for plot maturity, while plot credibility is left open for interpretation.

In the following, we review the plot maturity of the 11 plots recorded in 2022 and speculate to some extent about the credibility of some of these plots, keeping in mind that such considerations will always remain uncertain. The goal is to arrive at a more nuanced assessment of the degree to which these 11 plots should be taken into account when assessing the current terrorist threat from the far right in Western Europe, i.e., whether the plotters truly inhibit both intent and capability of carrying out an attack.

### **Vague and semi-vague plots**

Five of the 11 plots recorded in 2022 were coded either as vague or semi-vague, meaning that they were either lacking a specific target, or that the operational planning was at a very early stage. Four of these five cases involved young boys/men signalling terrorist intent on accelerationist social media platforms while at the same time trying to acquire weapons and/or bombmaking materials.<sup>22</sup> In two of the cases, improvised explosive devices had been assembled and in one case also tested. In three of the cases, there was no information about any potential target for the supposedly planned attack. The fact that these plotters informed their ideological

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<sup>21</sup> A more detailed explanation of the various plot types and how they can be used analytically can be found in the *RTV Trend Report 2022*, pp. 26-27. Our operationalization of the plot variables “Targeting” and “Operational planning” is described in the *RTV Codebook*.

<sup>22</sup> Accelerationism refers here to an extreme-right ideological undercurrent promoting the use of mass violence in order to move faster towards a societal collapse for the sake of building a new society from the ground up.



peers online about their attack plans may also be interpreted as a sign of weak intent. If they really wanted to carry out an attack, bragging about it online is arguably not very wise, and may suggest that these young boys/men were primarily driven by a desire for social recognition on social media platforms, rather than a real intent to carry out attacks aimed at harming other people.

That said, we do know that similar cases have materialized into actual attacks in a handful of cases during the past years.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, we also know that hundreds if not thousands of similar cases have not materialized into actual attacks. What separates these four cases from most of these hundreds or thousands of cases, however, is the demonstrated attempts of acquiring weapons and/or explosives. As such, government agencies have little choice other than responding to such potential threats, regardless of how immature the actual attack plans may be.

The fifth case in this category (vague and semi-vague plots) can be characterised as a group-based plot with ambitious goals in combination with rather limited operational planning. In this particular case, six German men, aged between 34 and 59, were allegedly planning a terrorist attack on energy infrastructures in Germany, including attacking pylons of power lines to interrupt the power supply and generate societal chaos. However, no explosives were discovered in the investigation. This last plot is akin to the remaining group-based plots from 2022. What characterizes these plots is the combination of an ambitious plan with varying degrees of operational planning.

### **Intermediate plots**

The 11 plots from 2022 comprise three plots coded as *intermediate*. The first occurred in Spain, where the National Police dismantled a clandestine neo-Nazi organization that spoke online and between themselves about attacking politicians and prosecutors. Seven members of the group were simultaneously arrested in Alcoi, Torrejon de Ardoz and Barcelona. The police seized weapons included a revolver, three carbines, simulated firearms, ammunition, knives, baseball bats and explosives-making manuals, as well as lists of car registration plates owned by political opponents such as left-wing politicians and separatists. The seven detainees were, according to the police, a cohesive group on social media that incited hatred and extreme violence against perceived enemy groups and proposed initiating armed violence in the streets. However, concrete plans for violent attacks appears to not have developed.

In a second intermediate plot from Italy, police raided people connected with the neo-Nazi and white supremacist organization “Ordine di Hagal”. The raids were carried out in the provinces of Naples, Avellino, Caserta, Milan, Turin, Palermo, Ragusa, Treviso, Verona, Salerno, Potenza, Cosenza, Crotone, while the organization was based in the province of Naples. Four people were arrested, suspected of plotting to attack a police station and a shopping centre. The group was mainly active on Telegram. The plot was partially detected through police monitoring one of their conversations revealing that, in addition to anti-Semitic and racist propaganda, they were speaking between themselves about organizing a massacre “like the one that guy did in New Zealand, but I would go to the n\*\*\*\*\*, I would go to the police station”. The group had contact with Ukrainian groups with neo-Nazi members, such as the Azov Battalion. The weapons seized were knives, hatchets, and other unspecified sharp objects, replica handguns, ammunition, and

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<sup>23</sup> See for example RTV Trend Report 2020, pp. 20-21.

airsoft handguns. This plot was coded as intermediate because it remains unclear how far the operational planning of an actual attack had developed. There was stated intent among group members, but few concrete plans of an actual attack.

The third plot coded as intermediate represent the first RTV case ever registered from Iceland. Here, four right-wing extremists were initially arrested on suspicion of plotting terrorist attacks targeting public and government institutions. Police found "fanatical propaganda" during their investigation. Only two of the four men remain in custody. Several semi-automatic weapons, including 3D-printed ones, were seized at nine locations, as well as thousands of rounds of ammunition. The targets may have included the parliament, Iceland's annual police party of October 1<sup>st</sup>, as well as the annual PRIDE-parade. In raids in both Kopavogur and Mosfellsbær, police seized dozens of firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition. The plot is suspected to have been inspired by the atrocities of Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people, most of them in a shooting spree at the summer camp of the Labour youth wing. It has been difficult to find detailed reporting about this case, and therefore difficult to assess the intent of the people involved. The investigation is still ongoing, and no one have been sentenced thus far. It appears that the operational planning was well underway and that the plotters were considering various targets but had yet to decide on a specific one.

### **Semi-mature plots**

Three of the 11 plots recorded in 2022 were coded as semi-mature. All three occurred in Germany. In the first, members of a Telegram chat group called "Vereinte Patrioten" [United Patriots] and of the Reichsbürger movement were arrested in several federal states for planning several bomb attacks targeting power supply facilities in order to cause a nationwide blackout and to plunge Germany into a civil war. In addition, they planned to kidnap SPD politician and Federal Minister of Health Karl Lauterbach. After the coup, a double for either Chancellor Olaf Scholz or President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was to announce on live television that the laws of the Federal Republic would no longer apply.

