

EVENT SUMMARY AND CEP POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*CEP Webinar Supported by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany
on December 13, 2021:*

***“Paramilitary Training Activities of Violent Right-Wing Extremists:
Threat, Mitigation Opportunities, and Challenges”***

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EVENT CONCEPT

One of the most concerning offline threats emanating from members of the transnational violent right-wing extremist and terrorist movement concerns ongoing paramilitary training activities. In the past few years, paramilitary training activities of members of this movement concentrated on locations in the United States, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Balkans, while in South African right-wing extremists have strengthened their connections to networks in the United States and Europe and served as an inspiration.

The first time such activities have come to the forefront was during the conflict in the Ukraine, where a significant number of European and American [right-wing extremists traveled to the country](#) to participate in the conflict. [Some of these extremists](#) remained in the country while other returned or are currently engaged in other conflict zones. Those right-wing extremist fighters that returned present a latent security risk in their home countries. Their military combat experience, coupled with their extremist ideologies, remain a serious concern. The Ukraine conflict also increased the [role and relevance of Central and Eastern European groups and networks](#) for the transnational movement as a whole. During the past several years, commercially driven [weapons and paramilitary training infrastructure](#) has developed in Central and Eastern Europe which does not seem to deploy particular strict know-your-customer protocols when offering sensitive training services to foreigners. This commercial infrastructure [has been used regularly by right-wing extremists](#) to obtain professional paramilitary training.

Furthermore, the close connection of many networks within the movement to the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) scene in Europe and the United States as well as the penetration of violent right-wing extremist individuals in the professional security industry may aid in the preparation for and perpetration of violence and therefore deserves further analysis. In order to counter these activities, both common legal concepts as well as the further development of a range of legal and administrative measures is necessary. These could focus on disrupting travel of the respective individuals, as well as increasing controls over access to arms, ammunitions, explosive material, and [their precursors](#). Finally, greater clarity over potential financial flows towards these training facilities and the respective online content related to members of violent right-wing extremist and terrorist networks could serve as an early warning mechanism.

This webinar explored the issue of paramilitary training activities of violent right-wing extremists in Central and Eastern Europe and discussed the challenges and opportunities that governments encounter when attempting to mitigate this threat. This webinar was the fourth event in a [virtual event series](#) during which CEP, supported by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, examined the various challenges emanating from the transnational right-wing extremist and terrorist movement.

CEP has compiled a briefing paper for this event, which can be accessed [here](#).

EVENT AGENDA

Moderator

Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler

Senior Director, Counter Extremism Project

Introductory remarks

Gabriele Scheel

Head of Division “International Cooperation against Terrorism, Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime and Corruption”, Federal Foreign Office of Germany

Panel 1: Existing training infrastructure and threat analysis

Kacper Rekawek, PhD

Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo

Jakub Woroncow, PhD

Researcher, Institute of Social Safety (IBS), Poland

Ruslan Trad

Journalist, co-founder of De Re Militari Journal and member of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria

Panel 2: Government countermeasures, challenges, and opportunities

Jan Bartošek

Security Policy Department, Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic

Gilles de Kerchove

Former E.U. Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and CEP advisory board member

EVENT VIDEO RECORDING

Please find the event video recording [here](#).

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS

Introductory remarks

Gabriele Scheel

Head of Division “International Cooperation against Terrorism, Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime and Corruption”, Federal Foreign Office of Germany

Unfortunately, far-right extremism is gaining ground in Germany and an increasing transnational connectivity can be observed. Thus, the Federal Foreign Office of Germany has been placing this issue on the international agenda via various multilateral fora. It will also be one of the priorities of the German G7 presidency in 2022. The new government coalition assesses that violent far-right extremism is the biggest threat for democracy in Germany and intends to tackle this threat at the level of the European Union (EU) as well.

The paramilitary training infrastructure of far-right extremists has been growing in Central and Eastern European (CEE) states. In combination with right-wing extremist ideology this poses a severe threat for public security as it can result in terrorist crimes. Thus, for instance, travel routes of known violent right-wing extremists need to be observed by the relevant authorities.

Panel 1: Existing training infrastructure and threat analysis

Kacper Rekawek, PhD

Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo

The CEE region is not necessarily a “Shangri-la” for Western far-right militants or right-wing extremists. This also relates to the issue of paramilitary activities. A very well-developed paramilitary training infrastructure is available in the region. However, this infrastructure is primarily commercially oriented and not controlled by local radicals whose militancy is often overestimated (Poland) or hampered by the government (Hungary). Furthermore, several leading paramilitary stakeholders are government affiliated and controlled (Poland) or seemingly ideologically at odds with the Western right-wing extremist (XRW) scene (Czech Republic and Slovakia).

Consequently, Western extremists who attempt to utilize this infrastructure for their purposes, such as the Hanau shooter, do not involve themselves in the intricacies of the regional extremism-paramilitarism axis. They tend to obtain their training privately, potentially under false names, most likely skipping the scant security protocols that these privately run commercial training facilities employ.

