

**RADICALIZATION, POLARIZATION AND XENOPHOBIA:
THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE NORDIC RESISTANCE
MOVEMENT IN SWEDEN AND FINLAND**

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Europe has seen a steady increase in far-right movements in recent years, gaining prominence in politics and becoming more vocal and violent in protests and targeted attacks. **The same phenomenon can be observed in Finland and Sweden, where a salient shift in both the ideology and conduct of Neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) indicates an increasing radicalization in the far-right movement. Observed in tandem with an increase in popularity, the development indicates a growing polarization in society.** In Sweden, NRM members have targeted asylum centers with increasingly deliberate and pronounced attacks. In Finland NRM demonstrations are progressively characterized by violence and an event has in one instance led to the death of a counter protester in September 2016. The Finnish Police has initiated legal action in attempt to abolish the group, with proceedings beginning in August this year. Moreover, the growing radicalization of the NRM movement in both countries is augmented by regular conventions between NRM members in Finland and Sweden, **a proximity which is likely to have broad consequences in the Nordics.**

The NRM is an openly racist and anti-Semitic neo-Nazi movement based in Sweden, Finland and Norway. The NRM has ambitions to stop “mass immigration” of individuals not of northern European descent, to “regain power from the global Zionist elite”, to create a self-sufficient Nordic Nation, and ultimately to establish a government. Since 2016, the NRM’s rhetoric and activities have been more directly focused on immigrants in Sweden and Finland. The NRM was established in 1995 in Sweden and has grown into a large, active and organized group with approximately 250 active individuals, 81% of whom are men. The movement was established in Finland in 2008, and in Norway in 2011. Previously existing as separate national branches, in 2016 the Nordic Resistance Movement re-branded itself as a “pan-Nordic” organization with a unified vision and political ideology. Its political vision was published in 2015, titled “Our Path”. The publication describes an aim for a National Socialist republic including Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and optionally the Baltic states. Indeed, since 2015 the NRM has been a registered political party in Sweden.

The NRM is chiefly operational in Sweden, where approximately half of its members reside. In Sweden, the NRM is known as Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen. The organization and its members have openly advocated violence for a “racially clean” Sweden. In Finland, the NRM is known as Pohjoismainen vastarintaliike (PVL), and in Norway it is known as Nordiske motstandsbevegelsen (NMB). The NRM has briefly also been operational in Denmark, but the branch was disbanded for inactivity in 2016. Members travel actively to attend and support NRM events in other Nordic countries. According to a 2017 publication by Hate Speech International (HSI) titled “Neo-Nazis in the North: The Nordic Resistance Movement in Finland, Sweden and Norway”, **the NRM has developed into the largest, and most active neo-Nazi organization in the aforementioned countries.**

The number of known active members in Sweden increased by 30% between 2013 and 2015, according to a Swedish Expo Foundation study which maps the activity of far-right groups in Sweden. The study details that in 2015 there were 159 active members of NRM in Sweden, with 51 new members joining in the year 2015. According to an investigation published by Expo in February 2017, 8 active members located in Sweden are associated with serious crimes conducted in the past year. In June this year three men linked to the NRM, Viktor Melin, 23, Anton Thulin, 20, and Jimmy Jonasson, 50, were sentenced by the criminal court in Gothenburg for attempted murder. The incidents included the bombing of a left-wing book store in November 2016, a bomb attack against an asylum center on 5 January 2017, and an attempted bomb attack against an asylum center on 25 January 2017. **The choice to target refugee asylums can be seen as an indication of the evolving mandate and focus of the NRM in Sweden, which has previously been oriented chiefly on anti-Semitism.**

Swedish members of the NRM have also been associated with other serious crimes in the last few years. In January 2016, 38 members of the NRM were arrested for attacking police during a demonstration in Stockholm. Among the individuals charged were Linus Edberg Vosthenko, 22, charged with larceny and violent rioting, and Philip Olsson, 22, and Jimmy Björk, 32, both charged with violent rioting. After the riot, authorities described the NRM as an organization characterized with “criminally organized culpability”. In 2015, Martin Saxlind, 25, was found guilty of threatening an ethnic group, after publishing material explicitly saluting Hitler as editor of the NRM web forum Nordfront. According to the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen) NRM members have been involved in armed street fighting incidents.

NRM rallies have also been increasingly characterized by violence. On 30 September this year the NRM held a rally in Gothenburg, where NRM members clashed with riot police and counter-demonstrators threw fireworks and attempted to break police lines. 30 people were arrested and one police officer was slightly injured. The NRM had sought to pass near a synagogue during their march which coincided with Jewish Yom Kippur holiday, but Swedish courts intervened and shortened the route.

On 11 November, 16 NRM members were detained after an unauthorized demonstration was attended by 65 NRM supporters in Gothenburg. Police stated that the group wore all black outfits and brandished the green and white flags of the NRM. Without official authorization, the march was quickly stopped by authorities.

Another alarming signal is the growing online presence of the NRM. **A study published by the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) on 13 November, 2017 describes growing activity on the NRM's web forum Nordfront.** Nordfront publishes editorial content and provides a platform for registered users to post comments. The study, part of a government-mandated research project aiming to analyze violent extremist propaganda, notes that by September 2017 there were 4,262 articles published on the website and 117,259 comments. There were also 12,918 registered members at Nordfront, where registration is required for leaving comments but not for reading articles. Active members increased from 111 in 2010 to 4,415 by October 2017. Not only is the web forum a tool of distributing propaganda, but also a channel for articulating threats. This was demonstrated on 12 November when the Swedish police reported the Nordfront website for asking its users to provide names and addresses of police officers participating in a crackdown on an illegal NRM gathering that took place on 11 November and publishing a threatening photo.