This particular plot was coded as semi-mature because its targets had been selected and the operational planning was well underway. As of writing, the court process is still ongoing, and no one has yet been sentenced. Yet based on what we know so far, there was both intent and capability of doing harm in this case. As such, the plot may very well have materialized into an actual attack without government intervention, which in this case also involved undercover agents selling weapons to the group members.

A second and rather similar plot apparently has ties to the first plot through similar groups and people being involved. In this case, more than 3000 police officers raided 130 locations in Germany and arrested 25 members of the group "Patriotische Union" [Patriotic Union] and of the Reichsbürger movement. One arrest was conducted in Austria and another one in Italy. The perpetrators were organized and aimed at carrying out a *coup d'état*, including storming the Reichstag and the German parliament building. Among the arrests there was a judge and former member of parliament for the far-right party AfD, a prince from the House of Reuss and several members of the police/security services. The prince was the head of the central body of the organization, the Council, and supposed to become the new head of state if the coup was successful. The organization was divided into a civil branch, headed by the prince and the Council, and a military branch, headed by a former paratrooper. The members were organized in small

groups where they divided the tasks to be carried out between them, communicated via a messaging app, and even signed a non-disclosure agreement upon entry. The organization attempted (unsuccessfully) to gather support from Russia to carry out their plan.

This particular plot has also been coded as semi-mature as the main target had been selected and the operational planning was well underway. It appears that the main action to be taken was to storm the German parliament, the Reichstag, modelled after the January 6 storming of Capitol Hill in the United States in 2021. Once done, the plotters planned to take hostage of several parliamentary representatives and then show these hostages on live television. Media reporting about this case shows that the plotters were deeply embedded in conspiratorial thinking. As such, while the plot may come across as highly unrealistic in terms of its ambitions of a *coup d'état*, it is still possible that the people involved truly believed in their own plan. Therefore, there may very well have been both intent and capability of at least attempting to storm the Reichstag using force. In that sense, the plot is credible and may have developed into an actual attack without government interference.

The third semi-mature plot from Germany involved a 16-year-old boy who was arrested for preparing a school shooting. The perpetrator wanted to kill teachers and pupils at his own high school and had worked out the details of the attack in a diary and a manifesto. He wrote extensive instructions for imitators, recorded video messages, and had sought out and found information on the dark web about how to assemble pipe bombs. Police officers found crossbows, knives, machetes, air pressure pistols and materials for pipe bombs at his house. In addition, the police seized several texts and writings of anti-Semitic, racist, and anti-Muslim nature. In prison, he allegedly spoke openly about his attack plan, his murderous fantasies, his hatred of foreigners and his admiration for earlier right-wing extremist terrorists to staff. In other words, the boy's intent comes across as rather credible, and the plot's operational planning was also well underway.

## Discussion

To sum up, the 11 plots recorded in 2022 involve five plots coded as either vague or semi-vague, suggesting that it is less likely that these plots would have materialized into actual attacks even without government interference. Three plots were coded as intermediate, characterised by limited operational planning, or a lack of specific targets, and therefore a less clear intent of carrying out an actual attack. Finally, three plots were coded as semi-mature, meaning that these plots may very well have developed into actual attacks without government interference.

Of the three semi-mature plots that were detected, the potential harm caused by the plot if it had turned into an attack varies considerably. One of the plots primarily targeted material objects but also involved the kidnapping of a minister. A second plot involved storming the German Reichstag by force and taking multiple hostages, but not necessarily any explicit plans of killing people. The third plot involved plans of carrying out a school shooting and could potentially have led to multiple people being killed.

When it comes to the three intermediate plots, the ones from Iceland and Italy involved potential mass-casualty attacks, whereas the one from Spain was more unclear about any specific attack plans and whether the targets were to be people or buildings.

All in all, we see that the maturity and credibility of the 11 plots recorded for 2022 varied considerably. Based on the information we have at this point, only the three plots coded as semi-nature come across as attack plans that likely would have materialized without government interference. The three plots coded as intermediate may also have materialized into an attack but there is considerably more uncertainty regarding their credibility. It is of course also possible that one or several of the five plots coded as either vague or semi-vague could eventually develop into an attack, although it seems less likely considering their lack of targets or concrete attack plans.

So, should plots be taken into consideration when assessing terrorist threats? Based on the above discussion, the answer must be that it depends on the maturity and credibility of the plots in question. Many events reported as terrorist plots in the media clearly do not represent real threats in the sense of perpetrators inhibiting both intent and capability of carrying out an attack. At the same time, other plots are indeed “real” and should be taken seriously. Hopefully, our inclusion of new plot variables to this year’s version of RTV dataset will provide researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with relevant information for making more nuanced assessments of the potential terrorist threat stemming from these types of plots.

## Country case studies

### France: Far-right violence in a politically polarized country

As was pointed out in the introduction to this report, France is one of few countries in Western Europe where right-wing terrorism and violence may be on the rise. Far-right violence is not a new phenomenon in France.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in postwar Europe, France witnessed high levels of terrorism and violence from the far right.<sup>25</sup> Most of this terrorism and violence took place within the context of the Algerian war of independence, which lasted from 1954 until 1962, and generated high levels of political polarization.<sup>26</sup> Following violent attacks from the Algerian movement *Front de Libération Nationale* (FNL) in the late 1950s, and the French government’s decision to support Algerian independence in the early 1960s, the far right created “the greatest wave of terrorism that France has experienced throughout her history.”<sup>27</sup> The far-right group called *Organisation de l’Armée Secrète* (Secret Army Organization, OAS) was particularly violent. Although it only existed for about two years, its activities resulted in more than 2,000 deaths in metropolitan France and in Algeria.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, far-right violence continued to display traces of the war in Algeria as evidenced by the attacks against hostels of immigrant Algerian workers by former OAS militants, as well as the assault on the Algerian consulate and the organized racist assassinations in Marseille in 1973.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, a new generation of militant far-right activists centered around the group *Ordre Nouveau* (initially called *Occident*) was particularly

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<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Olivier Peria, Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Audry Gagnon for input and comments to this short case study.

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Aasland Ravndal. “Thugs or Terrorists? A Typology of Right-Wing Terrorism in Western Europe.” *Journal for Deradicalization* 2015, no. 3 (2015): 18.

