

# Monster or Hero? Far-right Responses to Anders Behring Breivik and the July 22, 2011 Terrorist Attacks

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## Abstract

*This study maps and seeks to explain the evolution of far-right responses to the July 22 terrorist attacks in 2011. We identify substantial temporal and spatial variation in how different far-right actors responded between 2011 and 2021. These findings present us with four puzzles: First, why was Breivik rejected by the far right in Western Europe, while receiving substantial support in Russia and eventually also from online subcultures originating in the United States? Second, why did parts of the far right not only reject Breivik, but vehemently condemn him? Third, why did initial support for Breivik in Western Europe come from individuals outside the organized far right? And fourth, why does support for Breivik seem to increase with distance in time and space? We argue that the nature of taboos offers an elegant explanation to these puzzles. We propose that the strength of the macro-cultural taboo against violence provides an overarching explanation, mediated by three taboo-related mechanisms referred to as contagion, rebellion, and decoupling. In regions where the taboo against violence is strong, most future support for right-wing terrorism will probably continue to manifest itself through anonymous online spaces, while the more organized far right will continue distancing itself from taboo violators to avoid becoming (complete) social and political pariahs.*

**Keywords:** Breivik, cultural taboo, far right, political violence, terrorism

## Introduction

For all the ways the far right has changed since World War II, one thing has remained constant: a particularly deep-seated animosity toward the political left.[1] Various labels – “multiculturalists”, “socialists”, “globalists” and “cultural Marxists”, the left is generally understood as an internal enemy. They are the traitors causing moral and societal decay that – wilfully or otherwise – lets outsiders take over.

When, on July 22, 2011, a 32-year-old white Norwegian man by the name of Anders Behring Breivik struck the governing Social Democratic Labour Party in two devastating attacks, one could therefore have expected that the far right had cause to celebrate and support Breivik. The fact that his manifesto mirrored the belief that Islam is a totalitarian ideology, and that Europe was being taken over by Muslims, lends further credence to the notion that Breivik would find support among the far right. These anti-Islamic beliefs had already come to dominate both West European radical right parties and far-right activists more generally.[2] It is therefore understandable that support for Breivik on the far right was raised as a major concern in the aftermath of the July 22 terrorist attacks. Yet, the flurry of writing and speculation along these lines was followed by little substantive empirical investigation. This article aims to narrow this gap by mapping the evolution of far-right responses to Breivik between 2011 and 2021.

Our mapping exercise identifies four puzzling patterns. First, while Breivik was rejected by the far right in Western Europe, he received substantial support in Russia and eventually also from online subcultures originating in the United States. Second, parts of the far right, most notably leaders of radical right parties in Western Europe and members of the anti-Islamic movement, not only rejected Breivik, but vehemently condemned him. Third, initial support in Western Europe came from individuals outside the organized far right. Fourth, support for Breivik appears to increase with distance in time and space.

We argue that the nature of *taboos* offers an elegant explanation to these puzzles. We therefore begin this article by presenting existing theory on cultural norms and the taboo against violence. Next, we describe the methods used in this article to map far-right responses to Breivik. We then provide an extensive overview of

these responses organized into three subsections: (1) complete and partial rejection; (2) partial and complete support – Wave One; and (3) partial and complete support – Wave Two. Finally, we apply our taboo framework to explain variation in far-right support across actors, time, and place.

### ***The Violence Taboo***

As is widely discussed in introductory sociology courses, culturally transmitted norms guide and constrain human behavior in profound ways.[3] Within a society, people are motivated to follow cultural norms based on both internal and external reasons.[4] When internalized, norms are followed because they are an end in and of themselves. Externally, norms are followed for strategic purposes – achieving goals and avoiding sanctions by others. Some norms possess such strong moral valence and agreement within society that breaking them is considered taboo. The term taboo has its etymological origins in the Polynesian word *tapu* – meaning “prohibited”. From the start, taboos have been understood as an effect of sacredness.[5] It is only taboo to transgress against that which is held to be sacred and holy. A common characteristic of taboo violation is that whoever violates the taboo also becomes taboo.[6] Taboo violation therefore has ripple effects, where the stigma transfers from the act onto the actor and then again onto those who become associated with the actor.[7]

What is taboo and how many taboos a society cultivates vary considerably across different cultures and within cultures over time. While it has been argued that “Western” culture is characterized by having very few taboos,[8] it harbours a strong taboo against violence.[9] Several (controversial) studies indicate that Western societies have become dramatically less violent over the last few centuries,[10] and that this is in part due to the codification and institutionalization of this taboo.[11] A central thesis by Charles Tilly was that democratic values and institutions in Europe were deliberately developed to put an end to incessant violence and bloodshed.[12] Political theorists have also argued that, ideally conceived, violence is “anathema” to the “spirit and substance” of democracy.[13] Outside the realms of normative theory, empirical studies also demonstrate that democratic societies are overall less violent than autocratic ones.[14] Survey data from some Western European countries suggest that only very small minorities accept the use of political violence against their political opponents.[15]

At the individual level, most will adhere to and uphold taboos. Some, however, have internalized them to the extent that they are willing to make extreme sacrifices to punish transgressions. In contrast, a small minority seem immune to social taboos. Sergey Gavrilets and Peter Richerson describe these extreme categories as the “oversocialized” and “undersocialized”, respectively.[16] A minority within this minority of “undersocialized” individuals can, for various reasons, also become motivated to actively rebel against taboos. The literature does not specify the underlying reasons for why some might be immune to or rebel against taboos, but sociological studies show that reasons for rebelling vary tremendously, depending on the nature of the taboo. Sometimes such rebellions can result in the dismantling and collapse of taboos. For instance, Western societies have witnessed major backlashes against “traditional norms and values”, such as the taboo against homosexuality. Notwithstanding the major substantive differences to the case under investigation here (the July 22 attacks), the implication is that we should expect similar patterns to play out in the case of the violence taboo. While this taboo will motivate most to reject violence and the perpetrators of violence wholesale, the very strength of this taboo may also drive a subset of the population to rebel against it and embrace violence.[17]

Finally, the literature on the phenomenon of humor provides an important clue about the nature of taboos that has implications for our case as well. Emerson argues that jokes “provide a useful channel for covert communication on taboo topics.”[18] More recent survey-based studies indicate that while people initially respond negatively to jokes about specific acts of violence, natural disasters, and other traumatic events, they become more accepting with time.[19] This change is correlated with whether people still see the events as threatening or not. As time passes, these jokes lose their appeal and simply become stale. In other words, the connection between a specific transgressive act and the general taboo becomes weakened as the act becomes more distant.

### Mapping Far-Right Responses to Breivik

Ever since the July 22 attacks in 2011, we have actively monitored and archived expressions of support for Breivik as well as negative responses. In total, the material we have gathered during this ten-year period amounts to an extensive collection of primary sources, including letters to and from Breivik, public statements, online support blogs, online message board archives, and far-right publications, supplemented with some secondary sources, most notably news articles describing far-right responses to Breivik. To promote transparency and replicability, primary sources cited or referenced in this article have been uploaded to an online repository and can be accessed by other researchers.[20]

In Western Europe, our analysis covers radical right parties in the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. Outside the political party domain, we cover prominent anti-Islamic groups and online communities such as Stop Islamization of Norway and the English Defence League, as well as some extreme-right groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement.

Beyond Western Europe, we look at how Russian neo-Nazis responded and—later—online communities operating at the transnational level. To the best of our efforts, we have also tried to track down and map supporters of Breivik that are unaffiliated to established far-right communities by actively scouring the web for expressions of support through a combination of using search engines, tracing hyperlink networks and manually following references (“snowballing”). This led us to an overlapping online community of support blogs that, at its peak, operated a total of 38 different websites.

For all cases, our categorization of responses ranges from complete rejection (“reject actions and ideas”), via partial rejection (“reject actions but not ideas”) and partial support (“support actions but not ideas”) to complete support (“support actions and ideas”). The premise on which this response typology is based is that supporting Breivik’s actions is qualitatively different and more severe than supporting his ideas. In the following sections, we map various far-right responses to Breivik by situating them within this framework.

### Complete and Partial Rejection

We begin with the most influential political actors on the far right, namely the (populist) radical right parties. Next, we turn to the Counter-Jihadi community and the broader anti-Islamic movement, and finally the white nationalist movement. Figure 1 below provides an overview.