Therefore, two major security concerns arise for Western security authorities. The first is the potential connection between Western right-wing extremists with likeminded CEE paramilitaries. Although CEE paramilitaries deny that their orientation is far right or right-wing extremist, they nevertheless share many ideological stances with Western radicals. This ideological proximity can allow for closer cooperation in the future. Furthermore, CEE paramilitaries have established

connections to Russia that are similar to some parts of the Western right-wing extremist scene. These shared eastward looking networks can be strengthened at any point. The second concern is the risk that Western right-wing extremists obtain paramilitary training through Ukrainian networks and training facilities. Although these Ukrainian training networks are currently more internally focused, their commercial orientation also allows for the training of foreigners without clear and effective screening procedures for foreign trainees. Consequently, the current situation can develop into a major security threat for Western security authorities. The possibility of a truly transnational and paramilitary XRW arch stretching from Moscow via CEE into the heart of Western Europe is not unthinkable.

Jakub Woroncow, PhD

Researcher, Institute of Social Safety (IBS), Poland

Although there are many civil defense organizations with radical right-wing leanings active in Poland, one cannot speak of a paramilitary right-wing extremist training infrastructure. Not least because access to weapons is very restricted in Poland. However, the threat should not be ignored because certain civil-military personnel have been involved in suspicious activities in this regard, for instance, giving non-weapons related training to Polish right-wing extremists and being active in Ukraine.

In Poland, there are no known cases of right-wing extremist groups with military training – only in rare individual cases with connection to Russia, notably the Russian Imperial Movement, which afforded paramilitary training to two Polish individuals in the past. Furthermore, it is important to note that foreign extremists of the Ukrainian Asov Regiment came to Poland for military training on a private, commercial basis in the past, but there was no connection to official (military) forces.

Ruslan Trad

Journalist, co-founder of De Re Militari Journal and member of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria

Bulgaria has seen an increase in political extremism both on the right as well as the left spectrum. The migration crisis of the past years provided an “excuse” for establishing right-wing militias, which try to mobilize and recruit using the narrative of defense against “Islamic intruders”. Local militia elements have received training from Russian instructors in Bulgaria in some cases. Moreover, some vigilante-type groups have performed “citizen arrests” of Muslim refugees.

Bulgaria is one of the important locations for cooperation and collaboration of European and U.S. right-wing extremist groups. The Bulgarian groups are sometimes used as covert instruments for wider anti-EU/NATO movements. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented such Bulgarian groups from gaining further strength.

In the Bulgarian border region towards Turkey, for instance, there are paramilitary training facilities, which are run not only by nationalistic business people but also by elements of the state’s security apparatus. Right-wing extremists from several countries have come to these facilities and received training, including the Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant. The training includes weapons such as AR-15s and mixed martial arts techniques.

Anti-EU parties in the Bulgarian parliament with clear ties to Russia have connections to far-right extremist groups in Bulgaria and there is a lack of enforcement against these groups by Bulgarian authorities.

Panel 2: Government countermeasures, challenges, and opportunities

Jan Bartošek

Security Policy Department, Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, extremist entities have been closely monitored since the 1990s and the possible efforts of extremist groups trying to gain access to legal firearms was identified as a potential threat. The need to deal with this threat became evident after the outbreak of the so-called Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and the migration crisis of 2015. As a consequence, legislative action has been taken: Effective since January 30, 2021, is a legal Act on dealing with weapons in cases relating to the internal or external security of the Czech Republic.

Important to mention is the ban on armed groups, which prohibits “to establish or organize an armed group, to provide armaments to an armed group or to participate on activities of such a group.” An “armed group” in the framework of the new legislation is defined as a group of persons, that “a) can be characterized as a paramilitary force, b) follows political, religious or other ideological objectives, and c) deals with weapons, tries to gain access to weapons or organizes other persons who deal with weapons.” Violation of the relevant Article is an administrative offence; it bans the mere constitution of armed groups (on the contrary, the actual activities of an armed group would constitute a crime under the Penal Code). Legal persons and natural persons are equally punishable. Sanctions are a fine up to CZK 200,000 (approx. EUR 8,000) and a temporary ban on dealing with arms (up to 7 years). These sanctions are administered by the Ministry of Interior.

In conclusion, the ban on armed groups is primarily an explicit condemnation of autonomous (non-state) militias. The mere announcement of the Draft Act in 2019 resulted in the voluntary dissolution of several inchoate militias before the law even came into effect (such as Zemská domobrana, Nymburští lvi, Sušičtí vlčáci, Batalion Valašské Meziříčí). Consequently, so far, it was not necessary to apply the outlined legal mechanism against a potential or a real armed group.