<sup>26</sup> Casal Bértoa, F. (2023): Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond, PSGo. Available at: [whogoverns.eu](http://whogoverns.eu). By taking into consideration the percentage of votes obtained by “anti-political-establishment” parties, France between 1945 and 1958 is considered more polarized than Germany between 1919 and 1933.

<sup>27</sup> Michele Gandilhon. “Right-Wing Political Violence in France: Stock Take and Perspectives,” pp. 151 in Taylor, Max; Holbrook, Donald, and Currie, P.M. (eds.). *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*. (New York/London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2013).

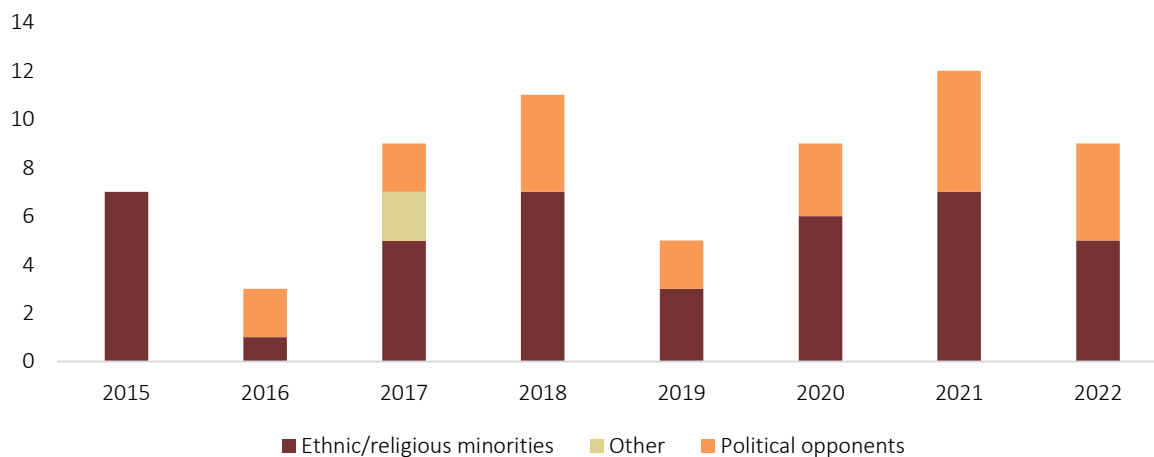
<sup>28</sup> Gandilhon. “Right-Wing Political Violence in France,” pp. 152

concerned with anti-communism and the struggle against left-wing ideas, which were increasingly popular at the time.

A main turning point in France with regards to patterns of political violence came with the formation of *Front National* (FN) in 1972 and the party's goal of becoming an institutional actor in the French political system. As noted by the French researcher Michel Gandilhon in his account of the evolution of right-wing violence in postwar France, "the hour had come for legalism, and political violence virtually disappeared."<sup>29</sup> This is very much in line with research pointing to an inverse relationship between far-right mobilization in the electoral arena and in the protest arena, in which growing electoral support tends to decrease levels of violence and vice versa.<sup>30</sup>

With the growing influence of the FN, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that France has experienced lower levels of far-right violence compared to neighboring countries of a similar size where no such far-right party existed for a long a time. Between 1990 and 2022, France witnessed 14 fatal attacks, while there were 24 in Spain, 30 in the UK and as many as 98 in Germany. When looking at all completed attacks (fatal and non-fatal) since 2015, this is still the pattern: France has had 83 completed right-wing attacks, compared to 102 in Spain, 206 in the UK and 496 in Germany. However, in contrast to most countries in Western Europe, including those already mentioned, levels of right-wing violence in France do not seem to be on the decline. In fact, as shown in Figure 22, there seems to be a small increase: from 30 to 35 completed attacks when comparing the periods 2015-2018 and 2019-2022.

Figure 22. Attack frequency and target selection in French fatal and non-fatal attacks, 2015-2022 (n=65)



Moreover, as was illustrated in Figure 6, France is among the top three countries in Western Europe in terms of the number of fatal attacks per million capita over the past eight years, with four fatal attacks during this period, two of which occurred in 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Gandilhon. "Right-Wing Political Violence in France," pp. 153. At the same time, it should be noted that racist violence continued to exist and that the far-right continued to mobilize in the protest arena through actors such as Groupe Union Défense, Club de l'Horologe, the Nouvelle Droite.

<sup>30</sup> Koopmans, Ruud. "Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe: Grievances or Opportunities?" *European Journal of Political Research* 30, no. 2 (1996): 185-216; Jacob Aasland Ravndal. "Explaining Right-wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Grievances, Opportunities and Polarisation." *European Journal of Political Research* 57 (2017): 845-66.

To make sense of this development, we should distinguish between two types of right-wing violence: *racist violence* targeting ethnic and religious minorities and *anti-left violence* targeting political opponents. Based on data from both fatal and non-fatal attacks since 2015, these two types of violence account for as many as 63 of the 65 attacks during the last eight years. Both have long roots in the French society, as demonstrated in Figure 22.<sup>31</sup>

The most common form of right-wing violence, both in France and elsewhere, is racist violence. Since 2015, there has been 41 attacks against ethnic and religious minorities in France, of which 15 attacks specifically targeted Muslims, demonstrating how Islamophobic sentiments in general, as well as violent reactions to Islamist terrorism, contribute to the overall levels of racist violence. Moreover, five attacks explicitly targeted blacks.

In the remaining attacks (21 in total), which were at least partly driven by racism, the perpetrator targeted someone he – almost all perpetrators were men – considered to be either an immigrant, foreigner asylum seeker and/or refugee. In some cases, victims may be targeted due to multiple (perceived) identities. Given that French state policy rejects any reference to minorities,<sup>32</sup> the information about the victims of violence is based exclusively on media reporting, and, in many cases, utterances made by the perpetrator(s) prior to, during or after the attacks.

