

Vigilantism, Nationalism and the Rule of Law in Contemporary Europe

Research Paper

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PREFACE

In a contemporary Europe marked by profound transformations, the emergence and proliferation of ‘vigilante’ and ‘patriotic patrol’ movements present a phenomenon deserving of the highest attention. These groups, while often manifesting in localised actions, are embedded within broader socio-political contexts that challenge the very foundations of our liberal democracies. They are not merely a symptom of social fractures, economic and cultural anxieties, and a crisis of trust in traditional institutions; they constitute a pressing challenge to the rule of law and social cohesion.

As the *European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA)*, we feel a responsibility to contribute to a clear and thorough understanding of this challenge. With this research, we have sought to move beyond anecdotal accounts and surface-level observations to offer a multi-dimensional analysis. Our work systematically explores the contextual factors fuelling these movements, the diverse profiles of their participants—dismantling misleading stereotypes—their operational and financial structures that ensure their resilience, and their tangible impact in terms of violence and hate crime.

However, this study does not confine itself to diagnosing a problem. Our mission is to promote security within a legal and democratic framework. A cornerstone of this research is therefore dedicated to exploring concrete pathways to strengthen security and justice in full accordance with the rule of law. We firmly believe that the answer to illegal vigilantism is not suppression alone, but the enhancement of legal and constructive alternatives, such as *Participatory Vigilance* or *Neighbourhood Watch schemes*, which operate in close partnership with and under the supervision of law enforcement.

This work is offered as a contribution to the public debate, intended for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, researchers, civil society organisations, and all citizens committed to building safer, more cohesive communities. It is our hope that a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon can inform strategies that not only address the symptoms but also tackle the root causes, thereby reaffirming the strength and resilience of democracy.

The EUNWA Board – July 2025

Abstract

This research provides a multi-faceted analysis of contemporary far-right extremism and associated vigilante 'patrol' movements in Europe. It argues that understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond surface actions to investigate its contextual drivers, participant demographics, organisational structures, and tangible impacts.

Synthesising existing research and data from institutional sources (e.g., Europol, OSCE/ODIHR), the study first outlines the challenge these groups pose to liberal democratic principles, including the rule of law, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy. It then explores the key drivers fuelling their emergence, such as socio-economic insecurity, anxieties surrounding migration and cultural change, and declining trust in traditional institutions, all leveraged by nativist and populist ideologies.

The research challenges monolithic stereotypes of participants, detailing the diverse profiles involved – from digitally-savvy youth activists and middle-aged individuals in deindustrialised areas ('geographies of frustration') to older adherents closer to traditional politics – highlighting the unifying role of a perceived 'fear of decline'. Furthermore, it examines the significance of financial flows in signalling movement maturity and revealing international networks.

Finally, it presents a critical analysis of comparative data on violent extremism and hate crimes, suggesting correlations between organised patrol activities and recorded incidents, despite limitations in attribution.

The study concludes that a comprehensive understanding encompassing context, participants, finances, and impact is essential for developing effective responses that address both symptoms and root causes.

Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of far-right extremist ideologies and associated vigilante or *patriotic street patrol* movements represents a pressing challenge to liberal democratic norms and social cohesion across contemporary Europe. While often manifesting in localised actions, from neighbourhood patrols to provocative online campaigns, these phenomena are embedded within broader socio-political contexts and intricate networks that demand thorough investigation. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of this complex landscape, moving beyond anecdotal accounts to explore the underlying drivers, diverse participants, operational structures, and tangible impacts associated with these groups.

The significance of this inquiry stems from the multifaceted threats these movements pose. As will be explored, their activities can erode the state's monopoly on legitimate force, foster social polarisation through divisive rhetoric, incite hatred and discrimination against minorities, pose direct threats to public security, and contribute to the delegitimisation of democratic institutions. Understanding the roots and manifestations of this challenge is therefore crucial not only for academic insight but also for informing effective societal and institutional responses.

Adopting a multi-dimensional approach, this study synthesises insights from existing academic research, analysis of reports from key European institutions such as *Europol* and the *OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)*, and review of publicly available data and reputable news sources. It aims to dissect the phenomenon by examining: the contextual factors fuelling its growth; the varied demographic profiles and motivations of its participants; the financial mechanisms and networks sustaining its operations; and the measurable impact in terms of violence and hate crime.

This research is structured as follows: Chapter 1 defines the nature of the challenge these groups pose to the rule of law and social cohesion within liberal democracies. Chapter 2 investigates into the roots and contextual drivers, analysing the interplay of economic insecurity, migration narratives, institutional mistrust, and cultural change that creates fertile ground for extremism. Chapter 3 moves beyond stereotypes to paint a nuanced picture of the participants, exploring demographics, geographical concentrations ('geographies of frustration'), and motivations across different types of groups. Chapter 4 investigates the organisational aspects, focusing particularly on financial flows as indicators of maturity and network connections. Chapter 5 assesses the tangible impact, presenting and critically analysing comparative data on violent extremism and hate crimes potentially linked to these groups. Chapter 6 then surveys the varied and often fragmented institutional responses currently employed across Europe, constituting a 'regulatory patchwork'. Subsequently, Chapter 7 explores potential pathways forward, examining strategies for strengthening security frameworks, citizen participation, and social cohesion firmly within the rule of law. Finally, the Final Consideration summarises the key findings and considers their broader implications, arguing for a comprehensive understanding that can inform strategies moving beyond reaction towards prevention.

CHAPTER 1 - THE CHALLENGE TO THE RULE OF LAW AND SOCIAL COHESION

Picture this: dusk descends on a European city square. Or perhaps it's a quiet suburban street, or a windswept border crossing in the east. Figures emerge, often clad in uniform jackets or adopting a purposeful stride. They are the *Soldiers of Odin* in Helsinki, the activists of the now-banned *Génération Identitaire* unfurling banners in the Alps, the local 'concerned citizens' group patrolling a neighbourhood in Dresden, or the self-styled 'border hunters' in Bulgaria. The names and insignias vary, but the underlying phenomenon echoes across the continent: the rise of citizen groups claiming a mandate to defend identity, enforce order, or protect borders where they perceive the state is failing. They cast themselves as patriots, guardians, the last line of defence. Their existence and activities, however, pose fundamental and interconnected challenges to the established norms and institutions of European liberal democracies, jeopardizing the integrity of the social fabric. These challenges manifest on multiple fronts:

Erosion of the State Monopoly of Legitimate Force

A fundamental pillar of the modern state lies in its monopoly over the legitimate use of force, exercised through designated authorities such as the police and armed forces. The emergence of groups organising private 'patrols', surveillance, or border control actions directly contests this core principle. Vigilantism, even when framed as community protection or border security assistance, operates outside established legal frameworks. Although sometimes motivated by concerns perceived as legitimate by the local population, these forms of 'do-it-yourself' security are inherently problematic. Lacking formal accountability mechanisms and operating outside the legal controls and respect for individual rights that govern state actors, they introduce elements of arbitrariness, risk unequal application of force, and increase the potential for escalation and abuse. Such actions fundamentally undermine the principle that policing, law enforcement, and border control are state functions governed by the rule of law and democratic oversight, challenging the very authority of the state.

