

Strategic Impact of East Central European Extreme Right Vigilantes: From Subcultural Fringes to Instruments of Hybrid Warfare

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1. Introduction

Extreme right politics in East Central Europe is traditionally characterized by the existence of vigilant extreme right formations. Their growth is significant also in recent years. Several studies on this phenomenon have been published (Liedekerke 2016, Mareš 2012b, Mareš – Stojar, Stojarová) however, the general strategic impact of these groups has not been assessed. This is a goal of this paper. Its main research question is: “Why does the extreme right create vigilant structures in East Central Europe and which strategic impact on political and security environment do these extreme right vigilantes have?.”

The strategic-thinking approach within the scope of political strategy research (focused on extreme right) is used (Braun, Geilser, Gerster 2009). An analysis of the strategic intention of the extreme right is based on research of direct statements of subjects from this part of the political spectrum as well as on a contextual analysis of their real and declared activities. The strategic impact is identified on the base of general strategic analysis of the political and particularly security situation in East Central Europe. This paper serves mostly as a basic overview of these issues and my research in this field will be more deeply researched in the future.

2. Conceptualizing extreme rightist vigilantes in East Central Europe

The countries of the so called Visegrad group (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), Bulgaria and Romania are considered as East Central Europe in this article. This geographical area

is of specific strategic importance due to its position between the Western powers and Russia. Currently these countries are members of the European Union, however, the pro-Russian spectrum with anti-Western values is relatively strong in some of them (Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic), illiberal or even authoritarian tendencies are visible in the conservative spectrum in other countries (Poland, Hungary)(Zgut, Przybylski 2017).

The extreme right in East Central Europe is a part of contemporary extreme right party family, however, with a specific impact of historical legacies on the current policy. Strong nationalism, nativism and intolerance are similar elements of the extreme right policy as in the case of the Western extreme right. However, a large part of the East Central European extreme right is still rooted in the history of the nationalist movements from the 19th century and from the fascist and authoritarian movements from the 1920s - 1940s. This fact is the cause of the strong role of territorial issues (including irredentism) and stronger use of anti-Semitism in the traditional extreme right (Mareš 2009). On the other hand, in some countries (the Czech Republic, partially Poland) also a new anti-Islamic movement with pro-Israeli attitudes is growing (Mareš 2014). In several countries of East Central Europe the extreme right spectrum is divided according to various historical traditions and geo-political orientation (neo-Nazis, traditional nationalists, clergy-Fascists etc.)(Kupka, Layrš Smolík 2009, Minkenberg 2017). A part of former pro-Russian communist spectrum turned in recent years to strong nationalist and intolerant attitudes (mostly towards Muslims and immigrants), which interconnects this political stream with the extreme right (in the vigilant and paramilitary sphere the Czechoslovak reserve soldiers for peace can be mentioned as an example)(Vejvodová, Janda,, Víchová 2017).

Vigilantism can be in a very broad sense defined as the use of power by private citizens and non-state groups for purposes of establishing or keeping state of “law and order”, defined according their values. The acts of vigilantism are committed outside the governmental structures by private citizens (Johnston 1996). Various actors and forms of vigilantism can be identified. Vigilantism can be provided in the form of ad hoc activities or by long-term existing structures, by individuals or by groups with various levels of organisation, hierarchy and affiliation (a. o. in the form of satellite organisations of political parties) and these individuals and groupings can use different intensity of violence (the brutal forms are considered as vigilant terrorism). Vigilantism can be connected with various political ideologies, various politicized religious streams and ethno-nationalist demands. Vigilantism can be carried out in democratic as well as non-democratic regimes, including transformation period (Kučera, Mareš 2015). Extreme right vigilantism seems to be the most numerous form from this point of view, including the situation in East Central Europe (Mareš, Stojar 2012).

3. Historical legacy

The historical legacy of extreme right vigilantism in East Central Europe is relatively strong in the sense of deep historical roots of this political activity. It is also important to mention that many extreme right vigilant groups see their own tradition not only in historical vigilant formations but also in governmental military, paramilitary or police organisations from the era of non-democratic right-wing authoritarian and fascist regimes, sometimes also from the era of historical national movements and rarely also from the era of historical regimes.

“Pure” extreme right vigilantism in this area can be divided into several main periods in modern history. The first period are the post-WW I years, during establishing states and borders of the System of Versailles. The vigilant character was typical of various nationalist paramilitary units, used for small wars as well as for “law and order” activities. “White terror” and paramilitary violence in Hungary during the post-WW I conflicts can be mentioned as an example (Bodó 2004). The second period followed continuously this first period. Extreme right political parties and movements created their own militia formations. Usually the original declared goal was the protection of party rallies (Pejčoch 2009: 5), however, these units were used also in clashes with political opponents and in some cases their members joined governmental paramilitary or military formations. A specific example is the Voluntary Protect Service (Freiwilliger Schutzdienst), which was established from the Ordinary Service (Ordnerdienst) of the Sudeten German Party in Czechoslovakia in 1938. Large part of members of this organisation joined the Sudeten German Voluntary Corps (Sudetendeutsches Freikorps), formed in Germany against Czechoslovakia in September 1938 (Burian 2012: 306-376).