**Figure 1.** Far-right Actors Completely or Partially Rejecting Breivik. (WE = Western Europe, NWA = North-Western Europe, NA = North America)

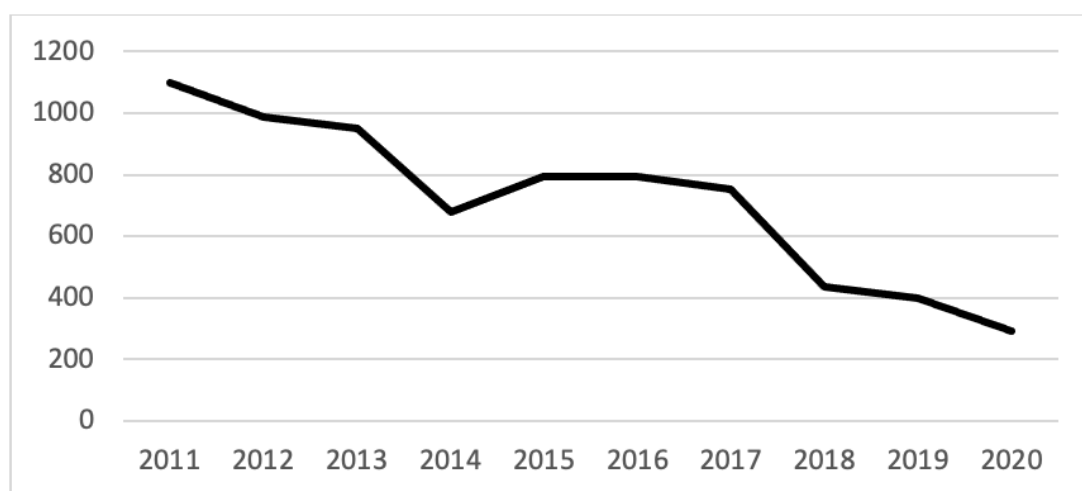
<i>Complete rejection</i> (reject actions and ideas)	<i>Partial rejection</i> (reject actions not ideas)	<i>Partial support</i> (support actions not ideas)	<i>Complete support</i> (support actions and ideas)
Radical right parties (NWE)	French & Italian radical right parties		
The anti-Islamic movement (NA & WE)			
White nationalist movement (NA & WE) →			

### *Western European Radical Right Parties*

No radical right party in Western Europe voiced official support for Breivik's actions or ideas. Many made public declarations condemning the attacks. Most of these parties faced massive levels of media scrutiny,[21] as well as public criticism after the attacks, often revolving around whether the far right in general could be held ideologically and morally responsible.[22] A final and crucial element is therefore how these parties dealt with such criticism. We start with the most proximate case, the Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP).

After the attacks, no other party came under such intense public scrutiny as the Progress Party. Figure 2 shows the amount of newspaper coverage between 2011 and 2020 – instances where Breivik and the Progress Party were mentioned in the same article.

**Figure 2.** Norwegian Newspaper Articles Mentioning Both the Progress Party and Breivik by Year



Source: Atekst Retriever. \*Search string: Breivik AND "Frp" OR "Fremskrittspartiet" OR "Siv Jensen".

Between July 22 and December 31, 2011, exactly 1,100 newspaper articles mentioned both the Progress Party and Breivik. While such co-mentions have declined from the peak in 2011, the number of articles nevertheless remained high throughout the entire period. This level of media coverage reflects several factors. First, the day after the attacks the public learned that Breivik had been a member of the Progress Party and representative for the Progress Party's youth wing in Oslo between 1997 and 2007.[23] Second, Breivik's manifesto demonstrated his obsession with the supposed "sneak Islamization" of Norway for which he primarily blamed the Labour Party, the main target of his attack. Progress Party leader Siv Jensen initially introduced "sneak Islamization" as a term during the parliamentary election campaign in 2009, also putting the blame on the Labour Party.[24] Third, during his trial, Breivik himself stated that "Had I not experienced that the press had torpedoed FrP in 2009 [the national elections], then I would probably not have gone through with the attacks." [25]

These three factors triggered a still-ongoing discussion and bitter conflict between those arguing that the Progress Party was in some way responsible, versus Progress Party representatives who decried these charges. Most prominently, a strong contingent within the Labour Party leadership and their youth wing has called for holding the Progress Party morally accountable for Breivik's attacks.[26] This remains a wellspring of conflict and has contributed to the polarization of citizens' perceptions of the two political factions.[27]

When confronted with the fact that Breivik had been a member of the Progress Party, its leader Siv Jensen described the attacks as "horrible and cowardly" and a "national tragedy" that went against the "principles and values of the entire Norwegian society." [28] Jensen also said it was a day when "all 25,000 Progress Party members are Labour Youth members." [29]

Unlike other radical right parties, the Progress Party openly said they would tone down their rhetoric and they

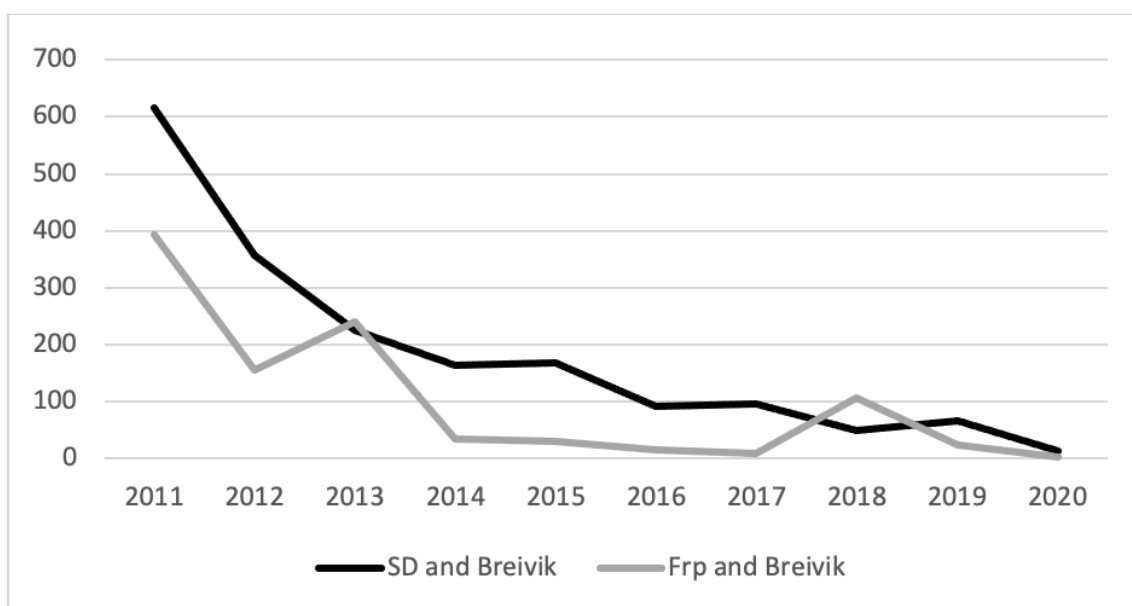
did not campaign on opposition to Muslim immigration during the local elections, which resulted in a loss of support.[30] The party leadership also demonstrated a willingness to sanction anybody that crossed their newly imposed line, particularly expressions that could be interpreted as support for Breivik.[31] In response to the criticism, questions and charges, however, Jensen and Progress Party candidates also responded by describing these as a political ploy to destroy them and their credibility and accused opponents making associations between Breivik and the Progress Party as “playing the July 22 card”.

On July 23, 2011, Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the radical right Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD), issued a statement condemning the attacks as an attack on democratic society, saying “we will never accept that violence and terror take root in our society” while offering his condolences to the victims, their relatives and the Norwegian people.[32] Four days later, during an interview on *Sveriges Radio*, Sweden’s national publicly funded radio broadcasting service, Åkesson was pressed on whether SD held some responsibility for the attacks. This was just one of several hundred times SD was linked with Breivik in the Swedish mass media. As seen in Figure 3, co-mentions of SD and Breivik have been more frequent than co-mentions of Breivik and FrP, the party of which he was a former member.

In the abovementioned radio interview, Åkesson rejected any responsibility for the attacks and any comparison made between SD and Breivik. When asked about the difference between SD’s and Breivik’s politics apart from the methods Breivik used, Åkesson said: “One cannot disregard a person’s methods since they are clearly connected with the ideology one has. I believe in democracy and I believe in openness and I make no compromise on those values.”[33] There were nevertheless some incidents where local SD politicians expressed sympathy and support for Breivik online. These politicians were exiled from the SD,[34] with party leader Åkesson openly condemning some of their statements.[35]

Similar patterns of media scrutiny and harsh criticism from political opponents played out across Western Europe. The Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Belgian Vlaams Belang (VB), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) all responded with complete rejection. Party leaders condemned Breivik, described him as a “monster”, “cynical mass murderer” and “madman”. Furthermore, all party leaders went on the counter-offensive, arguing that Breivik and the attacks were used strategically for political gain and to silence (legitimate) debate.