Incitement to Hatred and Discrimination

The communication, rhetoric, and discourse employed by many of these groups are often imbued with xenophobic, racist, Islamophobic elements, and generalised hostility towards minorities. This language is not limited to polluting public debate; it actively contributes to a climate where prejudice and discrimination can become normalised or legitimised. As highlighted in reports by numerous anti-racism NGOs across Europe, the normalisation of verbal hatred represents a tangible danger to peaceful coexistence, potentially acting as a catalyst for discriminatory behaviours and, in the most extreme cases, inspiring acts of violence directed against targeted groups, thereby undermining societal commitments to equality and human dignity.

Deepening Social Polarisation

These groups frequently promote and deliberately exacerbate societal divisions by constructing sharp 'us versus them' dichotomies. They tend to portray society through a starkly divided lens: on one side, a virtuous and betrayed 'native people', and on the other, internal and external enemies identified as allegedly corrupt elites, 'dangerous foreigners' or 'invading' migrants, or other targeted categories. This polarising narrative exacerbates pre-existing social tensions and creates new fault lines, making

constructive dialogue across societal divides more difficult, hindering the search for common ground and shared solutions to complex problems, and potentially fracturing social cohesion.

Threatening Public Security and Promoting Violence

Paradoxically, while often claiming their objective is to enhance public safety, these groups can themselves become significant sources of instability, danger, and public disorder. The ideologies they espouse frequently overlap with those held by violent right-wing extremists. *Europol's annual TE-SAT reports* consistently flag right-wing extremism and terrorism as a significant ongoing threat, often involving lone actors or small cells inspired or influenced by these broader movements. Furthermore, physical clashes involving members of these groups, counter-protesters, and law enforcement are not uncommon events. While precise comparative data specifically on violence solely *by* vigilante groups is scarce, arrests, foiled plots, and public order disturbances linked to the broader right-wing extremist milieu (where minorities are often primary targets, as suggested by analysis of datasets like the RTV dataset) are regularly reported across EU member states, undermining the very public order these groups claim to protect.

Delegitimising Democratic Institutions

A core tactic involves persistent and systematic attacks on the legitimacy of fundamental democratic institutions. Governments, parliaments, the judiciary, mainstream media outlets (frequently portrayed as untrustworthy, biased, or acting against the interests of 'the people'), and supranational bodies like the European Union are routinely targeted. This constant questioning and sustained critique aim to erode citizens' trust and confidence in the democratic system and its processes. By fuelling cynicism and mistrust, anti-political and illiberal tendencies are reinforced, potentially weakening the very foundations of democratic governance and increasing susceptibility to authoritarian alternatives.

These combined challenges illustrate that the rise of street-level nationalism and vigilantism is not merely a fringe issue but constitutes a complex and multifaceted threat that strikes at the core principles of modern European democracies. It goes beyond mere political dissent to challenge state authority, foment hatred, fracture society, generate insecurity, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The subsequent chapters will delve into the factors driving this phenomenon, the characteristics of those involved, their methods of operation, and the measurable impacts of their activities.

CHAPTER 2 - ROOTS AND CONTEXTUAL DRIVERS OF CONTEMPORARY FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

The growing visibility and activism of groups linked to right-wing extremism and forms of vigilantism in Europe are not isolated or sudden phenomena. They emerge and strengthen within specific contexts, fuelled by a complex interplay of deep-seated socio-economic shifts, political dynamics, cultural anxieties, and potent ideological currents. Understanding the deep roots of the phenomenon is essential for analysing its nature, strategies, and impact on democratic societies.

Underlying Factors and Ideological Roots

These groups are not isolated anomalies but potent symptoms of deeper currents running through contemporary Europe, fuelled by a complex confluence of anxieties, socio-economic factors, and political shifts. Their emergence and growth are intrinsically linked to several key factors:

- **Heightened Security Concerns.** Public anxiety regarding security and border control has been significantly amplified by successive migration waves, particularly the peak influx of 2015-2016, alongside high-profile jihadist terrorist attacks in European cities. These groups actively leverage these fears, often portraying immigration – especially from Muslim-majority countries – as an existential threat to both physical security and cultural homogeneity, providing fertile ground for narratives linking immigration and threat.
- **Erosion of Institutional Trust.** Across Europe, faith in traditional political institutions, mainstream parties, established media, and even supranational bodies like the European Union has markedly eroded. This widespread scepticism and disillusionment, extensively documented in academic literature on European populism (Mudde, C. 2000), creates fertile ground for anti-establishment and 'anti-system' narratives. Self-proclaimed 'patriots' position themselves as authentic representatives of 'the people' against supposedly 'corrupt' or 'traitorous' elites, promising to return power and defend 'national' interests.
- **Identity Politics and Cultural Change.** Globalization, secularization, and increasing ethnic and religious diversity challenge traditional notions of national identity, leading to perceptions of rapid cultural transformation. This can generate identity-based reactions and fear concerning the loss of 'authentic' traditions and values. In response, these groups champion a return to perceived 'native' values, often framed in ethno-nationalist or culturally exclusive terms. They actively engage in what researchers term 'nativism' – the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the people') and that non-native elements ('the foreigners') represent a fundamental threat or dilution. Influential concepts like the 'Great Replacement' theory, propagated by movements such as the pan-European Identitarians, resonate within these circles despite being widely debunked.
- **Economic and Social Precarity.** Periods of economic crisis, unemployment, and growing inequality generate anxiety and resentment. These socio-economic insecurities can be exploited by directing blame towards scapegoats, who are often migrants or minority groups.
- **Core Ideology.** Ideologically, these groups draw heavily on nationalist, sovereigntist, and right-wing populist currents of thought. 'Nativism' is often central, emphasizing the defence of 'one's own people,' 'one's own culture,' and 'one's own territory' against supposed external threats (like migration) and internal ones (like 'traitorous' elites or minorities accused of disloyalty).

These factors rarely operate in isolation. Instead, it is the complex interplay between economic anxieties, security fears, political disillusionment, cultural identity concerns, and mobilising ideologies that creates a fertile ground for far-right extremist narratives to take root. This environment, marked by widespread anxieties and a crisis of traditional representation, shapes the context from which the specific groups and diverse participants, explored in the next chapter, emerge and draw their appeal.