People perceived to be of Arabic descent seem to be particularly exposed to violence, reflecting the country's colonial history in the Middle East. In at least 15 attacks, the perpetrator explicitly mentioned the (perceived) Arabic origin of their victim(s) or made use of derogatory words like “bicot” or “bougnoles.”<sup>33</sup> More generally, racist violence is often characterized by perpetrators expressing profound nativist ideas in which those people with another ethnic background or skin color than that of the majority population is considered “dirty” and/or “terrorists” and thus a threat to perceived national (often white) purity and/or national security. For example, in 2021, a man of North African origin was sitting on a bench at a train station when an unknown, visibly intoxicated man approached him while calling him “dirty” and a “terrorist”, before repeatedly punching him in the face and the body. This kind of violence against people of North-African origin is so common in France that it even has its own name, *Ratonnade*. The expression comes from the very pejorative and racist word “raton”, which appeared for the first time in 1937. Victims are also frequently being told to “go back to where they belong”. For example, in 2018, after a demonstration held by *Bastion Social*, a neo-fascist group founded in 2017 by former members of the far-right student association *Groupe Union Défense*, a couple was attacked in their car by around a dozen group members who were shouting “go back and do dirty Arab Ramadan”.

Anti-left violence is the other common form of right-wing violence in France, which makes the country stand out compared to many other countries in Western Europe. As illustrated in Figure 11 earlier in this report, France had the second highest relative share of attacks targeting

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<sup>31</sup> The ‘other’ category includes two attacks in the region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté in 2017 where the same 17-year-old perpetrator first attacked two women in Chalon-sur-Saône before attacking two university student and one member of staff in Dijon about a week later.

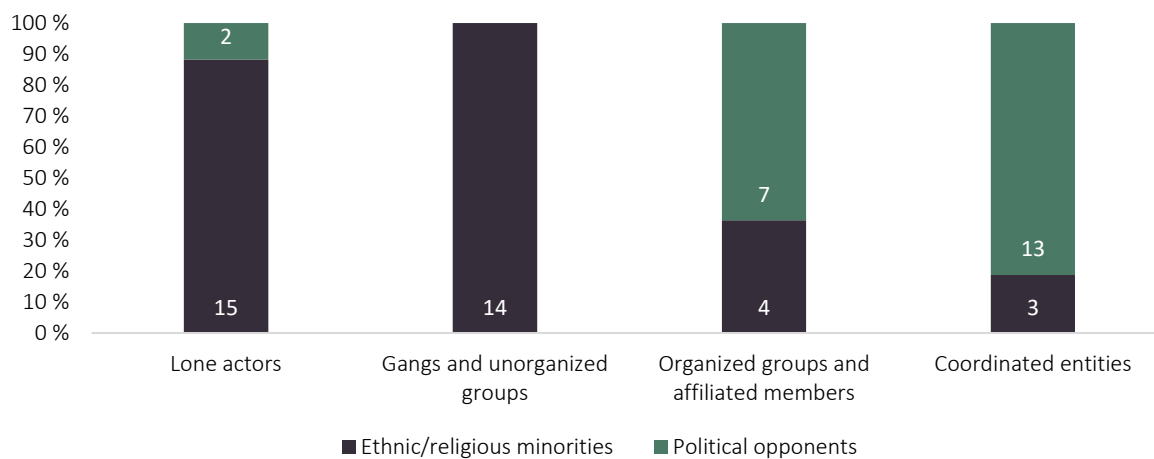
<sup>32</sup> See “How French law makes minorities invisible” in *The Conversation*, November 13, 2016. URL: <https://theconversation.com/how-french-law-makes-minorities-invisible-66723>

<sup>33</sup> Arabic decent is not one of the categories in the RTV dataset. This information is retrieved from the qualitative description of the events in the dataset.

political opponents of all countries in Western Europe in 2022. Since 2015, there have been 22 attacks targeting political opponents. Almost all these attacks have been directed at antifascist and left-wing activists, including members of *Jeunes communistes du Cher*, *SOS Racism*, and the small left-wing party *Lutte ouvrière*.<sup>34</sup> For example, in 2021 during the first electoral rally of the far-right presidential candidate Éric Zemmour, several right-wing activists attacked members of the anti-racist organization *SOS Racisme*, which had organized a non-violent demonstration wearing T-shirts with the message “No to Racism.” More generally, this type of anti-left violence reflects how increasing street presence by militant far-right groups, notably in Lyon, Paris, Nantes, Marseille, and Bourges, is challenged by opponents leading to fights, ambushes, and attacks on antifa bars.

Beyond the target selection, the dynamics of racist and anti-left violence are quite different. First, as shown in Figure 23, the two types of violence are carried out by different kinds of perpetrators, often using different kinds of weapons.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 23. Perpetrators of violence against ethnic/religious minorities and political opponents in France, 2015-2022 (n=58)



Note: five attacks excluded in figure 23 because they were perpetrated by either professional entities or because they remain unknown

While racist violence is typically committed by lone actors, gangs, or unorganized groups, anti-left violence is almost exclusively carried out by so-called coordinated entities (i.e., a constellation of at least two people with an apparent far-right association but no specific information about group name, see Box 2) or organized groups. The latter includes *Groupe Union Défense*, *Bastion Social*, *Breizh Firm*, *Jeunesses Nationalistes révolutionnaires*, and most recently, *Reconquête*, *Zouaves Paris*, *Action Française* and *Les Patriotes*.<sup>36</sup> Many of these groups

<sup>34</sup> Other attacks against political opponents include at least one attack against so-called ‘pro-immigration activist’ who worked for an NGO helping asylum seekers and two attacks against journalists covering demonstrations.

<sup>35</sup> It also seems like many perpetrators of racist violence, particularly the lone actors, are older men, just like in the two fatal events in 2022, while perpetrators of anti-left violence are younger men, often in their twenties.

<sup>36</sup> The association between lone actors and racist violence has become even clearer during the last eight years in the sense that severe violence towards ethnic and religious minorities are increasingly carried out by lone actors rather than (suspected) organized and unorganized groups. Lone actors were responsible for 4 out of 20 attacks between 2015 and 2018 compared to 11 out of 21 between 2019 and 2022. Almost all these attacks happened during the last two years.

have been banned precisely because of their involvement in violence.<sup>37</sup> Related to the different perpetrator types, racist violence is characterized by a wide variety of different weapons, ranging from fists to sharp objects (e.g., knives) and firearms, while anti-left violence is almost exclusively characterized by beating and kicking.