**Figure 3.** Swedish Newspaper Articles Mentioning the SD and Breivik and FrP and Breivik, by Year



Source: A Tekst Retriever. \*Search string: Breivik AND “Frp” OR “Fremskrittspartiet” OR “Siv Jensen”. \*\*Search string: Breivik AND “SD” OR “Sverigedemokraterna” OR “Jimmie Åkesson”.

While French Front National (FN) and Italian Lega Nord (LN) leaders also accused the media and their opponents of using Breivik's attacks against them, their response to Breivik differed from the others in marked ways. While FN leader Marine le Pen described Breivik's actions as "cowardly and barbaric" and former FN leader Jean-Marie le Pen described Breivik as a "madman", they blamed the Norwegian government for not taking into account the "global danger of massive immigration which is the main reason in this deadly crazy man's thinking." [36]

Going further, prominent Italian LN politician and member of the European parliament Mario Borghezio went on the radio saying that some of Breivik's ideas were "great", agreeing with Breivik's opposition to Islam and his accusation that Europe has surrendered to Islam. [37] This caused a political uproar, resulting in LN politician Roberto Calderoli putting out an official statement on behalf of the party, both condemning the attacks and apologizing for Borghezio's statements. [38] It was just shortly afterwards, however, that LN politician and co-president of the radical right Europe of Freedom and Democracy group (EFD) in the European Parliament, Francesco Spironi, leapt to Borghezio's defence, saying that while he condemned the attacks, "If [Breivik's] ideas are that we are going towards Eurabia and those sorts of things, that western Christian civilization needs to be defended, yes, I'm in agreement." [39] Borghezio was subsequently suspended for three months, while Spironi faced no repercussions.

### ***The Anti-Islamic Movement***

In the aftermath of 9/11, the far right grew with the expanding movement mobilizing against Islam and Muslim immigration to the West. It developed extra-parliamentary initiatives in the form of alternative news sites, blogs, and street-oriented protest groups such as Stop Islamization, PEGIDA and the English Defence League (EDL), as well as creating some new political parties. In the years prior to the attacks, Breivik had been an active, but peripheral participant in the anti-Islamic movement. Substantial portions of his manifesto consisted of articles he had appropriated from ideological authorities within the movement. He claimed to be Facebook friends with several hundred EDL members, hailed Stop Islamization of Europe (SIOE) as an important organization and praised several of the anti-Islamic movements' most prominent leaders. In Norway, he was a frequent commentator, issuing opinion pieces on the anti-Islamic, alternative news site *Document.no*. Breivik attended meetings hosted by it and approached its editor with business proposals. Among the more established Norwegian actors at least, he was continuously rebuffed – characterized as a "weirdo" and a "lone island". [40] By and large, anti-Islamic activists resoundingly rejected Breivik after the attacks he committed. [41] However, whereas some rejected Breivik wholesale and decided to stop using polemical words such as "traitors" to describe their political opponents, others said they agreed with what he wrote about Islam but rejected his actions and a few went even further. [42]

We begin with Geert Wilders, leader of the Freedom Party in the Netherlands and possibly country's the most influential anti-Islamic figure. Breivik had lauded Wilders' party as one Europe's "truly conservative parties" and is thought to have attended an event in 2010 where Wilders gave a speech to EDL members. [43] Like many of the previously discussed radical right party leaders, Wilders completely rejected Breivik's ideas and actions, lambasting him as a "violent and sick character" and offering his condolences to Norwegians and families of the victims. [44] He went on to state that neither he nor his party were responsible for a "lone idiot who twisted and violently abused freedom-loving anti-Islamization ideals, no matter how much some people would like that." [45] He also argued that Breivik's acts must not be allowed to discredit the anti-Islamic campaign.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, it became known that Breivik had frequented the alternative news site *Document.no*. [46] Its editor, Hans Rustad, responded by condemning Breivik's actions, stating that "this was a time for reflection" and, in parallel to steps taken by the Norwegian Progress Party, said the website would tone down its rhetoric – in particular, no longer describing opponents as traitors. Beyond that, Rustad has also maintained that the attacks have been misused in a "scandalous" manner to defame the right, and has been adamant in advocating a view of Breivik primarily as someone who is mentally ill.

Within the street-oriented activist community, the response was more mixed. The leader of the Norwegian Defence League, Ronny Alte, resigned from his position, in an attempt to distance himself from Breivik and the attacks.[47] In contrast, Arne Tumor, leader of the larger activist group Stop Islamization of Norway (Stopp islamiseringen av Norge, Sian) went on record stating that “Breivik was a superb Islam-critic with substantial knowledge about Islam.” Nevertheless, Tumor also said he rejected the attacks and described Breivik as “evil” and “mad”.[48] In the UK, the EDL put out an official statement saying that “No form of terrorism can ever be justified, and the taking of innocent lives can never be justified.” EDL leader Tommy Robinson did nevertheless state that the Breivik’s behavior “shows how desperate some people are becoming in Europe.” SIOE put up a statement with a blanket condemnation of Breivik as a madman and that any attempts to link them with Breivik was “absurd”, while joint SIOE and Stop Islamization of Denmark leader Anders Gravers stated he had denied Breivik membership in the organization and completely rejected his attacks.

Writing under the pseudonym Fjordman on the web pages of Gates of Vienna, Peder Nøstvold Jensen was one of the Counter-Jihadi community’s most important ideological authorities. Breivik copied many of Fjordman’s articles verbatim into his manifesto and described Fjordman as his favourite author. In an interview a few days after the attacks, Jensen described Breivik as a monster motivated by violent desires, while stating that the manifesto was “utter rubbish”, adding that notions that Breivik had anything in common with anti-Islamic activists were nonsense.[49] Jensen also said he had rebuffed Breivik’s attempts to make contact with him because he thought Breivik was “boring”.[50] Another prominent anti-Islamic intellectual, Bruce Bawer, penned an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* lamenting that “ [Breivik’s] violence will deal a heavy blow to an urgent cause.”[51]

German *PI-News*, an influential German equivalent to *Document.no*, framed the attacks as a catastrophe for conservatives and as acts of a madman, while also saying that it is “important to note that the ‘bad guys’ aren’t always just others. We must not evade our own responsibility by pointing-fingers-to-others.”[52] Striking a different note, Manfred Rouhs, chairman of the anti-Islamic Pro-Germany Citizens’ Movement denied that there was any similarity between Breivik’s ideology and theirs, saying the “message and hate” he brought into the world had nothing to do with them.

Some prominent anti-Islamic figures in the United States gave a more ambiguous response to Breivik, simultaneously condemning his actions while also presenting arguments that, while not supporting the attacks outright, certainly came close to justifying them. The person that went furthest was perhaps Pamela Geller of Atlas Shrugs. Geller stated that while there was no justification for Breivik’s actions there was also no justification for Norway’s “antisemitism” and “demonization” of Israel. She went on to describe the victims at Utøya as having a pro-Islamic agenda, and that if they had grown up, they would have become future leaders of the party responsible for “flooding Norway with Muslims” attacking and raping “native Norwegians”.[53]

### ***The White Nationalist Movement*** [54]

Unlike most radical right parties and anti-Islamic groups, the white nationalist movement explicitly promotes a political system favoring people of a white ethnic or racial descent. As a movement, it comprises different actors, often referred to as white supremacists, national socialists, fascists, or simply right-wing extremists.

Considering Breivik’s ideas and actions, the white nationalist movement has had an ambiguous relationship to him. On the one hand, Breivik promotes a form of ethno-society that white nationalists long for. For example, he suggests preserving the Nordic race by using “reprogenetics” in state-run surrogate clinics where Nordic children would be born and raised.[55] During his second trial, he also proclaimed that he was, and had always been, a true national socialist.