CHAPTER 3 - TYPOLOGIES, PARTICIPANTS, AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EUROPEAN STREET-LEVEL NATIONALISM

A Continent-Wide Constellation: Typologies of Groups

While the contextual factors discussed in the previous chapter explain *why* far-right and vigilante groups may gain traction, understanding *who* participates requires a closer look at the diverse individuals and group structures involved. Moving beyond stereotypes, this chapter examines the varied typologies, demographic characteristics, geographic concentrations, and common traits of these movements across Europe.

While sharing core ideological tenets often centred on nationalism, nativism, and institutional scepticism, the forms these far-right and street-level nationalist groups take across Europe are diverse. They adapt to different national contexts, legal frameworks, and choose varying primary modes of operation. Several key typologies can be identified:

1. **Identitarian Movements.** Forming part of a pan-European network, groups such as *Génération Identitaire* (formally dissolved in France but ideologically persistent), Austria's *Identitäre Bewegung* (IBÖ), Germany's *Identitäre Bewegung* (IBD), and Italy's *Generazione Identitaria* focus primarily on defending a perceived European ethno-cultural identity against multiculturalism and immigration, particularly from non-European origins. Their methods often involve high-visibility, media-oriented stunts (like temporary occupations or banner drops), sophisticated online propaganda campaigns, and the promotion of concepts like 'ethno-pluralism'. Their transnational connections and strategies are well-documented by research organisations like the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).
2. **Citizen Patrol Groups.** This model involves establishing a visible presence in public spaces through patrols, often uniformed or wearing distinctive clothing. Finland's *Soldiers of Odin* (SOO), established in 2015 and subsequently spreading to other Nordic countries and beyond, epitomises this approach with its night-time street patrols (ostensibly against 'immigrant threats') and signature black vests. Similar phenomena include local groups in Germany (particularly in eastern regions, sometimes emerging from the *PEGIDA* orbit), Sweden, and Norway. In the UK, groups like *Britain First* have organised 'Christian patrols' in areas with significant Muslim populations. While often presenting themselves as neighbourhood watches enhancing security, these patrols are frequently criticised for intimidation, racism, and promoting an anti-immigration agenda.
3. **Border Vigilantism / Volunteers.** Primarily observed in countries on the EU's external borders, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Greece, this involves citizen groups organising themselves to independently 'patrol' border areas. Their stated aim is often to report or physically intercept migrants attempting to cross irregularly. These activities frequently operate in a legal grey area, sometimes meet with tacit local tolerance, but have also been associated with controversial, sometimes violent, methods and accusations of abuse.
4. **Online Networks and Nationalist 'Galaxies'.** Underlying and connecting many of these offline activities is a vibrant, extensive, and often aggressive online ecosystem. Social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps (like Telegram), and dedicated forums serve as crucial tools for disseminating propaganda, recruiting new members, coordinating actions (both online and offline), raising funds, and cultivating an international community. The [EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network \(RAN\)](#) has extensively analysed this digital dimension. Beyond specific

named groups, informal 'galaxies' or networks of nationalist and far-right activists exist in almost all European countries. These networks share similar ideologies focusing on national sovereignty, Euroscepticism, security concerns, and cultural identity, and often maintain connections or overlaps with established radical or far-right political parties (such as the *AfD* in Germany, *Rassemblement National* in France, or *Vox* in Spain).

The following table provides an overview of various far-right, identitarian, and citizen patrol groups and networks active in several European countries. For each entity, it briefly outlines their period of activity, main targets and methods, origin and evolution, and the response from relevant authorities.

Country	Group / Network	Activity period	Main targets & methods	Genesis /Evolution/Response of Authorities
Austria	Identitäre Bewegung Österreich (IBÖ) (Austrian Identitarian Movement)	2012-today	Demonstrative actions with high media impact, such as temporary occupations, banners and leaflet distribution. Intense activity on social media.	This far-right group is inspired by the French Bloc Identitaire and is part of the pan-European identity movement. The founders include Martin Sellner , Patrick Lenart and Alexander Markovics . The first national media presence occurred in May 2013, in response to the so-called counter-occupation of the Vienna Votive Church against asylum seekers. Sources: Wikipedia Bundesministerium Inneres
Finland, Sweden & Norway	Soldiers of Odin	2015-today	Evening and night patrols 'against migrants' in city centres; black vests with Viking rune.	Born in Kemi, Finland, in 2015, they still patrol some northern towns with black vests and Viking symbols, although their presence is much reduced compared to the early days and kept under surveillance by Finnish intelligence (SUPO). The stated aim of 'protecting' the local population, but have been widely criticised for intimidation, racism and links to the far right. Widespread in 14 countries. Potentially violent network. Sources: Wikipedia Haram Online
France	Génération Identitaire / Defend Europe	2012-21	Media blitzes at Alpine borders (Col de l'Échelle) and in the Pyrenees to 'block' migrants; drones, pick-ups, blue jackets	It is the French branch of the identity movement and has been particularly active with media actions against immigration. The French government chooses the hard line, recognising the group 'as a criminal organisation' inciting hatred. It is disbanded in March 2021. The organisation has disappeared, but ideology and informal networks, however, persist. Source: France24

Country	Group / Network	Activity period	Main targets & methods	Genesis /Evolution/Response of Authorities
Germany	Bürgerwehren (Citizens' patrols)	2015 → revival 2024	Walkers armed with sprays and dogs; social campaigns with calls for 'self-defence'	Born in the PEGIDA orbit. Ministry of the Interior (BfV) monitors them as a threat to public order. Alerts in Saxony. Source: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung
Germany	Identitäre Bewegung (Identitarian Movement)	2012-today	Demonstrative actions with a high media impact, such as temporary occupations, banners and leaflet distribution	As part of a European network, it is known for spectacular actions (occupations, banners) aimed at promoting the idea of an 'ethno-cultural identity' threatened by 'Islamisation' and 'grand replacement'. Local patrols have also emerged here, especially in some eastern cities, often linked to the environment of the extreme right and the AfD party. Despite surveillance by the German security authorities (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz - BfV), the group continues to operate and maintain a significant presence through its online activities and demonstration actions. Source: Der Spiegel
Greece	Golden Dawn (until 2020) + vigilante networks in the Northeast	2006-today	Night patrols in Athens neighbourhoods and on the banks of the Evros; assaults on migrants and activists	Golden Dawn recognised as a criminal organisation (2020), but vigilante cells remain active. Sources: Statewatch Inkstick Media
Hungary	Magyar Gárda → National Legion	2007-2019	Uniformed parades, 'security garrisons' in Roma villages, paramilitary training	Magyar Gárda has been banned; National Legion is tolerated by the authorities and presents itself as a 'traditional self-defence force'. Sources: Independent Taylor & Francis Online
Italy	Articolo 52 (Article 52)	2025-today	Targeted beatings of young people of foreign origin, fundraising for spray and radio	Police (Digos) investigation for incitement to hatred and criminal conspiracy. Sources: Domani la Repubblica
Italy	Rete dei Patrioti (Patriots' Network)	2020-today	'Safety walks' in urban centres	Splitting of Forza Nuova, extreme right-wing organisation. Prefects and police headquarters ban unannounced marches; Police (Digos) monitoring Source: Il Fatto Quotidiano
Poland	Straż Narodowa (National Guard)	2020-today	Supporting militias at the 11 November procession, 'defence	Linked to the leader of the 'Marsz Niepodległości'; 1.7

