Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 3.06.2020 www.osw.waw.pl

Germany: an upsurge in political extremism

Kamil Frymark

According to a report from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) published on 27 May, the number of politically motivated crimes in 2019 in Germany rose by 14.2% y/y, from around 36,000 to 41,000. The number was higher only in 2016. Inevitably, the largest number of such crimes are attributed to right-wing motivation (around 22,000, an increase of 9.4%), while the largest increase has been seen in the case of crimes linked to left-wing political views (around 9000, an increase pf 23.7%). The number of crimes committed against politicians and officials has risen by over 33% (to around 1600). The report also reveals that the number of anti-Semitic crimes last year was the highest since statistics began to be kept (since 2001) – around 2000 (an increase of 13%). The most frequent offences involved circulation of propaganda materials and symbols of prohibited organisations (around 40%, i.e. around 16,000). In turn, the number of violent crimes decreased (by around 16% to around 2800). Nevertheless, last year three politically motivated murders and ten attempted murders were committed, predominantly by right-wing extremists. The Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer (CSU) responded to these statistics by promising to tighten up the law, strengthening BKA and the counter-intelligence (BfV), focusing more on counteracting hate speech on the internet, and improving protection for local government members and emergency services.

Commentary

- Aggression towards politicians and state officials has been intensifying at least since 2016. The Ministry of Internal Affairs registered around 400 attacks at that time and started keeping regular statistics. Local politicians face the highest risk. As can be concluded from the perpetrators' statements and the BKA's report *Crime in the context of migration,* published in March this year, this is an effect of the migration crisis and local government's response to it, since local government is responsible for ensuring care to refugees. In 2015 and 2017 the lord mayor of Cologne (North Rhine-Westphalia) and the mayor of Altena (North Rhine-Westphalia) were attacked by right-wing extremists; they both survived the knife attacks. The election campaign to the local parliament in Bremen and eastern federal states in 2019 also affected the number of these crimes. Tensions may rise again in 2021, since elections in six local parliaments and to the Bundestag are scheduled for next year.
- The increasing number of politically motivated crimes will add to the criticism of the AfD; some of its members are linked to right-wing extremists (which was especially strongly

emphasised following the murder of Walter Lübcke, a member of the CDU, last June). Some of its activists are also known for anti-Semite statements. However, according to statistics, the AfD is also the party most frequently attacked (e.g. attacks on its offices and destroying its posters), which is attributed to left-wing radicals. Since the crime statistics are ambiguous, no specific group can be held accountable (more and more attacks are unclassified; an increase of 45% compared to 2018, to around 6000). This is convenient for all groupings and allows them to accuse their political rivals of increasing extremism.

- The government is planning to toughen the *NetzDG* act of 2017, which obliges administrators of social media portals to block or remove hate speech. As a result of the amendment, they will be obliged to report any death threats and incitements to hatred to the BKA. Anti-Semitism can be used as an example illustrating the scale of the problem; almost half of crimes linked to anti-Semitism are committed online. Furthermore, social media offer more organisational opportunities to extremists.