On the other hand, Breivik killed white children, he supported Israel, and his white nationalist ideas are completely overshadowed by the anti-Islamic rhetoric permeating his manifesto. Therefore, the initial response from the white nationalist movement was one of complete rejection. For example, although Breivik had been a

registered user of the white nationalist forum Stormfront since 2008, several Stormfront-users blasted Breivik for the attack, and the website administrators posted a warning that they would delete any postings from those “cheering this slaughter” of children.[56] Other well-known white nationalists rejected Breivik because they saw him as a “Zionist puppet”, including David Duke,[57] Varg Vikernes,[58] and the most active group in the Nordic countries at the time, today known as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM).[59]

However, some white nationalists did offer initial support to Breivik. One such was Alex Linder, the founder of the *Vanguard News Network* (VNN), the second most important white nationalist website after *Stormfront* at the time of the attacks. One week after the attacks, Linder wrote: “Breivik sacrificed his future to save his nation. He acted heroically.”[60] Furthermore, with time, parts of the white nationalist movement changed its opinion about Breivik, thereby moving from complete rejection to partial acceptance. For example, in a 2018 documentary about the NRM, the leader of NRM’s Norwegian division stated that he “could understand” why some people living in the Nordics go to such extreme measures. When asked directly about whether the NRM distances itself from the attacks, he replied that “he did not see any reason why they should do that” and reiterated that the NRM “understands why people can act in that way when seeing that their people slowly but surely is being replaced.”[61]

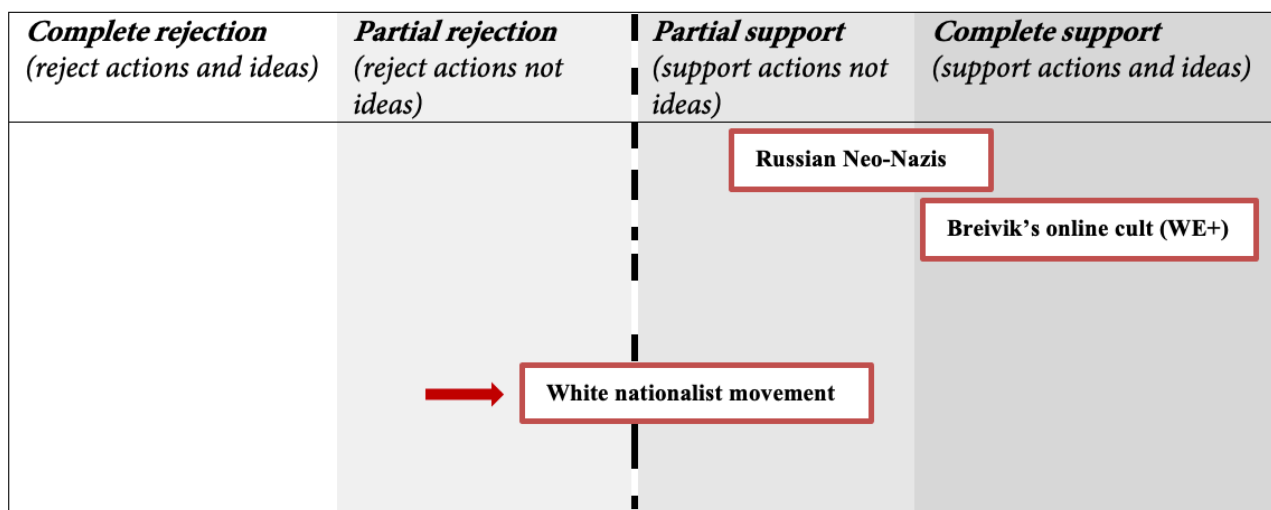
A similar development happened with Greg Johnson, another prominent ideological authority within the American white nationalist movement. In a blog post devoted to Breivik, Johnson wrote that he initially detested Breivik but during the trial came to see him in a new light – as somebody who believes in the white race rather than being a straightforward Counter-Jihadist, which Johnson alongside other racially oriented figures on the far right sometimes reject as a “Jewish ploy”.[62]

This growing approval of Breivik within parts of the white nationalist universe culminated in complete support being given to Breivik within a particular segment of the movement predominantly active online and mainly based in the United States. However, American activists were not the first to fully support Breivik. Long before them came the Russians.

**Partial and Complete Support – Wave One**

While condemnation of Breivik by radical right parties and the wider far-right community primarily occurred immediately after the attacks, support for Breivik has manifested itself in two waves. The first wave began after the attacks and gradually died out after the trial ended; a second wave then began several years later.

Figure 4. Far-right Actors Giving Partial or Complete Support to Breivik (Wave One)





### *The Russians*

Only months after the July 22 attacks, Russian nationalists were chanting “Slava Andersu Breiviku!” (“Glory to Anders Breivik”) in the streets of Moscow.[63] This is one of many examples showing that Breivik was quickly adopted as a hero by the Russian extreme right. Such lionizing came both from street activists and from prominent leaders praising Breivik publicly on their websites, in social media, and even on national TV.[64]

One such supporter was Nikolay Korolyov, a Russian terrorist sentenced to life in prison for having orchestrated the bombing of a marketplace in Moscow in 2008, killing 61 people. During the early days of Breivik’s imprisonment, Norwegian correctional services did not stop letter exchanges between Breivik and his supporters. As a result, Korolyov was able to reach Breivik via a network of Russian activists operating on his behalf.[65] In his letter, Korolyov paid respect to Breivik and promised that his clandestine prisoner network fully supported Breivik’s “creative abilities”, offering him “their trust”. [66] In the letter Breivik wrote in response, he accepted Korolyov’s proposal of cooperation between them.[67] Later, Korolyov commented extensively on Breivik’s motivation and actions in the second volume of his so-called Skinhead Bible [Biblia skinkheda], hailing Breivik as someone who proved how much a single person can do in fighting “the System”. [68]

According to Enstad, this view of Breivik still lingers within the Russian extreme right. He is still regularly mentioned as someone they remember and respect. If only there were a few hundred like him, goes the argument, entire regimes could be overthrown.[69] However, while Russian support for Breivik has been extensive and without comparison, the Russian extreme right has shown little interest in his writings, his ideas, and his overall project, which is to stop non-Western cultural influence in Europe. Instead, Russian support to Breivik appears to be mostly instrumental in the sense that his actions serve as an inspiration in their quest to topple the Russian government.[70]

However, the other part of this initial wave of support, Breivik’s online cult, was in contrast deeply affective and fixated on Breivik’s person and writings.

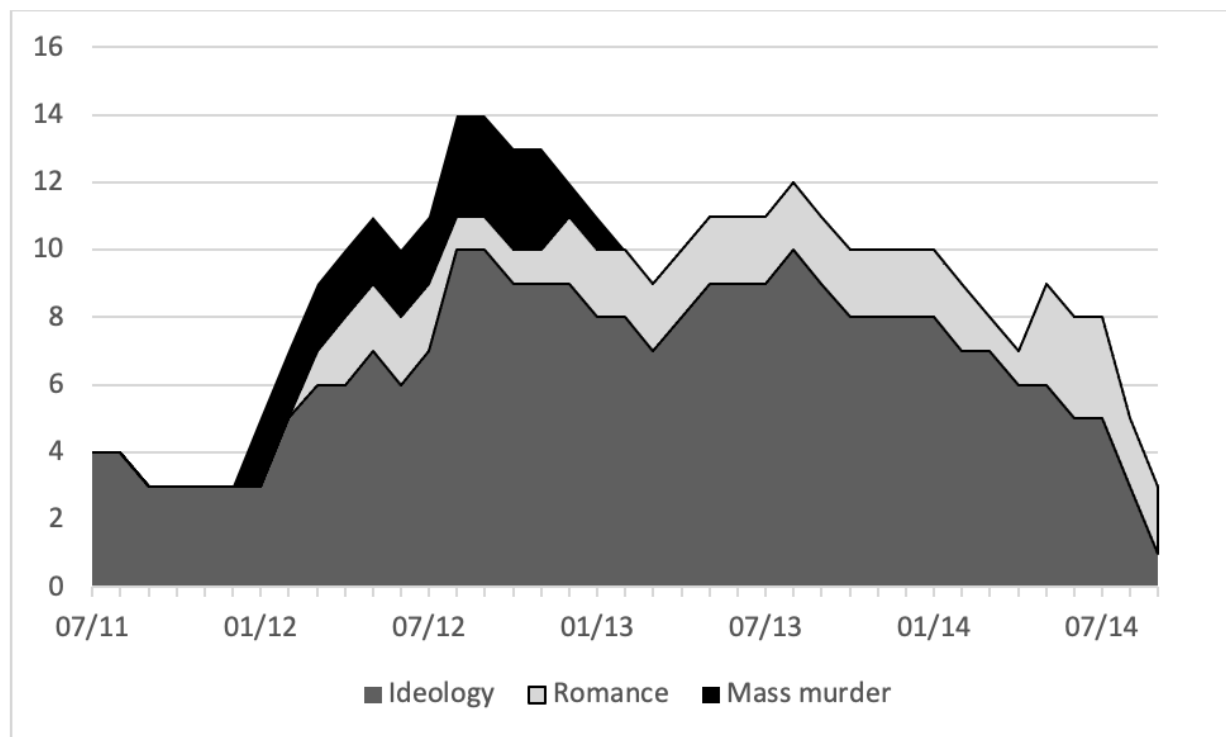
### *Online Followers*

This section traces the evolution and eventual dissolution of the online community of blogs dedicated to Breivik between 2011 and 2015. It represents the most sustained far-right mobilization directly tied to Breivik and the attacks. Actively scouring the web for his supporters in this period, we were able to uncover a total of 38 blogs and fan sites dedicated to Breivik. These websites ranged from small blogs with only a couple of posts, to larger blogs that remained online for several years with more than a hundred unique participants. A majority used names that clearly signalled their support for Breivik, such as *Awaiting 2083*, *Breiviks Army* and *Marxisthunter*.