Country	Group / Network	Activity period	Main targets & methods	Genesis /Evolution/Response of Authorities
			of churches' and counter-protests	million € of public funds 2020 22; parliamentary disputes. Sources: Instytut Spraw Obywatelskich
Spain	Patrullas ciudadanas (Barcelona, Madrid) & Hogar Social	2017-today	Self-organised groups in the metro or neighbourhoods, filming alleged pickpockets and posting them on social networks	Authorities denounce alarmism and xenophobia; phenomenon reignited in 2024 – 25 Source: El País
United Kingdom	Britain First	2011-today	'Christian patrols' in front of mosques, video clash over YouTube; strong online activity	They organised demonstrations and 'patrols' (e.g. Britain First's 'Christian patrols') often in areas with a strong Muslim presence, with overtly Islamophobic and nationalist rhetoric. Social suspension and convictions for hate speech; re-eligible as a party from 2021. Sources: Wikipedia HOPE not hate
United Kingdom	English Defence League (EDL)	2009-2013	Street demonstrations against Islam and Sharia law	Although not officially disbanded, it began to decline in 2013 when fewer and fewer people started to attend its rallies. The EDL's reputation was damaged in 2011 after some supporters were convicted of plotting to bomb mosques and links to Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik were revealed. Source: Wikipedia

Age, Social Class, and Life Path: The Faces of the Movement

If contextual factors explain the "why" behind the growth of these phenomena, demographic analysis helps understand "who" is involved, debunking the stereotypical image of an indistinct crowd. Average age, education level, and socio-economic position vary considerably, influencing tactics, goals, and the longevity of groups.

Beyond the Stereotype

- **Participant Diversity.** Contrary to common perception, participants are not just angry young men. Understanding demographic nuances is crucial.
- **Types of Groups and Participants:**
 - *Youth-Based Social Movements.* Formations like *Articolo 52* (Milan) or *Génération Identitaire* (France) originate in youth cultures, with an average age just over 20, a strong presence of students or precarious service workers, and high digital proficiency.

- A study on *Génération Identitaire* (Bouron S., 2017) referred to it as a "campus rebellion" rather than a proletarian protest.
- *Mixed Composition Neighbourhood Patrols*. Groups like the Finnish *Soldiers of Odin* (SOO) or the Saxon *Bürgerwehren* (civic patrols) bring together men predominantly aged between 30 and 50, often skilled industrial workers, drivers, or artisans affected by deindustrialization. A study on SOO (Veilleux-Lepage, Y., & Archambault, E., 2017) indicates an average age of 30-35 and recruitment through informal networks (bars, workshops).
 - *Senior Patriotism*. Entities closer to traditional politics like *Britain First* (UK) rely on sympathisers over 45, peaking among the over-65s (77% according to a *Prospect* poll (prospectmagazine.co.uk). The case of Marek Zakrocki (48 years old, [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marek_Zakrocki)), responsible for a failed bombing, falls into this age group.
 - **Social Class, Local Identity, and the "Geographies of Frustration":**
 - *Where Groups Take Root*. They often emerge in peri-urban areas and small to medium-sized towns (30k-100k pop.) marked by industrial decline and perceived migrant influx (e.g., East Germany, source: [Süddeutsche.de](http://Sueddeutsche.de); logistics areas in Emilia-Romagna for the *Patriot Network*; university towns in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes for GI).
 - *Precariousness, Manual Labour, and Fear of Decline*. The social base is heterogeneous (metalworkers, long-term unemployed, delivery riders, small entrepreneurs). The binding element is often the **fear of decline** (socio-economic), rather than a structured ideology.
 - *Educated Youth and Digital Skills*. Alongside these figures, a younger, "identitarian" fringe (students in political science, digital marketing, freelancers) contributes crucial digital skills for the virality of actions.

Who Patrols? Unravelling the Human Fabric of the Movement

Just as important as understanding the finances is dissecting *who* makes up these groups. Moving beyond stereotypes requires asking critical questions about the participants' backgrounds, motivations, and life paths:

- **How do individual life paths change?** Does someone who was deeply involved in stadium ultras culture at 18 naturally progress into organising patrols at 30? Understanding these pathways can reveal feeder networks and evolving forms of militancy.
- **How important is cultural capital?** Do groups led by individuals with higher education (like the notable presence of university graduates in *Génération Identitaire*) exhibit different strategies, goals, or longevity compared to those primarily rooted in a working-class base, perhaps driven by experiences of deindustrialization?
- **What role do genders play?** While often male-dominated spaces, women are present, albeit fewer in number. They frequently take on crucial roles in communication, logistics, and online management. What specific factors motivate their participation, and how do their roles shape the group's dynamics?
- **What are the intersections with housing precarity?** Are members typically renters living in peripheral, often precarious, suburban areas, or are some landlords themselves, perhaps in declining inner-city neighbourhoods? Understanding their housing situation and local rootedness can shed light on specific grievances related to community change, perceived threats, or economic status.

Investigating *who* forms the patrols – not just *what* they do – means unravelling the complex mixture that often fuels 'street patriotism': hyper-digital youth leveraging online platforms, de-industrialised

workers feeling left behind, and middle-aged militants perhaps seeking renewed purpose or community.

Common characteristics

Across Europe, various groups have emerged that, while diverse in name and specific local context, share a distinct set of characteristics, operational methods, and underlying ideologies often associated with the far-right or nationalist vigilante movements. Understanding these commonalities is crucial for analysing their impact and formulating responses.