The defeat of fascism and the establishing of “real socialist” regimes on the territory of East Central Europe stopped the development of extreme right vigilantism for approximately forty years. At the end of the communist period, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the third era of vigilantism during the transformation period started. Typical was the involvement of subcultural vigilant activities (mostly racist skinhead patrols and lynching of opponents), pogroms led by the extreme right which involved a broader public spectrum (mostly against Roma) and some attempts to renew the interwar paramilitary style (Mareš 2012b).

The current fourth period is connected with a planned use of vigilant formations for broader political purposes in the era of growing right-wing influence in the Western world. Vigilantism in East Central Europe keeps some specific characteristic features, however, it is also connected with pan-Western trends (as the establishing of the Soldiers of Odin branches shows). The start of this

current period was characterized mostly by the foundation of the Hungarian Guard (Magyar Gárda) by the Hungarian Party Jobbik in 2007 (Stojarová 2012: 276-277). This step was followed by a rise of many similar groupings in the region. New impulses came with the conflict in Ukraine (Mareš 2017: 83-87) and mostly with the migration crisis in 2015. While from the fall of communism to this time mostly Roma people were targets of vigilant violence in 2015-2016, migrants, at least partially, substituted their position (Hloušek 2017).

4. Current extreme rightist vigilante formations in East Central Europe

One of possible categorizations of current vigilant formations in East Central Europe can be based on their general purpose and character. The first category are paramilitary formations, formed with the intention to participate in real military conflicts, while vigilantism is one of their important activities in peace time. As an example can be mentioned the organisation Slovak recruits, focused on military training, however, active also in patrols outside the refugee camp in Gabčíkovo in 2015 or patrolling in Piešťany against “Arabs” in summer 2016 (Slovenský branci 2016).

The second category are patrols, formed primarily with goals in the policing sector. They can be uniformed and they can use various weapons or they can be unarmed. Usually they try to act within the framework of legal order. The patrols of the National Radical Camp (Oboz Narodowo Radikalny – ONR) in Poland in 2016 can be mentioned as an example. Groups of uniformed members patrolled in Lodz, with “preventive” goals. They were aimed mostly against possible Arabian migrants, however, they did not break the Polish law (according to available sources)(Flieger 2016).

The third category can be labelled as public active hunters – lone wolves or freely organized groups. They seek confrontation which can be unlawful. A typical example are structures around the Bulgarian “hunter” of refugees Dinko Valev as well as some Bulgarian “lone wolves” at the Bulgarian – Turkish border, active in hunting refugees and migrants (Brunwasser 2016).

The fourth category are underground unlawful groupings and individuals, characterized by the use of brutal violent or even terrorist methods with vigilant purposes. For example, the so called “death squad” in Hungary, consisting of four neo-Nazis, murdered in 2008-2009 six Roma during violent night rides and many others injured (Mareš 2016: 81-83).

Relation to political actors can be another criterion of categorisation of vigilant formations. The first category are party affiliated groups – as the National Guards of the National Party in the Czech Republic (a. o. members of the NG patrolled outside a basic school in Karlovy Vary in 2008 with the goal to protect children from majority against crime committed by youth “gypsy gangs”)(Mareš

2012a: 148). The second category are autonomous formations formed within the spectrum of broader social movements, as the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace (Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze pro mír) during the Ukrainian and migration crisis)(Vejvodová, Janda, Vichová 2017: 32-33). The third category are subcultural phenomena – as the Army of Outlaws (Betyársereg) in Hungary (Juhász, - Győri –Zgut – Dezső 2017: 17-19).

5. General categorization of strategic impact of East Central European Extreme Right Vigilantes

Categorization of the strategic impact of East Central European extreme right vigilantes is based on real broader goals and the intention of the founders of the vigilant actors beyond the primarily declared vigilant aim. Of course, also this original goal can be assessed as a strategic issue. However, the vigilantes serve as a strategic instrument of the extreme right with impact in specific fields of political activity. The mobilisation impact, the propagandist impact, the impact on ethnic conflicts and impact on hybrid warfare can be identified in East Central Europe. Some of these impacts are usually used in sum by all vigilant groups (mostly the mobilisation and propagandist impacts), while the issue of hybrid warfare does not necessarily belong to each of the current vigilant groups. The substance of concrete impacts will be further explained with help of selected examples.