Most of the blogs were hosted using *WordPress* or *Tumblr*, platforms for self-publishing that at the time exerted little to no control over incoming content.[71] Fourteen of the 38 blogs were flash-in-the-pan duds that were set up and then quickly taken down again – sometimes with no content at all. That left 24 websites that (i) stayed up for a longer period and (ii) had some content and activity.

Breivik’s online fanbase had three main obsessions – mass murder, romantic interest, and ideological conviction. The first two of these are well-known phenomena referred to in existing literature as “dark fandoms”[72] and “hybristophilia”[73] respectively. While active, visual material stood front and centre on most of these sites. The mass murder community created “humorous” memes gamifying Breivik’s killings and comparing Breivik to other mass killers. The women romantically obsessing with Breivik posted drawings of him idealized with boyish good looks, as a knight on horseback or an angel, which featured alongside fictional romantic stories as well as the occasional real-life picture of a woman and a cake she had baked for Breivik. Among the ideologically convicted, images consisted of more traditional “propaganda” props such as posters with slogans, flags and the symbols of the Knights Templar. When these posts are categorized according to which obsession was paramount, we see that ideology was predominant (Figure 5). Over time, the few blogs interested in mass murder disappeared, whereas those with an ideological or “romantic” orientation endured for a longer period.

**Figure 5.** Number of Active Websites Dedicated to Breivik between 2011 and 2014, Categorized According to Focus (N = 24)



The nationalities of the owner/hosts of these 24 blogs indicate that this was a predominantly West European phenomenon, but that it stretched beyond to North America and Russia as well.[74] The Nordic countries represent eight of the 24 blogs, with four Norwegian, three Swedish and one Finnish. A further three were German, two Russian, one Spanish and one Canadian. A whopping eight, however, were Dutch. This is down to the activity of one individual: Angus.

### ***The Story of Angus and Breivik's Cult***

As the ideologically convicted blogs grew in prominence, the community also became more hierarchical and clandestine. Over time, the community gravitated toward *The Commander Breivik Report*, a blog administered by a person calling himself Angus Thermopylae. While a majority of the support blogs primarily posted images and memes rather than text, Angus' blog primarily contained text and was more oriented towards Breivik's political project. We analysed all posts written by Angus on *The Commander Breivik Report*, in total 171 texts posted between February 2012 and January 2015.[75] A majority of these posts sort into six main categories: (1) news updates relating to Breivik; (2) transcripts from the trial; (3) the publication and discussion of letters written by Breivik from prison; (4) Internet security; (5) discussions about ideology and race theory, and (6) discussions about Breivik's reception within the wider far-right community.

Besides writing blog posts, Angus also coordinated an extensive effort to translate Breivik's manifesto into other languages, resulting in 14 different translations. It was apparent that the person behind Angus was both intellectually and technologically resourceful. Besides following Breivik's situation closely, Angus also wrote an Internet security manual for his network members. Multiple security services and journalists were simultaneously trying to track him down but without success, which testifies to his technological skills. Ironically, it was human interaction that eventually led to him being identified by a Norwegian journalist.[76]

With time, Angus managed to develop a small network of dedicated Breivik supporters, centred around North-European countries. We have reviewed all commenters active on *The Commander Breivik Report*. In total, 62 different users with nicknames were active on the blog between 2012 and 2015, in addition to several

anonymous posters, before Angus disabled anonymous posting in July 2012. Among those who stated their nationality, a majority were from Northern Europe, with seven users from the UK, five each from Germany and Sweden, and three from Norway. In addition, there were users from Iceland, Brazil, Bulgaria, Finland, Israel, New Zealand, Poland, Russia and the US.

Together, these users wrote a total of 178 posts. Table 1 shows all users who posted more than three comments. The two most active users, Anka P and RusFebruary, were both women. Our review also shows that at least half of female users were mainly interested in Breivik for romantic reasons, while the most active user, Anka P, comes across as more politically motivated. In fact, it was a woman from this inner circle who initially helped establish contact between Angus and Breivik, as she had already been a pen pal with Breivik for some time. [77] Once this contact was established, Breivik granted Angus the “privilege” of being his official spokesperson outside prison. As a result, Angus ended up becoming something of a cult figure himself inside this small online community.

**Table 1.** Most Active Users on The Commander Breivik Report  
by Nationality, Number of Posts, Gender and Interest

Names	Origin (self-reported)	Total number of posts	Gender	Affiliation to Breivik: Ideological/political or romantic
Anka P	NA	21	Female	Ideological/political
RusFebruary/rusfeb	Russia	11	Female	Romantic
Hederosus	UK	7	Male	NA
Kingfish	NA	7	Male	Ideological/political
Lillith Nefer	Sweden	7	Female	NA
thunor/thunor14	NA	6	Female	Romantic
MS13	NA	5	NA	NA
Jprivers	NA	5	Female	Romantic

While being extremely careful with internet security, Angus was apparently less careful with women. This carelessness ultimately revealed his real identity, as one woman from the inner circle gave his name to a Norwegian journalist. Following extensive background research, the journalist then exposed Angus publicly as a 36-year-old Dutchman living with his wife in the United States. The journalist also travelled to Angus’ home in South Carolina to confront him with a series of pieces of circumstantial evidence strongly suggesting that he was the person behind Angus. For obvious reasons, the Dutchman never admitted to being Angus, but his behaviour during two encounters with the journalist confirmed rather than disproved the initial suspicion. Furthermore, shortly after the journalist left, the blogs ran by Angus became inactive.

Two years later, Angus briefly resurfaced with a message on the V Kontakte site of his support network, informing its members that Breivik had now changed his name to Fjotolf Hansen, and providing Breivik’s mail address in prison. Then, on July 22, 2017, Angus posted a long text about National Socialism and race theory and invited people to contact him via a V Kontakte page that no longer exists. This is the last trace of Angus we have been able to find.

### ***Partial and Complete Support – Wave Two***

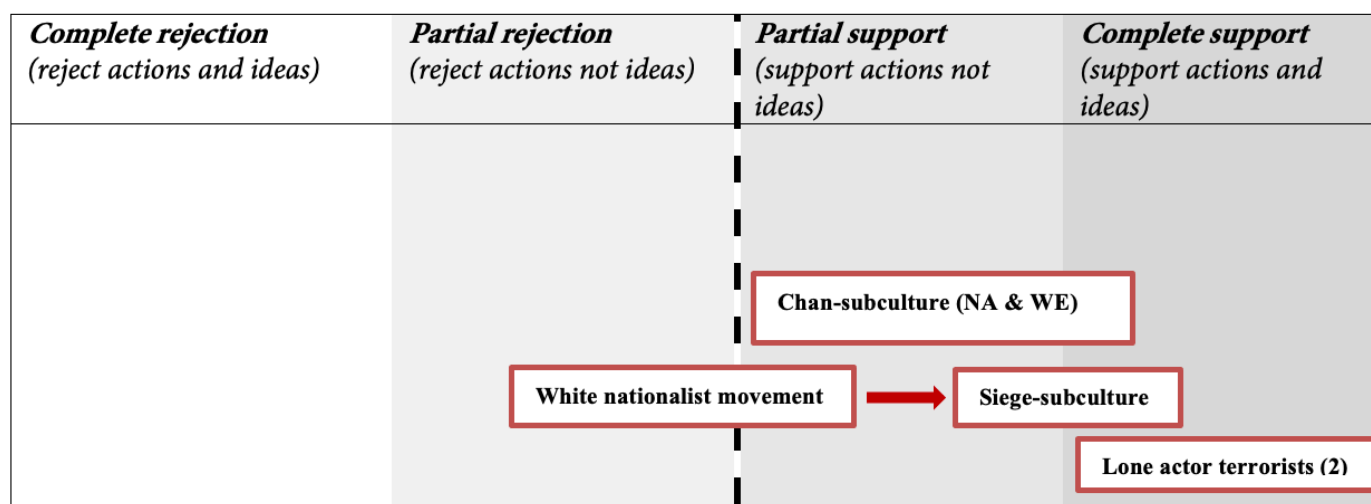
Following the exposure of Angus and the subsequent implosion of Breivik’s online support network, concerted support activity was absent for several years. Every now and then, there would be references to Breivik relating to attacks or plots in different countries, but in most cases, Breivik did not appear as a primary source of inspiration.[78] The second wave of support thus only began to rise in parallel with the development of two online subcultures: the chan-subculture and the Siege-subculture. It was also during this period that we saw

lone-actor attacks inspired by Breivik.