Second, the violence takes place in different places. Racist violence seems to happen nearly everywhere, including at the workplace or at home, in (the victim's own) cars, in the streets and public parks, outside of schools and mosques, on public transportation, in refugee shelters or migrant camps, in bars or restaurants, in the supermarkets and community buildings, or at festivals. Some are even attacked while being in custody when police officers act as perpetrators of far-right violence. And while there are several attacks in bigger cities, not least in Paris, many attacks take place in more rural areas and smaller towns. This is not the case with anti-left violence, however, which usually takes place in the street, almost exclusively in urban settings, reflecting that this violence may be an attempt to dominate public spaces of the bigger cities. Only in a few cases have political opponents been attacked at home or in schools.

Third, the context leading up to the attack is often different. Most of the racist attacks seem to be completely unprovoked, though some of them can be considered "racialized revenge attacks" in the sense that the perpetrator is holding the victim responsible for terrorist attacks due to their religion (Islam) or origin (Middle East). These attacks take place in the immediate aftermath of Islamist terrorism, such as the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January 2015, a series of coordinated Islamist terrorist attacks in November the same year, including the attack against the Bataclan theatre, and the murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty in 2020. The anti-left attacks, on the other hand, are perhaps better seen as meso-level examples of escalation of violence given that we often do not know "who started". These attacks often occur in a setting where far-right groups react violently to far-left groups taking down far-right posters, putting up far-left posters, staging counter-protests, handing out flyers demanding more repressive measures towards the far-right, or flyers in support of left-wing politicians. Attacks against political opponents are also more likely to be premediated rather than spontaneous. In several of the attacks, our data suggests that the far-right militants are actively looking for "antifa" members. For example, in 2019, at least 15 far-right militants equipped with telescopic batons and teargas attacked the visitors of a far-left bar, the *HoPoPop Café*, in Nantes while yelling "where are the antifas?"

Fourth, the two types of violence have developed differently in recent years. While the level of racist violence seems stable over time with 20 attacks between 2015 and 2018 and 21 attacks between 2019 and 2022, the anti-left violence has increased from 8 to 14 attacks when comparing the same periods. Arguably, this development is primarily linked to the growing polarization in France, though the "no decline" in racist violence, which has been observed in many other countries, is partly reflecting violent responses to Islamists terrorism.<sup>38</sup> While the level of polarization *in society* – that is, the extent to which there is general agreement on the general direction this society should develop – has not increased significantly in recent years,

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<sup>37</sup> Lebourg, Nicolas, and Marlene Laruelle. "The New Horizons of the French Extreme Right: Fragmented but Dynamic and Better Socially Embedded." In *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe*, 217-29. 2023.

<sup>38</sup> See also Nicolas Lebourg et Isabelle Sommier. "La discontinuité des violence idéologiques" in Sommier, Isabelle; Audigier, François; and Crettiez, Xavier. (eds.). *Violence politiques en France de 1986 à nos jours*. (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2021): 29-54



mainly because France was already highly polarized,<sup>39</sup> the level of *political* polarization has increased since 2010. This type of polarization refers to the extent to which “political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussion.” Previous research has suggested that polarization is positively associated with political violence.<sup>40</sup>

Since late 2021, within the context of increasing polarization, France has also witnessed the rise of a new and more extreme far-right presidential candidate, Éric Zemmour. Although being more of a symptom than a cause of political polarization, Zemmour has demonstrated an ambivalent relationship to violence and promoted a profoundly nativist discourse. Not only has he been convicted three times of incitement to racial or religious hatred; he has also been using evasive language when confronted with violence by his own supporters. For example, when his supporters violently attacked activists from *SOS Racisme*, as described above, he responded as follows: “I obviously condemn all violence, but these are people who came to provoke. They had nothing to do there.” During his campaign, Zemmour also accused the public broadcast media of being “in the service of an ideology that detests France” and of “spitting on the French people” shortly after a “joke” at an international security trade fair in which he pointed a gun at journalists.<sup>41</sup> With regard to ethnic minorities, Zemmour has, for example, referred to unaccompanied foreign minors as “thieves and rapists” and that France “must send them back” – an argument that is echoed by violent perpetrators.<sup>42</sup>

While Zemmour do not call for violent action in the same way as some other far-right parties have done in recent years (e.g., Golden Dawn in Greece), his ambiguous statements related to violence and extreme rhetoric on migrants and Muslims could be one of the reasons why the violence is considered a viable strategy or necessary forms of action by both organized and unorganized far-right actors. Indeed, recent events this year, such as militant mobilization in Lyon in November 2023, suggest that the violent threat from the far right is more urgent in France than in a long time. As such, the French case suggests that the relationship between far-right violence and electoral strategies might be more complex than commonly assumed and that it hinges upon the discourse promoted by those actors running for office.

## Conclusion

This report has presented key findings from the 2022 update of the RTV dataset. The data shows that levels of right-wing violence in Western Europe is declining and mainly characterized by spontaneous forms of racist violence rather than premediated, more terroristic forms of violence. In fact, if we exclude spontaneous attacks (a defining feature of terrorism is premeditation) as well as premeditated attacks using “light weapons” (e.g., beating, kicking, or blunt instruments), we are left with only 11 attacks that may qualify as terrorism. A manual review of these 11 attacks further allows the exclusion of three additional cases that clearly do not satisfy any standard

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<sup>39</sup> See Varieties of Democracy: [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/VariableGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/)

<sup>40</sup> Ravndal, Jacob Aasland. “Explaining Right-wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Grievances, Opportunities and Polarisation.” *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 4 (2018): 845-66; Jupskås, Anders Ravik, and Maik Fielitz. “Far-Right Violence in Greece in Comparative Perspective.” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 40, no. 1 (2022): 95-115.