- **Core Ideology and Objectives.** The ideological underpinnings typically revolve around fervent Nationalism and Sovereignism. This is often coupled with strong scepticism, if not outright hostility, towards immigration, particularly from non-European and/or Muslim-majority countries, and a rejection of multiculturalism. Their stated goals generally include the defence of a perceived national, cultural, or ethnic identity, enhancing perceived local security, demanding stricter border controls, and expressing strong criticism towards established political elites and supranational institutions like the European Union.
- **Narrative and Justification.** These groups cultivate and exploit an acute perception of insecurity. While sometimes referencing concrete criminal incidents, this feeling is often significantly amplified by narratives spread through sympathetic media outlets and online echo chambers. Building upon this, they construct a compelling narrative centred around an alleged 'state vacuum', claiming that official institutions are failing or unwilling to guarantee the protection of citizens and territory. By presenting themselves as ordinary citizens stepping in to fill these purported gaps, they justify their actions as a necessary form of self-defence or community protection.
- **Methods of Operation.** Their modus operandi typically blends online activism with offline actions:
 - *Online Realm.* An intensive use of social media platforms (such as Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) is central to their strategy. These channels are employed to disseminate their specific narrative, rapidly recruit new members (often using viral videos showcasing 'interventions' or confrontations), discredit political opponents or critics, and organise offline activities. The communication style frequently relies on disinformation and highly polarizing language to mobilise support and antagonise perceived enemies.
 - *Offline Realm.* Groups establish a physical presence through various on-the-ground actions. These range from patrols (conducted on streets in urban areas or sometimes along borders), pickets, sit-ins or 'garrisons' at specific locations, to organised demonstrations. Alongside these, they often employ actions with strong symbolic value designed to attract media attention, such as hanging provocative banners, carrying out temporary occupations of buildings or public spaces, and distributing leaflets. Furthermore, this field presence is often marked by the deliberate adoption of a paramilitary aesthetic, including uniforms, specific identity symbols (like Viking runes, national flags such as the Italian tricolour, or historical nationalist symbols like the *Polish Falanga*), and organised formations during marches or patrols. Although their operational activities are frequently described publicly as mere 'walks' or 'observation', reports and investigations indicate they often cross the line into intimidation, unauthorised identification of individuals, illegal searches, and even the use of physical force, thereby operating within a precarious legal grey area.
- **Primary Targets and Societal Impact.** Their actions and rhetoric frequently focus on specific recurring targets, most notably migrants, asylum seekers, ethnic or religious minorities

(particularly Muslim communities), and sometimes marginalised street youth. Consequently, these groups are often at the centre of significant controversy, facing accusations of promoting racism, xenophobia, engaging in illegal vigilantism, and ultimately undermining public order and social cohesion. Due to these concerns and potential threats to security, they are typically monitored closely by security authorities and intelligence agencies in various European countries.

- **Organisational Structure and Political Alignment.** The organisation of these groups is often fluid and decentralised. They frequently manifest as informal networks or autonomous local cells, though some may be federated nationally or maintain connections with international umbrella movements (examples include the pan-European Identitarian movement or the *Soldiers of Odin* network). While rarely structured as formal political parties themselves, they often gravitate within the orbit of or share a significant portion of their ideology and electoral base with, established radical right-wing and populist political parties. This proximity can create complex dynamics between street-level activism and parliamentary politics.

This chapter has mapped the diverse constellation of groups operating under the banner of street-level nationalism across Europe. It underscores the necessity of a multi-dimensional approach, analysing the micro-level dynamics related to individual and collective profiles to complement the macro-level understanding of contextual factors explored previously. While often sharing core ideological precepts rooted in nationalism, nativism, and institutional scepticism, these movements manifest in varied forms – ranging from visible street patrols and border vigilante actions to sophisticated identitarian networks focused on media stunts and pervasive online activism. The detailed examples presented illustrate the distinct national contexts and specific characteristics of prominent groups. Yet, beneath this diversity lie significant commonalities in terms of underlying objectives, operational methods blending online and offline tactics, recurring targets, and often fluid organisational structures that frequently intersect with the broader radical right political landscape. Grasping this complex picture, integrating the analysis of the protagonists (*who*) with the context (*why*), is essential. Having explored the typologies, characteristics, and specific examples of *who* constitutes these movements and *what forms* they take, the analysis now turns, in the next chapter, to examine *how* these disparate groups organise their activities and mobilise the resources necessary to sustain their presence and impact.

CHAPTER 4 - BEYOND THE PATROLS: MAPPING THE FINANCES AND FACES OF STREET PATRIOTISM

The sight of self-proclaimed “patriotic patrols” or “vigilante groups” on the streets has become an increasingly visible phenomenon in various localities. While public attention often focuses on their actions – the patrols themselves, confrontations, or online propaganda – a deeper understanding requires looking beneath the surface. To truly gauge the nature, resilience, and potential threat of these movements, we must investigate two critical, often overlooked dimensions: the financial flows that sustain them and the diverse profiles of the individuals who participate. Where does the money come from? Who are the people involved? Answering these questions moves us beyond anecdotal evidence towards a structural understanding.

Following the Money Trail: The Economics of Street Patriotism

While the initial image might be simply people walking around, the reality is that organised street presence, especially sustained or scaled-up activity, requires resources. As long as activities remain basic, costs are minimal. However, the appearance of equipment like drones, bodycams, pick-up, or the mass production of materials like thousands of printed flyers indicates an underlying economic flow worth mapping. Tracking this money is not just an accounting exercise; it provides crucial insights:

1. **It Signals Movement Maturity:** A spontaneous Telegram channel reacting to an event can swell with members in hours. But if that same channel or group manages to consistently collect and spend significant sums – perhaps thousands of euros – it signifies a critical evolution. It suggests that raw indignation or online anger has been successfully channelled and organised, transforming into a micro-business capable of resource management and sustained operations. This financial capability often marks the difference between fleeting outrage and an enduring organisational presence.
2. **It Reveals International Networks:** Financial transactions often illuminate connections that aren't immediately apparent from street-level actions. The use of cryptocurrency donations, payments routed through US-based platforms, or the purchase of standardised merchandise can link seemingly local Italian groups to counterparts and support networks in Finland, Germany, the United States, or elsewhere. Following the money frequently uncovers transnational ecosystems of ideological support, funding, and coordination that underpin local activities.
3. **It Opens the Liability Chapter:** Identifying the financial infrastructure also brings questions of accountability to the fore. If a specific company processes payments for a group known for hate speech, or if another prints merchandise emblazoned with hate symbols, these entities can potentially be held accountable. Financial trails can expose intermediaries who, knowingly or unknowingly, facilitate extremist activities, creating potential pressure points for disruption or legal action.

Understanding 'who pays for the patrols' is therefore an essential step in measuring the real solidity – and the inherent dangerousness – of these street-level patriotic groups. By "following the money," cross-referencing public data, financial records, and digital clues, analysis can shift from merely documenting episodes of violence or intimidation to mapping the structural map of power and resources that makes such actions possible and sustainable.

In essence, probing the financial dimension of street-level patriotic movements offers critical insights that go far beyond surface appearances. As demonstrated, analysing the flow of resources serves not merely as an accounting task but as a vital tool for gauging organisational maturity, uncovering often hidden transnational networks, and identifying potential points of legal or regulatory accountability. Understanding 'who pays for the patrols' helps to map the underlying structure and resilience of these groups, shifting the focus from isolated incidents to the operational capacity that sustains them. Having considered the structural insights provided by financial analysis, the next chapter will assess the tangible impact of these groups' activities through an examination of available data on violence and hate crime.