**The Chan Subculture**

The chan subculture grew out of the websites 4chan and 8chan. These are so-called online message boards where users post content anonymously about various and oftentimes controversial topics. The chans have become notoriously known for their trolling culture, where users make morally transgressive and shocking statements to trigger negative emotional reactions in other persons or groups for the users’ own amusement. [79]

**Figure 6.** Far-right Actors Giving Partial or Complete Support to Breivik (Wave Two)



Because so many chan users are also avid online gamers, cultural, textual and memetic references to online games are everywhere to be found. This also includes references to first-person shooting games, which constitute a fundamental part of online gaming culture. Combined with its shock-seeking trolling culture, this gamification of chan discourse has therefore led to a practice of celebrating high “kill-counts” in mass-casualty attacks. The July 22 attacks are no exception.

As chan records are continuously deleted, it is hard to keep track of the precise timeline and extent of Breivik-supporting posts, especially on 8chan. When it comes to 4chan, we were able to extract all posts mentioning Breivik on the /pol/ (politically incorrect) message board between 2016 and 2018 from a dataset created by Papasavva et al. – in total, 16,504 out of 134.5 million posts.[80] What these posts show is that Breivik was regularly mentioned and celebrated as a hero on this message board. Out of these 16,504 posts, 587 posts contain the word “hero”. The posts are typically very short and contain few deliberations besides shameless support for Breivik, sometime coupled with references to online games or other mass-murderers. While not all posts speak of Breivik in positive terms, even posts containing the word “monster” describe other people, and not Breivik, as being one.

In addition to this dataset, we also reviewed more recent posts mentioning Breivik on 4chan’s /pol/ message board by using an online 4chan archive.[81] A search for Breivik on the /pol/ message board returned more than 34,000 hits. A brief review of recent posts from 2021 shows that Breivik continues to be regularly hailed, while negative mentions are much fewer and further between. In other words, when posting anonymously, a considerable number of mostly young people appear to support his actions. That said, it is difficult to interpret the level of sincerity behind anonymous posts on message boards infamous for their trolling culture.

*The Siege Subculture*

The Siege subculture grew out of an Internet site called Iron March, founded by a Russian Uzbek and a handful of other activists in 2011, the same year as the July 22 attacks.[82] The purpose of Iron March was to create a transnational forum for the latest generation of young and tech-savvy right-wing extremists – or “metanationalism”, which was the preferred ideological brand of its administrator.[83]

At one point, the entire Iron March forum was leaked online by anti-fascist hackers.[84] Utilizing a dataset containing the full Iron March archive, we were able to review all posts mentioning Breivik.[85] Just like on 4chan, Breivik was regularly referenced by anonymous users, and nearly all posts speak of him in positive terms. Many posts also compare the July 22 attacks to other lone-actor attacks and even argue that Breivik’s targeting was better.

The style and tone in posts mentioning Breivik on Iron March are similar to that of 4chan and 8chan. Posts are generally short, lacking in-depth elaboration, and have a playful and at times insulting tone. As Table 2 shows, the highest proportion of posts mentioning Breivik on Iron March was in 2012 and 2013. Table 2 also shows that the share of posts mentioning Breivik was considerably higher on Iron March than on 4chan, although the total number of posts mentioning Breivik is considerably higher at 4chan.

**Table 2.** Posts Mentioning Breivik on the Iron March and 4chan/pol/- Forums by Year, 2011–2017

Year	Iron March posts	Posts mentioning Breivik	Percentile	4chan /pol/ posts	Posts mentioning Breivik	Percentile
2011	5,680	8	0.001	0	0	
2012	37,237	216	0.006	0	0	
2013	25,465	138	0.005	1,240,075	358	0.0003
2014	24,555	102	0.004	15,480,253	3,551	0.0002
2015	37,281	83	0.002	19,304,366	5,074	0.0003
2016	33,581	136	0.004	45,284,126	7,125	0.0002
2017	31,329	86	0.003	49,837,851	5,823	0.0001
Sum	195,128	769	0.004	131,146,671	21,931	0.0002

Furthermore, Table 3 shows that other notable topics and names associated with the extreme right drew more interest from Iron March and 4chan users than Breivik did. In particular, both the terms “Charlottesville” and “Tarrant”, referring to violent events that occurred in 2017 and 2019 respectively, return more hits on 4chan than “Breivik” in searches covering the entire period between 2013 and 2021. In other words, 4chan users regularly referenced Breivik as an inspiration and a hero, but compared to other persons and events, their interest in Breivik was somewhat limited. On Iron March, interest in Breivik was more notable, both in terms of the relative proportion of posts and when comparing him against other extreme-right figures and events.

**Table 3.** Ranking of Notable Topics and Names Associated with the Extreme Right on Iron March and 4chan/pol/

Keyword	Iron March (2011–2017)	Rank	4chan /pol/ 2013–2021	Rank
Hitler	7,607	1	1,343,637	1
Siege	1,003	2	58,149	2
Mason	847	3	56,882	3
Breivik	769	4	34,133	6
Savitri	318	5	3,894	8
McVeigh	97	6	13,545	7
Charlottesville	53 (2017)	7	41,134	5
Tarrant	N/A (2019)		51,108	4

In 2015, the American group Atomwaffen Division announced its creation on Iron March. This group was ideologically inspired by a collection of newsletters titled “Siege” and authored by the American white nationalist James Mason during the 1980s. These texts promote terrorism by way of “leaderless resistance” to trigger a race war.

Besides drawing on Mason’s Siege newsletters, Atomwaffen Division and its in-house graphic designer, a Canadian using the alias Dark Foreigner, also developed a unique style and aesthetic characterized by a mixture of occultism, conspiratorial symbolism, splatter culture, and revolutionary terrorism. This aesthetic was in turn appropriated by other groups inspired by Atomwaffen Division and the wider Siege subculture, such as Sonnenkrieg Division in the UK and Feuerkrieg Division, whose membership is more transnational. Together, these groups generated a sizeable production of online visual propaganda promoting the Siege subculture.

A relatively small part of this propaganda included pictures of Breivik combined with short Norwegian phrases, such as “Vår helt” [our hero] from Atomwaffen Division, “Fri vår helt” [free our hero] from Sonnenkrieg Division, and “Ingen anger” [no remorse] from Feuerkrieg Division. However, apart from such references, Siege subculture propaganda never seemed to take much interest in Breivik’s writings, ideas, or person. In many ways, as a self-styled Christian crusader, Breivik may actually have come across as too “straight-edge” and boring for this particular subculture, characterized by its esoteric Nazi-occultism and keen interest in figures such as Charles Manson, David Myatt and Savitri Devi.

### ***Lone-Actor Terrorists***

The ultimate way of supporting Breivik is by carrying out new terrorist attacks while alluding to Breivik as an inspiration. These types of copycat attacks were a major concern in the immediate aftermath of the July 22 attacks. Because this question is the main topic in Macklin and Bjørgo’s contribution in this Special Issue, we only summarize their main findings here.[86] Perhaps the most striking finding is that few copycat attacks have to date taken place. Having reviewed a number of attacks and plots allegedly influenced by Breivik, Macklin and Bjørgo conclude that the attacks against two mosques in New Zealand in 2019 are the only clear-cut case of a completed action in which Breivik served as a major source of inspiration. However, Macklin and Bjørgo also note that Tarrant only downloaded Breivik’s manifesto after his own operational attack planning had started, and that he showed little interest in its contents.