6. Mobilisation impact

The mobilisation impact means that the establishing and activity of vigilant formations is used with the goal to gain new activists for the extreme right politics. Service in the vigilant groups can be presented as a meaningful and responsible public activity which can respond to personal character and goals of persons involved (including the use of martial arts, in some cases guns etc.). The involvement of a broader spectrum of activists can enhance the general membership base of the extreme right.

The Guard of the March of Independence (“Straż Marszu Niepodległości”) in Poland can be mentioned as an example. The “March of Independence” every year in November is currently the most important event of the Polish extreme right. This guard was regularly established in 2013 by an association which is responsible for the organisation of the march. As Konrad Jajecznik stated: “the organisers legitimised its formation by arguing that in previous years riots were provoked by masked police officers“ (Jajecznik 2015: 52). Paradoxically, in 2014 this guard was attacked by violent football hooligans (Jajecznik 2015: 52). However, according to some sources, the guard

protected some hooligans during the same march (Adom, Bzato, Jk 2014). The guard leads their members to stable vigilant political activism on behalf of the extreme right politics and the existence of the guard can have positive impact (from the point of view of organizers) on participation of “ordinary people”.

7. Propagandist impact

The propagandist impact is probably the most important issue of current activities of extreme right vigilantes. Yet the formation of the Hungarian Guard in 2007 won huge attention of mass media. A similar situation was repeated after establishing or the rise of activities of many East Central European vigilant groups. If the vigilant activities are carried out by party affiliated organisations, the electoral party support can be taken into account.

The so called Train patrols of the People’s Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana naše Slovensko) became a significant issue of Slovak politics in 2016-2017. The right-wing extremist party led by Marián Kotleba organized unarmed patrols (wearing party T-Shirts) in Slovak trains. Their main goal was to protect “white” passengers against so called “Gypsy” crime. Several attempts of Slovak governmental authorities were unsuccessful and the party won media attention. Despite strong criticism in mainstream media, it’s popularity was growing at that time according to surveys (Mesežnikov, Bráník 2017: 57).

8. Impact on ethnic conflicts

Extreme right vigilant units in East Central Europe can be used as drivers of current ethnic conflicts. Their activity can stimulate ethnic tensions and it can lead to local or regional unrests and riots. Such conflicts are welcomed by the extreme right, because in polarized society in uncertain times this part of the political spectrum can present itself as a “protector of law and order”. Ethnic conflicts can serve sometimes also as environment for elimination of political opponents (Mareš 2012: 47) .

The approval of the ban of the Hungarian Guard by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013 was reasoned by threatening the Roma community (European Court of Human Rights 2013). Several other paramilitary groups in Hungary stimulated with alleged countering so called “Gypsy crime” ethnic tensions in the country, as the Civil Guard Association for a Better Future (Szébb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület), which brutally attacked Roma people in the village Gyöngyöspata in 2011 (Mireanu 2013: 81-92).

9. Impact on hybrid warfare

The term hybrid warfare has been used by military theoreticians in various meanings since the mid of the 1990s. Currently it is connected mostly with a new Russian style of warfare applied in Europe after the Ukrainian crisis. The use of paramilitary units with allegedly vigilant goals was typical of the Crimea campaign in 2014. Current support of pro-Kremlin vigilant and paramilitary groups in East Central Europe is assessed as an instrument of long-term Russian hybrid campaign with the aim to undermine the stability of pro-Western governmental authorities in this area. These units can turn into real fighting units in case of a “hot” conflict.

The National Home Guard (Národní domobrana) was established in the Czech Republic in 2015 by the pan-Slavic extreme right party National Democracy. In 2016 it became independent and it is no more directly connected with the ND. This group organized paramilitary training camps and patrols against migrants. Members of the National Home Guard visited the Donetsk People’s Republic and Nela Lisková from this group is also the so called honorary consul of the DNR (of course, this republic and its “diplomacy” is not recognized by the Czech government) (Vejvodová, Janda, Víchová 2017: 34-36). Within the context of current hybrid threats and hybrid warfare these facts concern Czech security authorities (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR 2017: 12-13).

10. Conclusion

Vigilantism in East Central Europe is a comprehensive phenomenon with deep historical roots and with a plural spectrum of current organisational forms and activities. Vigilant formations operate in all East Central European countries, they are aimed traditionally against Roma people, at least since the migration crisis in 2015 they are strongly focused on immigrants and Muslims (paradoxically, despite relatively a limited number of immigrants and Muslims in this area, with specific exception of Bulgarian Turks). The strategic impact of vigilant activities can be identified mostly in adaptation of propagandist strategies of the extreme right. However, also a new opportunity for mobilisation of activists plays an important role. The role of drivers of ethnic conflicts and strategic instruments of hybrid warfare can grow in the future.

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