<sup>41</sup> “French presidential candidate asked to acknowledge, condemn supporters’ violence against reporters”. URL: <https://rsf.org/en/french-presidential-candidate-asked-acknowledge-condemn-supporters-violence-against-reporters>

<sup>42</sup> “Éric Zemmour is no fascist – he’s the creature of the French establishment”. URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/eric-zemmour-is-no-fascist-hes-the-creature-of-the-french-establishment/>

definition of terrorism, leaving us with a total of eight completed attacks from 2022 that may qualify as terrorism, including two fatal attacks. In total, these eight attacks led to four fatalities and seven people being severely wounded. By comparison, the spontaneous attacks from 2022 led to two fatalities and as many as 103 people being severely wounded. In other words, spontaneous and racially motivated violence is causing considerably more physical harm than attacks that may be regarded as terrorism.

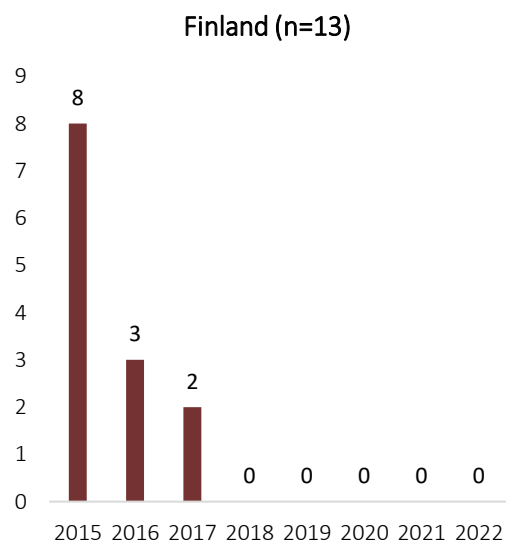
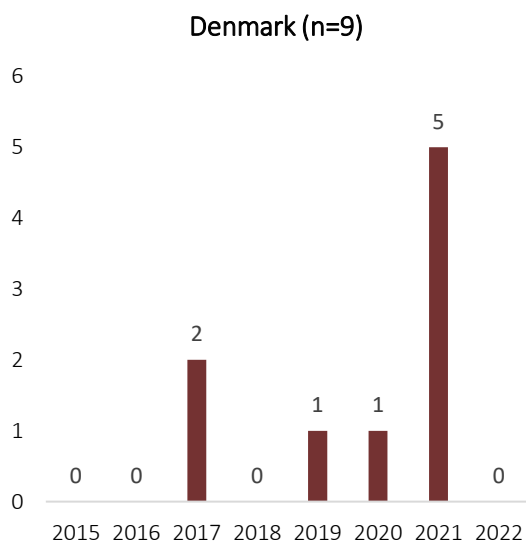
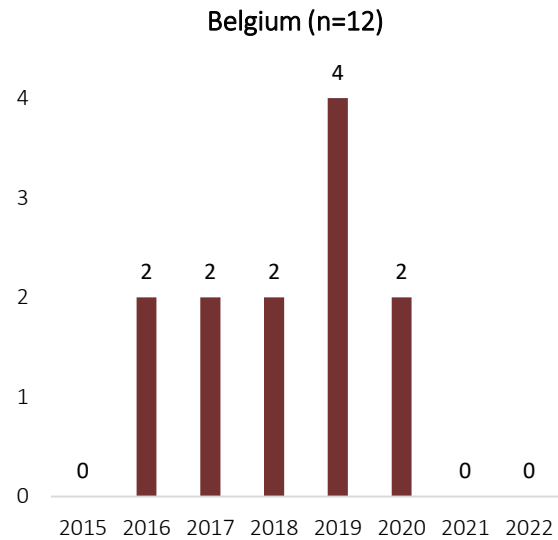
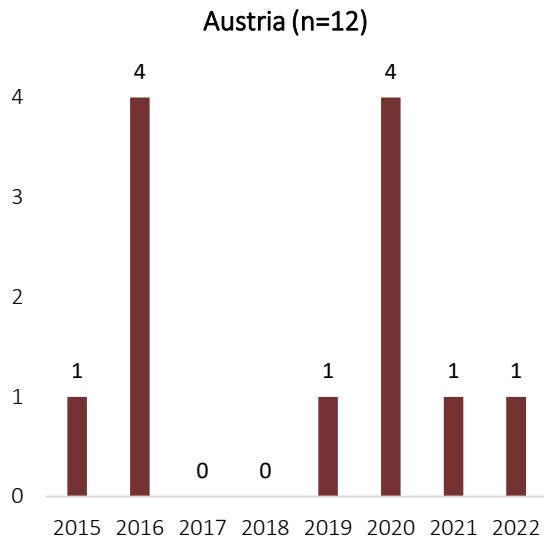
Furthermore, while the frequency of completed attacks is indeed declining in Western Europe, our data clearly documents that on average, Western Europe experienced about two severe attacks whose target selection was premised on far-right beliefs every week of 2022. For the entire post-2015 period, Western Europe experienced about three severe attacks leading to about five persons being either severely wounded or, in some cases, killed, every week because of far-right violence. In other words, while a decline in the number of attacks is good news, Western Europe is still facing a considerable threat of violence from the far right causing suffering and fear among those being attacked.

To ensure that policymakers and practitioners tasked to prevent and counter far-right violence are as well informed as possible, we will continue to document and analyse this threat landscape in Western Europe also in the coming years. Moreover, we will improve and expand the dataset in at least three ways. First, we are currently undergoing a major revision to increase the number of years eligible for non-fatal trend analysis and correlational research pre-2015. See our [RTV Methodology](#) for further details. Our goal is to cover all fatal as well as severe but non-fatal RTV events between 2010 and 2023 by the time of our next RTV Trend Report is to be published in 2024. Second, we are expanding the geographical coverage of the RTV dataset into new regions, including Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Some of this work is already published in open access academic journals.<sup>43</sup> Finally, we are collaborating closely with partners from the United States involved in the production of similar data, such as the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the Bias Homicide Database. Our goal is to create data that may be used to compare trends between Western Europe and the United States.

