

# Don't conflate Europe's racial terror with the rise of hard-right parties

*Fears that far-right extremism is linked entirely to the continent's rapidly growing fringe political movements with nativist agendas are misplaced*

DAMIEN MCELROY

The right-wing extremist who carried out a killing spree targeting shisha cafes in southern Germany last week was driven by a desire to "cleanse" his homeland. By the standards of the 24-page manifesto that Tobias Rathjen, 43, left behind, the death of a 35-year-old pregnant woman would mark a grim double victory. The woman was among eight victims in the town of Hanau, near Frankfurt, who died when Rathjen started his attack.

From the headlines of the past few days, there is evidence to suggest that ideologically driven acts of terror are gaining pace around Europe. So much so that there are many questioning just how isolated the extremists are. Is there a groundswell of wider social and political support for "manifestos" from the killers? Is there a hinterland among the new hard-right parties on the rise in European parliaments with a symbiotic relationship with neo-fascists?

These questions are pressing most obviously in Germany, where the Hanau attack has been condemned by state leaders and ordinary citizens alike.

Politics in Europe's largest country has been upended in recent months by events originating in the town of Erfurt on the border of the old East and West Germany, where local resident Bjorn Hocke is the regional leader of the AFD, a resurgent hard-right party capturing up to 20 per cent in nationwide polls. It has posted billboards that



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make plain its programmatic prejudice. One version states simply: "Stop Islamisation." In Germany, the idea of preserving Germans from other identities is something sacred in the public square – and the AFD revels in its post-Nazi taboo bursting.

Even in the digital-era, giant posters serve a proxy purpose. One group of activists erected a full-scale display outside Mr Hocke's

farmhouse home of Berlin's Holocaust memorial. A tonsorially-challenged opponent also funded his own banner sending up the idea that skinheads – a synonym for neo-Nazis – could be electorally viable. Adverts for a shaven-headed salon owner running for Germany's Liberal Party said he had excelled in history class, unlike all other skinheads.

Mr Hocke emerged as a pow-

er-broker on the national when his party topped the last year's state election and backed a Liberal candidate provincial leadership. The was far-reaching.

Annegret Kramp-Karrer the woman who had taken leadership of the centre Christian Democratic Party was thus the heir apparent Chancellor Angela Merke

# In Syria, Russia is weighing its opti

RAGHIDA DERGHAM

The military establishment in Russia is determined to contain Turkish ambitions in Syria and put an end to what it sees as excesses being committed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the war-torn country. However, members of Moscow's diplomatic corps are still hoping that the Turkish president would change course and avoid a potentially dangerous confrontation between the two regional powers in Syria's north. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, it is reliably learnt, is hoping to personally influence Mr Erdogan but finds himself in a position where there is pressure to make a decision quickly.

Either way, what is clear is that Russia will not abandon the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad. After all, Mr Al Assad's government is a key component in furthering Moscow's strategic interests in the Middle East.

I was in the Russian capital earlier in the week to attend the Valdai Club conference, the theme of which was "Middle East in a Time of Change: Towards New Stability Architecture". There, I met figures apprised of the thinking of the Russian civilian and military leadership groups – especially vis-a-vis Turkey and Iran – and got the sense that a military confrontation with Turkey in Syria is inevitable. For what they are worth, the Astana and Sochi agreements delineating the two sides' interests in the country are now in a state of

clinical death.

The military brass in Moscow believes that Mr Erdogan's efforts to undermine Russian involvement in Syria would have damaging consequences for its strategic interests, as well as prestige, and concludes that the time has come to counter his actions. Russian forces have momentum on the ground – and therefore control over timing – for them to swing into action. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to push for a political solution.

Russia defines its intervention in Syria "a war on terror" but it could well turn into a war for Syria. Which would be an important development because, while Russian public opinion might not warm up to the idea at the beginning, that will change when the conflict is framed in the context of a nation preserving its strategic interests and preventing Turkey from undermining its prestige.

Because of this deterioration in these ties, Iran – the third party to those agreements – could acquire greater importance for Russia. The catch, however, is that Moscow's attempt to strengthen its relations with Tehran in Syria and beyond would invite US measures against Russia – in the form of economic sanctions or even an undermining of its interests in other parts of the world. In other words, Moscow's two allies in Syria have become burdens – one economic and the other military.

There is certainly anxiety in Moscow regarding Iran's domestic



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the TurkStream inauguration in January. Relatio

*Even as Moscow continues to rely on diplomacy, the military establishment is preparing for a confrontation*