CHAPTER 5 -

GAUGING THE IMPACT: VIOLENCE AND HATE CRIME DATA

Measuring the precise scale and impact of violence perpetrated exclusively by informal vigilante or “patriotic patrol” groups across Europe presents significant challenges. Official statistics often aggregate data into broader categories like “right-wing terrorism” or “violent extremism,” making it difficult to isolate incidents directly attributable to these specific types of groups. Nevertheless, examining available data from key sources like Europol and national hate crime statistics can provide important indications, even while acknowledging inherent limitations.

Insights from Terrorism and Violent Extremism Data

Europol's annual EU Terrorism Situation and Trend (TE-SAT) reports serve as a primary source for understanding officially recognised terrorist activity.

- [Europol TE-SAT 2024 \(Reporting on 2023\)](#). The latest available report (published in 2024, covering 2023) indicated that there were **2 foiled right-wing terrorist attacks** in the EU during 2023. Notably, it did not report any *completed* attacks classified under right-wing terrorism for that year. However, Europol stressed the dynamic nature of the threat landscape, emphasizing that lone actors or small, autonomous cells currently pose the most significant danger within this sphere. For context, the report listed 120 total terrorist attacks (completed, failed, foiled) across all categories in 2023, predominantly linked to separatist and left-wing/anarchist extremism, alongside 14 jihadist attacks (5 of which were completed and were the most lethal). Europol also mentioned specific analytical projects, such as [AP Dolphin](#), dedicated to supporting investigations into non-Islamist violent extremism, including the right-wing spectrum.
- **Historical Trends.** Earlier research, such as analysis by the [European Liberal Forum drawing on RTV data](#), suggested a historical downward trend in *fatal* far-right attacks in Western Europe over the longer term. However, this research also highlighted a shift since approximately 2015, with most serious attacks being carried out by informal groups or lone actors, often specifically targeting ethnic and religious minorities. Germany has historically been identified as one of the countries most affected by this type of violence.
- **Crucial Limitations.** It is vital to recognise that these figures primarily capture incidents that meet the official, often high-threshold definitions of terrorism or violent extremism. Acts of intimidation, lower-level physical assaults, public order disturbances, or online harassment linked to vigilante patrols may not be included in these statistics or may be difficult to attribute consistently and comparably at a European level.

A Comparative Look at Hate Crimes and Physical Assaults (2023 Data)

Examining national hate crime data offers another lens, potentially capturing a broader range of incidents, although direct attribution to specific patrol groups remains complex. The following table provides a comparative snapshot based on available 2023 data:

Country (Official Source)	Total Hate Crimes Recorded (2023)	Physical Assaults* (2023)	Trend 2019 → 2023	Notes and Link to Patrol Groups
Germany (BKA ¹ / AP News ²)	17,007	~1,270 violent far-right incidents ("Politically Motivated Crime" data)	+98%	Peak incidence in Saxony & Thuringia, where Bürgerwehren groups linked to PEGIDA operate.
France (OCLCH ³ / HCRW ^{4**})	6,211	1,010 (16% of total incidents)	+21%	Génération Identitaire activity shifted online after 2021 dissolution, but local actions persist.
Italy (OSCAD ⁵ / HCRW ^{**})	1,106	168 assaults; 264 incitements to violence	+14%	Case studies: Articolo 52 (Milan), Rete Patrioti patrols (Emilia).
Finland (Finland Police / Yle.fi ⁶)	n/d (hate crime total)	14 arrests for disorder at "Suomi Herää" march involving Soldiers of Odin (Dec 6, 2023)	(discontinued series)	SOO patrols significantly reduced compared to 2016 peak.
Media Vigilance (OSCE NGOs ⁷ / HCRW ^{**})	9,891 incidents mapped by NGOs	— (aggregate data)	+34%	NGOs report under-notification of "street violence" often linked to vigilante groups.

* Based on categories like "physical assault/violent attacks against people" in OSCE-ODIHR datasets or national police reports where available.

** Hate Crime Reporting Website (collecting OSCE data)

Critical Interpretation and Caveats

Drawing definitive conclusions requires careful interpretation:

- **Attribution Challenges.** The data, particularly the broader hate crime statistics (like the OSCE-derived figures), does not isolate actions solely committed by vigilante or patrol group members. Victims may not know the affiliation of attackers, or incidents may not be recorded with that level of detail.
- **Correlation vs. Causation.** While direct causation is hard to establish from this data alone, a correlation emerges. Countries with a documented history of more structured and visible patrol groups (e.g., Germany with its *Bürgerwehren*, France pre-2021 with *Génération Identitaire*) tend to report higher incidences of physical assaults within their hate crime statistics compared to the EU average.
- **The Local Impact and Social Media.** The rise of hyper-localised groups, often amplified rapidly via social media (e.g., *Articolo 52* in Italy, *Patrullas ciudadanas* in Spain), can create spikes in intimidation or minor clashes that may fly under the radar of national statistics.

¹ **BKA:** *Bundeskriminalamt*, the Federal Criminal Police Office of Germany.

² Associated Press News, a major international news agency based in the United States.

³ **OCLCH:** *Office Central de Lutte contre les Crimes contre l'Humanité, les Génocides et les Crimes de Guerre*, the French Central Office for the Fight against Crimes against Humanity, Genocides and War Crimes.

⁴ **HCRW:** Hate Crime Reporting Website, the online platform managed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) that compiles hate crime data from participating States and civil society.

⁵ *Osservatorio per la Sicurezza Contro gli Atti Discriminatori*, the Italian Observatory for Security Against Acts of Discrimination, an inter-agency body within the Department of Public Security.

⁶ The website address for *Yleisradio* (Yle), Finland's national public broadcasting company.

⁷ **OSCE NGOs:** Non-Governmental Organisations operating within the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) region that report hate incident data to the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

However, local press coverage and NGO monitoring often capture these flare-ups more quickly, indicating a level of activity not always reflected in top-line figures.

While obtaining perfectly comparable, specific data on violence solely by vigilante groups across Europe remains elusive, the available evidence points towards a tangible impact. Data on foiled terrorist plots, trends in serious attacks, and comparative hate crime statistics – particularly concerning physical assaults – suggest that the presence and activity of these groups contribute to a climate of insecurity and manifest in real-world violence and disorder, even if much of this activity falls below the strict definition of terrorism. Understanding these patterns is crucial for assessing the threat these groups pose to community safety and social cohesion.

CHAPTER 6 -

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES: A REGULATORY PATCHWORK

Faced with the growing challenge posed by far-right extremism in Europe, the national institutions of various Member States have adopted heterogeneous approaches, creating what can be described as a veritable "regulatory patchwork". Far from a unified strategy at the continental level, responses vary significantly depending on national contexts, legal cultures, and the political orientations of the governments in power. It is possible to identify several main models of institutional response.