In addition to the Christchurch shootings, the German-Iranian teenager who killed nine people in an attack on a McDonald’s restaurant in Munich on July 22, 2016—the fifth anniversary of Breivik’s attacks—also seems to have drawn considerable inspiration from Breivik. The perpetrator had, according to an Afghan friend, “concerned himself extensively” with Breivik during their conversations. However, he was apparently also influenced by a number of other mass shooters with less political ambitions.[87]

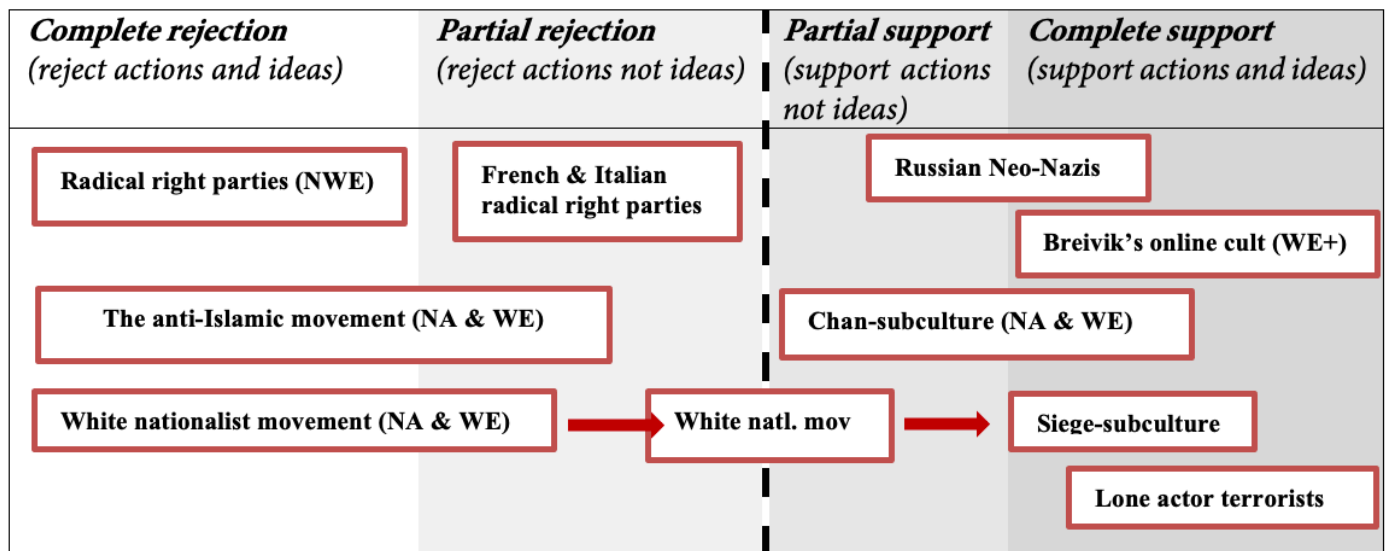
Apart from these two examples, Breivik does not seem to have been a major source of inspiration in other right-wing terrorist attacks completed after July 22, 2011. Clearly, other lone-actor terrorists were cognizant of Breivik and some had also downloaded his manifesto. Macklin and Bjørgo have also reviewed a number of more or less vague attack plots in which Breivik was mentioned or where his manifesto was found on the plotters’ computer. However, they find that most claims that Breivik has acted as an inspirational figure either cannot be precisely documented or have been mistaken. They also note that, unlike Breivik, the attacker from New Zealand quickly generated a string of copycat attacks in the United States (Poway and El Paso), Germany (Halle), and finally in Norway (Baerum). While these perpetrators were clearly inspired by and also alluded to the Christchurch terrorist, their manifestos or online postings displayed little interest in Breivik.

### ***Explaining Variation in Support Among the Far Right***

Figure 7 summarizes the patterns of support and non-support evidenced in our data. We see an interesting inverse relationship between radical right and extreme-right support. Whereas radical right support tends to come in the form of embracing Breivik’s ideas but not his actions, the extreme right appears to support his

actions but show limited interest in his ideas. Beyond this general pattern, our findings leave us with four puzzles. First, why have we seen so little support in Western Europe? Second, why did parts of the far right not only reject Breivik, but vehemently condemn him? Third, why did the initial support for Breivik in Western Europe come from individuals outside the organized far right? And fourth, why did extreme-right support for Breivik materialize several years after the attacks rather than in its immediate aftermath?

Figure 7. Overview of Far-right Responses to Breivik, Sorted by Actor Type and Ideology



The nature of taboos provides us with an elegant explanation to these four puzzles, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Four Puzzles and Answers to them Provided by the Taboo Framework

Puzzle	Answer
(I) Why so little support by far right in Western Europe but substantial support in Russia, and eventually also from American subcultures?	<u>Taboo against violence.</u> Strong taboo at the macro-cultural level in Western Europe acts as a ceiling; this taboo is weak(er) in Russia and the United States.
(II) Why did leaders of Western European far right condemn and denigrate Breivik?	<u>Contagion mechanism.</u> To ward off taboo transferral, which would have made them and any potential supporters themselves as well as their ideas impure.
(III) Why did initial support for Breivik in the West come from a small group of individuals outside the organized far right?	<u>Rebellion mechanism.</u> “Undersocialized” individuals are immune to normative pressures and rebel by acting out desires that run counter to taboo.
(IV) Why does Western support for Breivik increase with distance in time and space?	<u>Decoupling mechanism.</u> The linkage between the specific events and the general taboo grows weaker when their felt reality becomes more distant and therefore less threatening.

We begin with the far right’s complete rejection of Breivik in Western Europe and the concomitant partial support from the far right in Russia. Classical literature on taboos argues that post-modern Western societies have few taboos left.[88] While they have shed many taboos from the past, the taboo against violence has increasingly become a central organizing principle in Western and liberal-democratic societies. The macro-level variation in taboo strength between liberal democracies in Western Europe and an illiberal Russia stands

out as a clear and plausible explanation for this discrepancy.[89] In Western Europe and other regions where the use of offensive violence is taboo, its strength is in part owed to an investment in democratic society and the rule of law. Therefore, it is plausible that a societal taboo against violence *could* have been equally strong in Russia were it not for the regime's own willingness to employ violence and look away when non-state actors use violence against groups and individuals perceived by the regime as a threat or as morally delinquent (such as homosexuals).

Some Western countries, such as the United States, represent plausible intermediary cases where the taboo is not as strongly embedded in all spheres of society. While the United States on average has a more violent culture than West European countries, the taboo itself may have eroded further during the last decade due to the rise in affective polarization,[90] sectarianism [91]and democratic backsliding.[92] Survey data indicate that a sizeable minority of U.S. citizens now think political violence is justifiable.[93]

Next, our findings show that the far right in Western Europe not only rejected Breivik, but also went to great lengths in disparaging him. Why? Classical studies of taboos describe these as norms revolving around purity/impurity. The act of transgressing a taboo results in impurity, and everything that comes into contact with the impure risks becoming contaminated and being seen as taboo-breaking as well. Consequently, taboo violation causes a cascading spread of impurity – or rather the stigma of impurity – first onto the transgressor and then onwards to people, institutions and ideas associated with the original transgressor. This process was seen in the intense focus directed toward the far right and in the proclamations of guilt levelled against them by political opponents and the far-right's concomitant attempt at warding off this contagion by denigrating and vilifying Breivik, most clearly manifest in their recurring description of him as a “madman” and “monster”.

The literature on norms further tells us that some individuals are “immune” to their influence, and in some cases a taboo's very existence may drive a small subset of the population to rebel by violating the taboo directly or supporting the taboo violator and thereby making themselves susceptible to the stigma of impurity in the eyes of the majority. Such a response to an overwhelming taboo can be understood as a mechanism of rebellion. The rebellion mechanism offers a plausible account for the support that manifested itself in the online cult and community around Angus Thernopylae, as well as in the chan and Siege subcultures of Wave Two. While the underlying motivations to violate taboos can be manifold, our textual data suggest that much of the motivation in these cases derives from a mixture of sadistic and sexual predilections, nihilism, and morbid humour, as well as an intense drive to create communities of belonging.

One pertinent question is whether these communities could have come into existence at all without access to the internet and social media. These technological developments have made it so much easier for people exhibiting abnormal tendencies and obsessions to come together and create microcosmoses where societal taboos and cultural constraints have little impact. This is most pronounced among those who take pleasure from, and revel in, violence and destruction for its own sake – the fan community surrounding school shooters, mass and serial killers. Without access to the Internet (or if the Internet were tightly regulated), it would be exceedingly difficult for this small subset of individuals scattered across many countries to come together and form such “free zones”.