The increasing violence of the NRM is also visible in recent political discourse and expressions of concern. In September, Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (leader of the Social Democrats) described a need to act in order to combat the risk of far-right extremism in Sweden. On 8 October Swedish politicians convened to discuss current political issues broadcast by SVT, where many highlighted concerns regarding the violent clashes that took place at the neo-Nazi rally between the NRM, counter protesters and police in Gothenburg. **Sweden Democrats leader Jimmie Åkesson proposed to classify the group as a terrorist organization. Chairman of the Left party Jonas Sjöstedt called for associating the group with terror activities.**

According to the estimate of an expert at the Finnish Security Service, Tommi Partanen, there are approximately 80-85 active members of the NRM in Finland. To contrast, last year there were about 60-70 active members of the NRM in Finland which was a doubling of membership from 2014. **A YLE News investigation describes the NRM as the most militant Nazi organization in Finland, and that violence is central to its ideology.** The study also notes that the refugee crisis has created space for racist and anti-immigration groups and as an attempt to attract new members, the NRM in Finland has sought to “soften” its Nazi image. Many members describe the group as “nationalist” and sometimes carry the Finnish flag at riots. Crimes associated with Finnish members of the NRM largely fall under the rubric of street violence. The NRM collaborates with other extreme right groups in Finland such as Soldiers of Odin, who participated in a rally organized by the NRM on October 21 in Tampere. Propaganda is spread on the Finnish language NRM website, as well as through radio station Riimuradio where neo-Nazis are often interviewed, in other media including MV-Lehti, Magneettimedia and in social media.

From its establishment in 2008 until 2013, the NRM kept a “low profile” in Finland. Activities were largely focused on distributing propaganda and racist stickers. Demonstrations and activism was not focused on attracting attention and the group endeavored to avoid conflict. This changed in January 2013 following a stabbing in a library in Jyväskylä during a book publication event. Former founder of the movement in Finland Esa Holappa described **that after that incident “the group learned that violence was not so difficult”.** **Holappa stated that the organization uses conflict and clash in its propaganda as a means to attract new members.**

After the NRM was attacked by anti-fascists in autumn 2014, the group received 40 applications for membership.

Indeed, violence has also increased among Finnish NRM members. During an NRM event in Helsinki in September this year, **NRM member Jesse Tornainen kicked a counter protestor in the chest, who later died of injuries following the impact of hitting the ground.** In December 2016 Tornainen was tried and found guilty on grounds of outrageous assault. **The incident has sparked demands by public authorities to abolish the group.**

In December 2016, the police made a decision to take legal action against the NRM. The official demand to abolish the NRM was handed in on 2 March 2017, and preliminary legal proceedings began on 29 August. Member of Parliament Juho Eerola (Finns Party) has argued that prohibiting the group would make it more attractive to possible new members. Moreover, Holappa has warned that abolishing the NRM would only result in the same group emerging with a different name and logo.

On 21 October, the NRM organized a march in Tampere, Finland and was attended by 200 individuals supporting the NRM. The march was met by 800 counter demonstrators, according to police estimates. The counter demonstration was organized by Tampere Without Nazis. One individual was arrested and the police began an investigation into counter demonstrators on grounds of violent rioting. Police reports detail that counter demonstrators threw smoke bombs at police and police horses in an attempt to cross the Satakunta bridge that was blocked by police in order to keep distance between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators.

The increasing radicalization and popularity of the NRM in Sweden and Finland are in line with trends observed in Europe regarding the rise of far-right extremism. As such, developments can be seen as an indicator of the growing polarization of society in the Nordic countries. The re-orientation of the political and ideological motivations converging towards an explicit rejection of immigrants can be seen as a response to the ongoing refugee crisis and to the increasing threat level of Islamist terrorism in Northern Europe. **The flourishing of the NRM in such an environment implies that the radicalization of the NRM is an escalating trend.**

The latest attacks in Sweden indicate that migrants are becoming a priority target. Moreover, the close synergy between the NRM networks in Sweden and Finland arising from regular communication and conventions, suggests that diversification in ideology and conduct in one location will have a close positive correlation with radicalization in another.

The measures taken by police demonstrate that the events organized by the NRM movement are increasingly perceived as a serious security threat. In Sweden, a significant police deployment was observed ahead of demonstrations planned by the NRM in Gothenburg on 30 September. Finnish authorities also mobilized more police as an extraordinary security measure to prepare for an NRM rally in Tampere on 21 October. In Finland, the Police Board has called for the abolition of the organization as a result of exceptional violence associated with members of the NRM and the result of this trial

is likely to fundamentally affect the activities of the NRM in the future at least in Finland.

The political discourse and judicial measures taken against the group also highlight the growing influence of the NRM. Moreover, the declaration of the NRM's ambition to become a broader regional movement, in parallel with the growing popularity that far-right ideologies are enjoying in Europe, suggests that the radicalization of the NRM may have a spillover effect in Northern Europe.

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