Repressive Approaches: Targeted Bans and Disbandment

A first model, adopted by countries such as France and Greece, relies on direct repressive measures, such as the banning or formal dissolution of extremist groups. This approach is generally activated when concrete evidence emerges that designates the group as a criminal organisation or when its activities openly result in incitement to racial hatred or violence. Emblematic examples include the dissolution of *Génération Identitaire* in France by government decree, and the conviction and subsequent outlawing of *Golden Dawn* in Greece, deemed a criminal organisation whose members were responsible for serious crimes, including those motivated by racial hatred under laws concerning the apology for hatred. Germany, reflecting growing concerns, has seen its Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) classify the **entire AfD party (May, 2025) as a confirmed right-wing extremist endeavour (gesichert rechtsextremistische Bestrebung)**, deeming its positions incompatible with the constitutional order and democratic principles ([Der Spiegel](#)). This classification allows for more intensive surveillance and follows earlier monitoring of specific party factions and the Identitarian movement, indicating an increasing use of state tools against perceived threats to democracy. This strategy aims to legally dismantle or contain organised structures considered most dangerous to public order and democratic principles.

Discreet Surveillance and Preventive Tools

A second approach, found in nations like Finland and Germany, favours a containment strategy based on discreet surveillance and the application of specific regulations. In these cases, national intelligence agencies closely monitor the activities of far-right groups deemed a threat to the constitutional order, also utilizing laws aimed at countering paramilitarism and illegal training. Most states also rely on existing laws against hate speech, public order offenses, illegal carrying of weapons, and assault to prosecute illegal activities on a case-by-case basis. Germany has implemented specific tools on the digital front, such as the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (NetzDG), a law requiring online platforms to swiftly remove hateful and illegal content. This model aims to prevent the escalation of extremist activities and gather intelligence, intervening legally on specific grounds such as paramilitary organisation or the online dissemination of hate speech, rather than proceeding with a generalised dissolution of the group itself.

Indirect Tolerance and Selective Support

A third model, observable in countries like Poland and, partly, Hungary, presents more ambiguous contours. In these contexts, when the narratives and objectives of far-right groups overlap with or are functional to those of the government in power, forms of indirect tolerance or even support can be witnessed. This may manifest through public subsidies granted to non-profit organisations (NGOs) close to such groups (e.g., those organising citizen patrols), or through the co-organisation and

promotion of patriotic events where these formations play a visible role. Similarly, in some contexts, particularly at local levels or concerning border vigilantism, authorities may adopt a more ambiguous stance, sometimes driven by perceived public sympathy or lack of resources. Furthermore, the risk of instrumentalization exists where populist political parties sometimes echo the rhetoric of these groups or avoid condemning them directly, potentially seeking electoral advantage. Such approaches highlight how institutional response can be significantly influenced by the national political agenda.

The Ambivalent Role of Ordinary Criminal Law

Beyond these specific strategies, it should be emphasised that almost all European countries already have tools within their ordinary criminal codes potentially applicable to counter far-right activities. Laws punishing offenses against public order, incitement to racial hatred, the formation of subversive associations, or the usurpation of public functions (relevant in the case of patrols mimicking law enforcement) are present in most legal systems. However, a critical element common to many national contexts is the uneven and sometimes uncertain enforcement of these laws. Political will, the priorities of law enforcement and prosecutors, as well as legal interpretations, can vary considerably, making the effectiveness of common criminal law an inconsistent factor in the response to right-wing extremism.

This heterogeneity, coupled with non-uniform application of existing criminal laws, contributes to creating a complex and challenging context for an effective and coordinated counteraction to the phenomenon at the continental level. This patchwork response highlights a core dilemma: how to counter genuinely dangerous extremism and uphold the rule of law without alienating citizens who feel their security concerns are ignored or inadvertently providing extremist groups with the 'martyr' status they often crave.

In summary, the institutional landscape responding to far-right extremism and vigilantism in Europe is characterised by significant heterogeneity – a complex 'regulatory patchwork' reflecting diverse national contexts, legal traditions, and political considerations. Approaches range from direct repression through bans and dissolution in some member states, to strategies focused on surveillance and targeted prevention in others, and even instances of ambiguous tolerance or indirect support where political agendas align. Furthermore, the application of existing ordinary criminal law, while potentially relevant, often proves inconsistent due to varying enforcement priorities and interpretations. This fragmented and sometimes ambivalent approach highlights the profound challenges states face in balancing security imperatives, democratic principles, and public sentiment. The limitations and inherent dilemmas within these current responses underscore the need for more coherent, comprehensive, and democratically grounded strategies, which will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7 - STRENGTHENING SECURITY AND JUSTICE WITHIN THE RULE OF LAW

Simply suppressing these groups is unlikely to succeed in the long term if the underlying anxieties are not addressed through legitimate, democratic means. A comprehensive European response requires strengthening the capacity and legitimacy of the democratic state itself:

- **Reasserting Effective and Accountable Security.** This involves investing in well-resourced, visible, and community-oriented policing. Principles outlined in academic research and guidelines (e.g., by the **IOM**) emphasise partnership, local problem-solving, transparency, and building trust, especially with minority communities. This directly counters the narrative that the state is absent or ineffective. Legitimate, police-coordinated neighbourhood watch schemes can channel citizen participation constructively, explicitly *excluding* patrolling or intervention.
- **Managed Migration and Credible Integration.** Policies perceived as fair, orderly, and effectively managed are crucial. This includes efficient and humane asylum processes, legal migration pathways where appropriate, secure border management respecting international law, and crucially, robust, well-funded integration programmes (language, employment, civic participation) to foster social cohesion and counter narratives of inevitable conflict.
- **Strengthening Democratic Guardrails:** This means consistently enforcing laws against hate speech and discrimination, investing in media literacy programmes to combat disinformation (supported by initiatives like the **European Digital Media Observatory - EDMO**), promoting critical thinking, and creating meaningful channels for citizen dialogue and participation within democratic structures.
- **Pan-European Cooperation:** Enhancing intelligence sharing (e.g., via Europol's platforms like **AP Dolphin**) and exchanging best practices in prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), often facilitated by networks like **RAN**, remains vital given the transnational nature of these ideologies and networks.

The 'patriotic' and vigilante groups spreading across Europe are symptomatic of social fractures, economic and cultural anxieties, and a crisis of trust in traditional institutions. They offer simplistic and dangerous answers to complex problems, threatening the rule of law and social cohesion. Addressing this phenomenon requires a multi-dimensional strategy focused on strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring security within the rule of law, promoting integration and cohesion, and consistently applying legal frameworks against extremism.