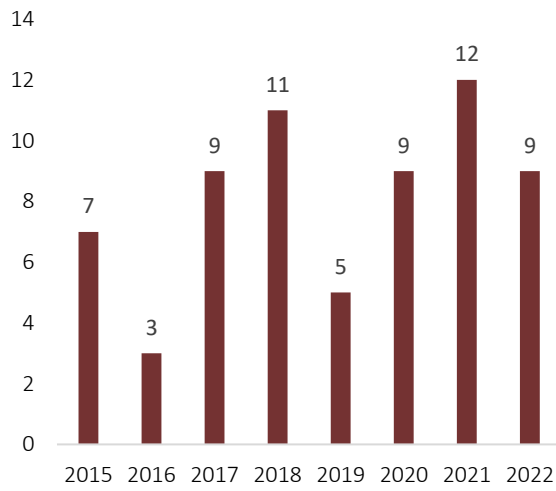
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<sup>43</sup> Harris-Hogan, Shandon. "Is Far-Right Violence Actually Increasing in Australia? Tracking Far-Right Terrorism and Violence in Australia Between 1990-2020." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 2 (2023).

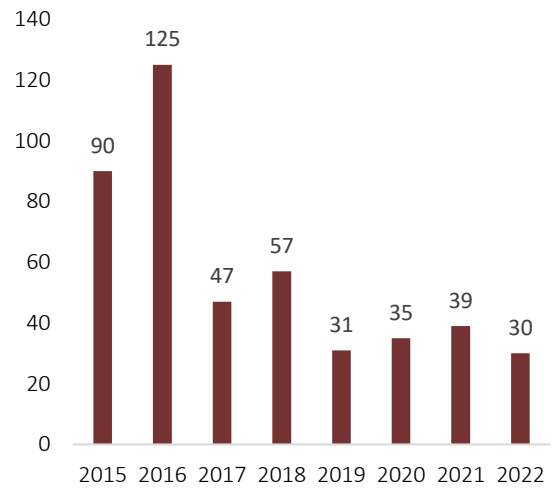
## Appendix 1: Distribution of completed attacks (absolute numbers) per country, 2015-2022



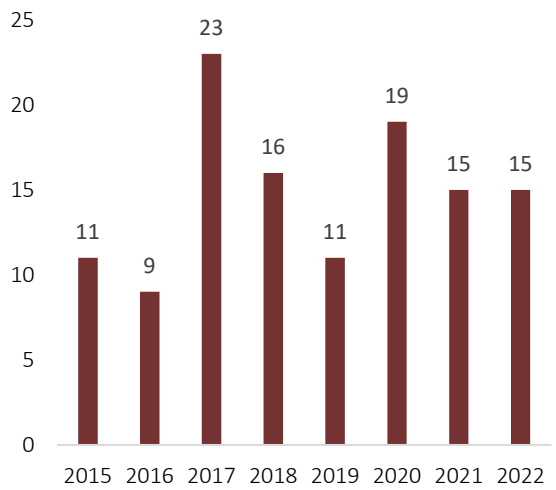
France (n=65)



Germany (n=454)



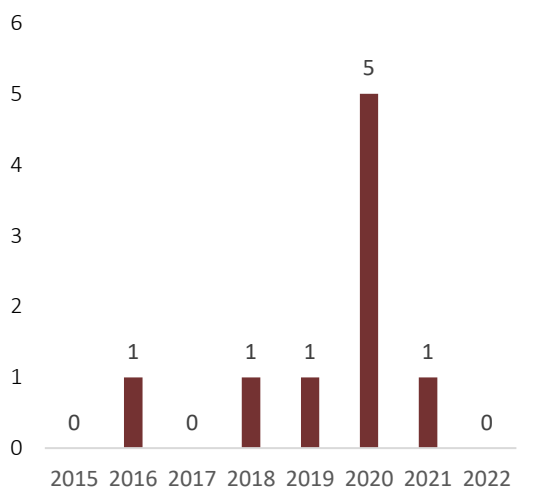
Greece (n=119)



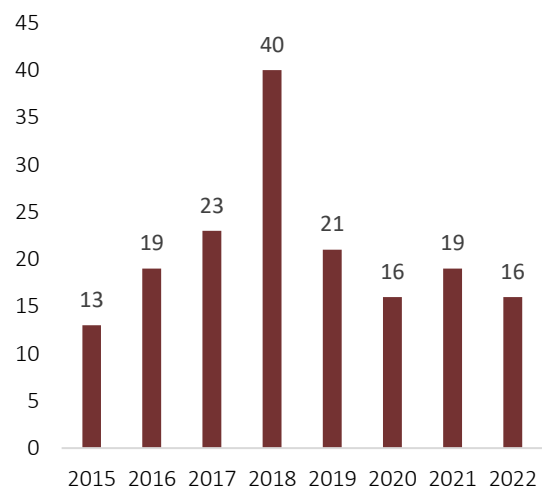
Iceland (n=0)



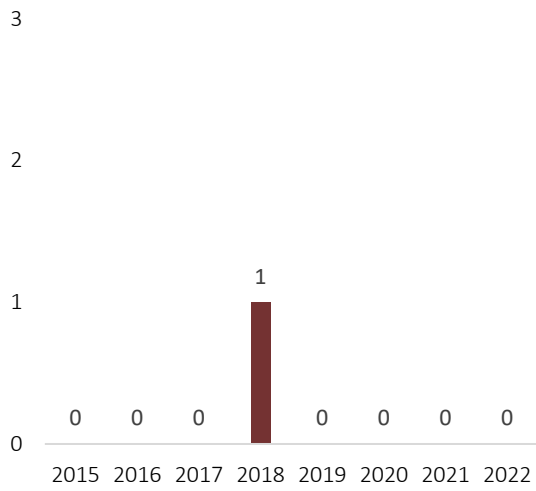
Ireland (n=9)



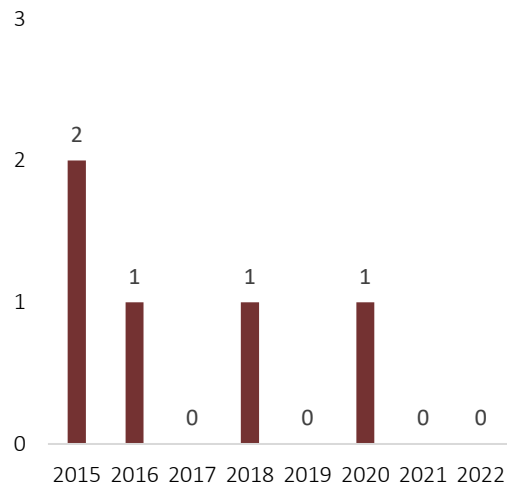
Italy (n=167)