Our findings also indicate that the coupling between the July 22 terrorist attacks and the general taboo against violence is dampened by distance in space and time. We refer to this mechanism as decoupling. While radical right parties that were proximate responded with vehement rejection of Breivik and even toned down their own rhetoric, leaders and prominent politicians from geographically and culturally more distant countries such as France and Italy openly said they agreed with some of Breivik's ideas. Among the parties further to the north, we only saw scattered utterances of support for Breivik's ideas among low-level politicians and members. In addition, activists from even more geographically and culturally distant countries such as Russia and the United States were amongst those expressing support for Breivik's actions.

The recent rise in support for Breivik among elements within the extreme right also indicates that distance in time decreases the coupling between the attacks and the general taboo. The role played by distance in either time



or space in diminishing the association between an event and a general taboo has previously been suggested in the study of the phenomenon of humour. In our material, this form of decoupling is most evident in the case of the white nationalist movement, which has evolved from complete rejection of Breivik to partial support.

There are some obstacles to supporting Breivik that fall outside the taboo against violence framework that have been mentioned by members of the far right themselves. These include the fact that Breivik murdered white children (i.e., members of the in-group) and that his ideological platform was derived from the Counter-Jihad and broader anti-Islamic movement, which portrays Israel and Jews in a positive light.[94] The relevance of these statements is hard to discern because they may have been an excuse used to avoid breaking the general taboo against violence while not losing face internally. However, it is possible that we would have seen more initial support from the Western European extreme right if Breivik had avoided targeting white children and built his entire manifesto around white nationalist ideas instead of anti-Islamic ideology. On the other hand, as we have noted, much of the eventual support from the extreme right was characterized by sadism and reveling in the gruesome nature of the killings, together with the fact that the victims were (mainly) left-wing, while being unconcerned by elements in Breivik's ideology that are at odds with "traditional" white nationalism.

Some final points of clarification are warranted. Are we implying that everybody rejecting Breivik found such violence morally abhorrent? No. As initially outlined, even "normal" people follow norms to avoid being stigmatized and sanctioned – i.e., for strategic purposes. As is often the case when academics raise the issue of so-called frontstage and backstage strategies, we have little evidence to either support or refute such claims. Nevertheless, there is evidence in other cases of right-wing extremists adopting such disavowal strategies in public while condoning acts of political violence in private.[95] It is therefore a distinct possibility that some members on the far right rejected Breivik solely based on a perception of strategic necessity, thinking that they might face severe repercussions unless they did so.

Furthermore, it is likely that the external motivation to uphold the taboo is stronger among the radical right and anti-Islamic actors as they seek legitimacy and influence within the current political system. In contrast, white nationalists and others among the extreme right are not primarily oriented to seek legitimacy from society at large. It is therefore probable that they are primarily motivated to follow a disavowal strategy to avoid severe sanctions such as surveillance and imprisonment. Whether the rejection is based on strategic calculation or derives from an internalized belief in the illegitimacy of violence, the immediate outcome remains the same. If "frontstage" rejection based on strategic calculations is followed by "backstage" support, however, the potential consequences further downstream can be dire.

On a similar note, our mapping did not cover far-right actors who remained silent about Breivik. Three plausible explanations of such silence are: (1) approving his deed but choosing to remain silent to avoid stigma; (2) disapproving but remaining silent to avoid having others question the veracity of the disapproval; and (3) ignorance of the attacks. Investigating the prevalence of these justifications would require interviews with, or surveys from, a representative sample of the far-right universe, something which falls outside the scope of this article. Therefore, we are unable to draw any conclusions about the motives behind those who kept silent after the events of July 22, 2011.

## **Conclusion**

In our mapping of responses to Breivik's actions and ideas, we found four different patterns. At the overarching level, the first pattern is *absence* of support. Breivik and his actions never gained substantial traction with the organized far right in the West. This holds for the radical right and, initially, for the extreme right as well. In the immediate aftermath, substantial and open support for Breivik came from further away, namely Russia. Second, most responded not only by rejecting Breivik, but also by actively condemning and denigrating him as a monster. Third, in the West, support for Breivik came predominantly from a small online community of people outside the organized far right. Fourth, it took several years before Breivik gained some wider traction among the Western extreme right. Nothing similar has happened among the radical right. This means that

support for Breivik has risen among the extreme right, but not among radical right parties or among anti-Islamic, extra-parliamentary initiatives.

The taboo framework provides us with simple but plausible explanations for each of these four patterns. The general absence of support and even outright vilification of Breivik by the Western European far right (puzzles I and II) can be explained by the strength of the taboo against violence and a desire to ward off the stigma of being associated with someone who violated that taboo. This process did not play out in Russia because the taboo against violence is weaker there. We stress that the importance of the taboo against violence for the West European far right is a consequence of the cultural taboo against violence in the societies in which they are embedded. This means that the far right can simultaneously be constrained by internalized beliefs about violence as illegitimate as well as by external constraints imposed on them by the environment they exist in. The two explanations are not mutually exclusive. The small online cult that coalesced around Breivik without any clear ties to the organized far right (puzzle III), can be explained by the taboo rebellion mechanism whereby a small minority actively seeks to rebel against taboos due to their very strength. Furthermore, this minority's ability to make something out of their individual desire to rebel and form a community seems entirely dependent on unfettered access to the Internet and social media.

Finally, documented support for Breivik appears to be mediated by distance in time and space (puzzle IV), which can be attributed to what we refer to as a decoupling mechanism. Distance renders the events less threatening and therefore less relevant to people's lived life. This means that associations with specific incidents, perpetrators and their ideas become successively less likely to be perceived as a form of taboo violation.

One implication of our findings is that if the macro-cultural taboo against violence had been weaker in Western Europe, we would probably have seen more open support for Breivik. Consequently, it is unlikely that we will see anything other than low levels of support for Breivik and similar right-wing terrorists in the near future unless the taboo itself becomes fundamentally weakened. As it currently stands, the taboo imposes a very significant ceiling effect. Nevertheless, within the boundary of this low ceiling, we may see a continuation of current developments where segments of the (marginal) extreme right become more brazen in their embrace and utilization of Breivik and his misdeeds.

A second implication is that future support will likely continue manifesting itself in online spaces where people can express themselves in (partial) anonymity, whereas the more organized far right with a physical presence will continue distancing themselves from such taboo violators to avoid becoming (complete) social and political pariahs.

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## Notes

- [1] In this article, we use “far right” as an umbrella term at the highest level of abstraction for nativist ideologies of both a radical and extreme variety. The distinction between the radical and extreme varieties of the far right rests on their view of democracy and violence. The radical right does not reject democracy per se and opposes the use of violence, whereas the extreme right seek to overthrow the democratic system and see violence as both glorious and necessary. Beneath this level, we find specific iterations of both radical- and extreme-right ideologies – such as fascism, ethno-nationalism, and anti-Islamic, cultural nativism. For an in-depth discussion and ideological taxonomy of the far right utilizing Giovanni Sartori’s (1970) ladder of abstraction, see Berntzen, L. E. (2019). *Liberal Roots of Far Right Activism: The Anti-Islamic Movement in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge, pp. 313–316, p. 173; DOI: 10.4324/9780429275012; also, Bjørge, T. & Ravndal, J. A. (2019), “Extreme-right violence and terrorism: Concepts, patterns, and responses.” The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. DOI: 10.19165/2019.1.08
- [2] Berntzen (2019) describes this as a result of two separate processes with opposite starting points. First, a gradual anti-Islamic reorientation on the part of Western European radical right parties where they underwent an ideological change, and second, an expansion with new, primarily extra-parliamentary initiatives originating outside the established far right, building on an explicitly anti-Islamic platform from the onset.
- [3] The decisive role played by culture and the existence of cultural variations among societies has again come to the fore with the recognition that many traits assumed to be of a universal nature are in fact delimited to specific cultures, and that attitudes and dispositions among people in so-called WEIRD countries (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) may be outliers rather than the norm (Henrich, J., Heine, S. J. & Norenzayan, A., (2010). “The weirdest people in the world?” *Behavioural Brain Science*, 33(2–3): pp. 61–83; discussion pp. 83–135. DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X0999152X.
- [4] See, for example, Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Penguin UK; Buckholtz, J. W. & Marois, R. (2012) ,“The roots of modern justice: cognitive and neural foundations of social norms and their enforcement,” *Nature Neuroscience*, 15(5): pp. 6556–6561.
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- [6] Callois, R. (1950). *Man and the Sacred*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
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- [8] See Douglas (1966); Durkheim (1912) used the term interdiction as a synonym for taboo.
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