Gilles de Kerchove

Former E.U. Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and CEP advisory board member

A comprehensive approach is needed to tackle the threat posed by right-wing extremist groups, including the threat emanating from paramilitary training activities of violence-oriented or violent right-wing extremist actors across national borders. As a necessary first step, a common understanding of the phenomenon of violent right-wing extremism and terrorism is required, which includes a working definition. Such a common definition would then be the basis on which reliable data can be gathered across the EU to gain a more granular understanding of the scope and details of the overall threat. Secondly, we need to identify best practices, especially regarding P/CVE approaches and methods. Thirdly, the online dimension of the threat posed by violent right-wing

extremism and terrorism needs to be analyzed and addressed in a sustained manner. Finally, international cooperation is essential, especially with the United States.

As far as paramilitary training infrastructures in the EU are concerned, EUROPOL has already begun working on this issue. Crucially, cooperation especially with Western Balkan states has increased. However, more legislative actions (with a focus on the EU Counterterrorism Directive) are needed covering paramilitary training activities – as such activities have happened especially in Ukraine. There is already a significant amount of regulation in place, which should be examined with this threat in mind to ascertain how much of the already available regulatory and administrative instruments can be brought to bear here.

Designations of relevant groups as terrorist organizations are an important tool in this regard. In addition, EUROPOL should be provided with reliable data by Member States on individuals travelling to other countries for paramilitary training. Furthermore, operators of private paramilitary training facilities should be obliged to follow Know-Your-Customer und Due Dilligence procedures concerning their clients. Already established procedures in the financial sector could serve as a blueprint. Military intelligence agencies of Member States need to be as engaged on this issue as they are already (successfully) as far as the Islamist-extremist violent milieu is concerned. Finally, especially in Eastern Europe and Western Balkan states, the issue of availability of demilitarized weapons needs to be addressed more effectively, in particular as it relates to the resale and illegal reactivation of such weapons.

CEP POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase data collection and analysis focusing on both the available commercial and ideologically driven paramilitary training infrastructure and potential connections between them.
 - In this regard “Look East to look West”: It is important to further study and assess the professedly anti-Western, anti-liberal, pan-Slavic paramilitary/militia/self-defence non-state groups operating in CEE. One particular focus should be on analysing their level of transnational connectivity in two directions. On the one hand, their connectivity to Western European right-wing extremist networks, groups, and individuals should be better understood. On the other hand, in order to assess the risks that these networks pose, it is also crucial to assess their connections to Russian networks groups and organizations. Here, both westward as well as eastward transnational connections are relevant. Even if direct connections to Western European right-wing extremist networks are not strong, shared connections to Russian networks can still act as a facilitating factor connecting Western European violent right-wing extremists to paramilitary structures in neighbouring states (e.g. Czech Republic).

- Explore the possibility of establishing an EU-wide database of operating commercial facilities, including information concerning the training that is offered, the weapons and materials used as well as the beneficial ownership of these facilities.
 - In this regard, increase information exchange between appropriate government authorities in those countries from which violence-oriented right-wing extremists travel to obtain paramilitary training and authorities in those countries in which such commercial facilities operate.

- Work towards establishing closer cooperation with governments in non-EU countries in which similar facilities operate and have been used by violence-oriented right-wing extremists in the past.
 - In this regard, impress upon the Ukrainian authorities the concern that the country’s growing paramilitary training infrastructure can be misused by violent right-wing extremists from Western Europe. As dismantlement of this infrastructure would be political costly for Kyiv at this point, Ukrainian authorities could be asked to collect and collate information concerning the training of foreigners in these facilities and transfer this information to the respective authorities in the country of origin of the trainees. In particular, this should be the case for foreign radicals connecting with their ideological counterparts in Ukraine while training. Ukrainian security authorities have responded positively to similar calls from U.S. authorities and established an effective cooperation mechanism. As a result of this cooperation, Ukraine expelled individuals who attempted to set up a local chapter of the Atomwaffen Division. A similar cooperation should be established with EU security authorities, especially in the light of the EU’s assistance to Ukraine.

- Increase collection and compilation of data concerning violence-oriented right-wing extremists that have traveled or aspire to travel to such facilities to obtain commercial training. This could be done through a specially dedicated project at the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL).
 - In this regard, in addition to attempting to designate extremist or paramilitary partners of Western European extremists or paramilitaries as terrorist organisations or introducing bans of their foreign organisations in the EU, authorities could as a first step ban travel into the Schengen zone of the leaders of these “enabling,” non-EU outfits and freeze their assets as well as evoke temporary travel restrictions on violent right-wing extremist individuals planning to travel to obtain paramilitary training in countries other than their home country.

- Explore the possibility to strengthen national as well as European Union regulation focusing on commercial paramilitary training facilities and setting appropriate standards for customer due diligence as well as cooperation mechanisms with appropriate government authorities.
 - In this regard, assess whether the Czech “anti-paramilitary” law, which bans groups intent on arming themselves regardless of their ideology, could be a model for legislative frameworks of other EU Member States. This could enhance efforts of those governments wishing to control the non-state element of the paramilitary phenomenon within their jurisdiction.

- Raise awareness among global social media platforms on the threat posed by the misuse of their services by violence-oriented right-wing extremist entrepreneurs, in particular when this misuse also includes the commercial sale of unregulated weapons, such as crossbows or knives by such entrepreneurs.