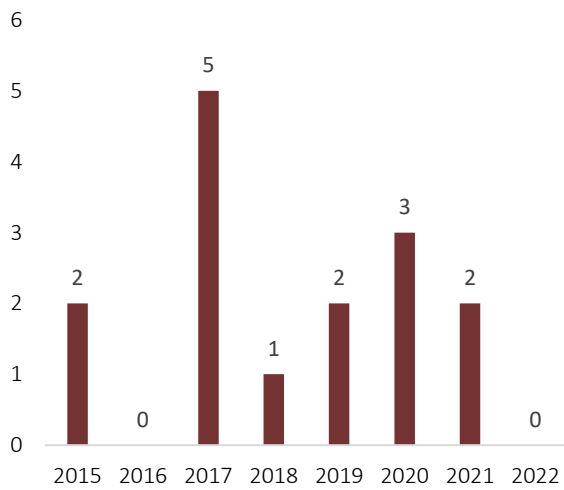
Luxembourg (n=1)



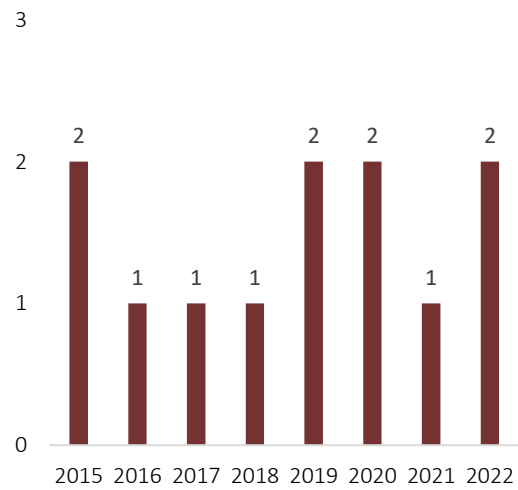
Netherlands (n=5)



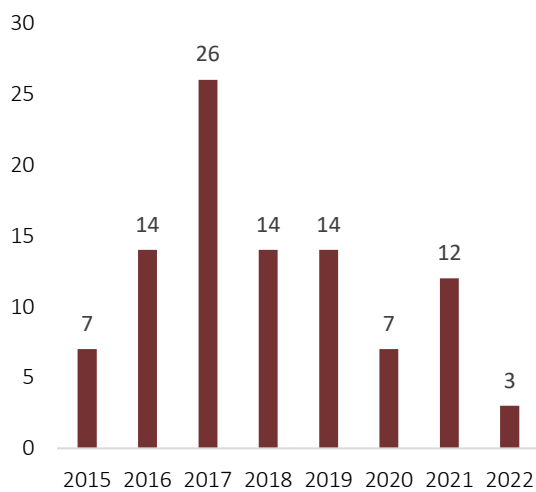
Norway (n=15)



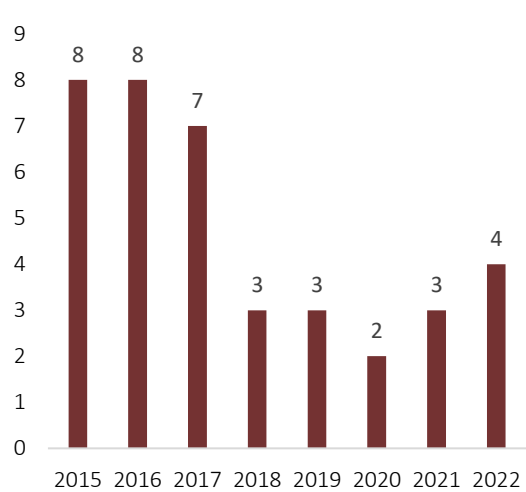
Portugal (n=12)

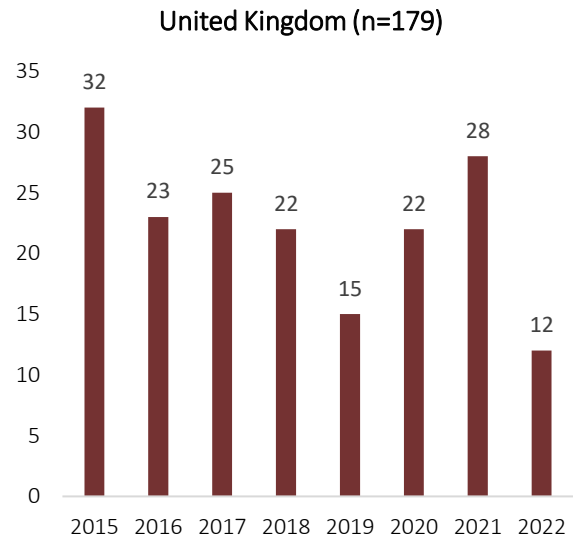
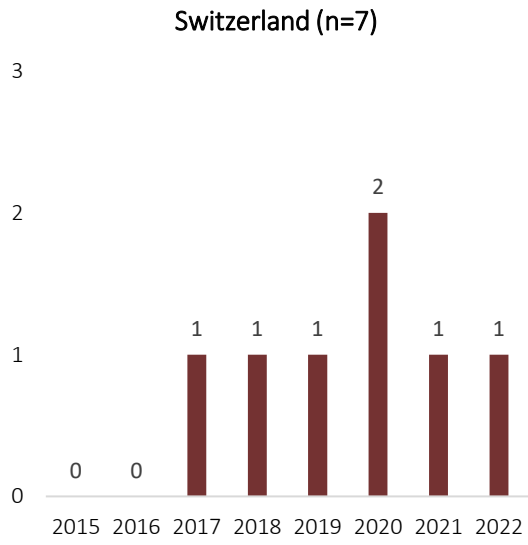


Spain (n=97)



Sweden (n=38)





## **RTV Trend Report 2023**

Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990 - 2022

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