A key element is reinforcing the state's capacity to provide security effectively and fairly, leaving no space for illegal parallel structures.

Community Policing, Proximity, and "Participatory Vigilance"

It is crucial to develop policing models that work closely with local communities (O'Neill, M., van der Giessen, M., Bayerl, P. S., Hail, Y., Aston, E., & Houtsonen, J., 2023), [IOM: Community Policing Without Borders Guidelines](#)), building trust (Bayerl, P. S., Karlović, R., Akhgar, B., & Markarian, G., 2018) and responding promptly to citizens' concerns. This includes visible presence, training on de-escalation and diversity, and attention to the online dimension ([EU RAN: Community police and the online dimension](#)).

However, addressing the appeal of vigilante groups requires more than just effective policing; it demands legal and constructive alternatives that channel citizens' desire for security appropriately. The alternative cannot be tolerance towards vigilantism, nor mere repression that ignores root causes. It involves strengthening the democratic state's capacity to respond effectively, in full compliance with the law and human rights.

An Alternative That Works: "Participatory Vigilance"

A promising legal alternative, already present in various forms across Europe, is structured "Participatory Vigilance" or Neighbourhood Watch schemes. Unlike illegal vigilantism, these programmes operate under strict rules and in close partnership with law enforcement. In Europe, there are thousands of Neighbourhood Watch groups with millions of members: volunteers limit themselves to observing, reporting, and communicating with police (absolute prohibition on searches or weapons). Associations coordinating these groups often offer insurance toolkits and work alongside law enforcement to prevent theft and vandalism (e.g., ourwatch.org.uk).

Furthermore, the European Union, through **Horizon Europe (Cluster 3 "Civil Security")**, funds open-source digital platforms allowing citizens to send encrypted and traceable reports, fostering secure communication channels and avoiding uncontrolled private chats often used by extremist groups.

Why it benefits everyone:

- **To police forces**, receiving accurate, structured reports reduces wasted interventions and provides valuable local intelligence.
- **To citizens**, feeling part of the solution and enhancing local safety without resorting to illegal actions or risking investigation for assault/bodily harm.
- **To institutions**, closing the recruitment space for extremist groups by demonstrating that the state is present, responsive, and capable of collaborating with its citizens on security matters.

The alternative lies not in criminalizing every form of civic participation, but in **recognising and channelling** the need for security within a regulated and inclusive framework.

Existing Models

Model	Where	Strengths	Limits
Neighbourhood Watch	National ONG (e.g. 2.3 million members in 2025 in UK)	Insurance programmes, digital kits, police-community	Volunteer-based; not always present in poorer neighbourhoods
EU Community Policing Projects	Horizon 2023-27, CERIS-FCT platform Migration and Home Affairs	Funding for reporting apps, intercultural training, data analysis	Still little known by municipalities; fragmentation among states

Five Pillars for a European Model of Participatory Vigilance

To be effective and safe, such programmes should be based on clear principles:

1. **Clear Legal Framework.** Define at the national level what volunteers *cannot* do (patrols usurping police functions, searches, use of weapons, detentions) and what they *can* do (passive observation, documented reporting through official channels).

2. **Accreditation & Training.** Mandatory registration with local police/municipal authorities, initial meetings with community police liaisons, and standardised training modules covering observation techniques, reporting procedures, de-escalation, minority rights, data protection (GDPR), and the legal limits of their role.
3. **Public Technology, Not Private Groups.** Utilise official, secure apps (potentially developed or endorsed through programmes like Horizon Europe) for sending geo-referenced information directly to law enforcement operations centres. Include feedback mechanisms to inform participants and counter misinformation spread in unofficial channels.
4. **Inclusive Governance.** Ensure programmes reflect the diversity of the community, with active outreach to encourage participation from women, ethnic minorities, and social workers. Establish partnerships with cultural mediators, especially in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, to build trust and ensure sensitive reporting.
5. **Independent Monitoring.** Establish a civic oversight commission (involving representatives from universities, human rights NGOs, the privacy guarantor, etc.) to publish regular (e.g., semi-annual) public reports on the programme's effectiveness, adherence to guidelines, and any reported abuses, potentially including public hearings.

Incentives and Funds

Sustaining these programmes requires resources:

- **EU Structural Funds 2021-27.** Utilise funds like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) allocated for "Urban Security" to support infrastructure (e.g., shared CCTV monitored appropriately) or personnel (e.g., young "street tutors" acting as liaisons).
- **EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats).** Leverage this platform for exchanging best practices and anonymised data with Europol regarding threats where community vigilance might provide early warnings (e.g., hate crimes overlapping with common criminal activities).
- **Local Vouchers/Incentives.** Municipalities could offer small incentives (e.g., vouchers for local services) to accredited network coordinators who complete specified annual training modules, encouraging commitment and skill updates.

(These recommendations draw inspiration from established models like the Italian protocols for Neighbourhood Watch (2023, Ministry of the Interior), the large-scale British Neighbourhood Watch (ourwatch.org.uk), and EU research/funding initiatives like Horizon Europe – Cluster 3 “Civil Security for Society” 2023-25, European Commission).

Guidelines for Implementation (Municipalities)

"Participatory vigilance" or "neighbourhood watch" projects, to be legal and constructive, *must* operate in close collaboration with, and subordination to, law enforcement. They *do not* replace police functions. Their role is based on passive observation and qualified reporting through designated channels, not on autonomous patrols or direct interventions.

Key Principles (Europe - Community Policing Context)

These structured programmes align with the broader European concept of Community Policing. Key principles highlighted by research and guidelines include:

- **Partnership.** Formalised collaboration between police, citizens, and other local agencies.

- **Geographical Approach & Proximity.** Dedicated officers for specific areas, fostering visibility and accessibility).
- **Participatory Problem-Solving.** Identifying and addressing local security problems *together* with the community, using their insights.
- **Trust Building.** Actively working to strengthen mutual trust between police and *all* segments of the citizenry, including potentially marginalised groups.
- **Online Dimension.** Recognising that community safety and extremist narratives increasingly involve the digital space, requiring appropriate online presence and monitoring strategies by authorities.

Efficient and Fair Justice

Ensuring the justice system operates effectively to prosecute all crimes, including minor offences that contribute to urban insecurity, is essential. However, this must always be done with full respect for due process guarantees. The perception of impunity for any type of crime fuels mistrust and the temptation for individuals to 'take justice into their own hands'.

Effective Crime Fighting

Investment is needed in crime prevention and repression strategies targeting the full spectrum of crime, from organised to predatory, based on intelligence and data analysis rather than ethnic stereotypes or biased assumptions.

Migration Management and Integration

Addressing anxieties often exploited by extremist groups requires fair and effective migration and integration policies:

- **Transparent and Controlled Migration Policies.** Developing migration policies perceived as orderly and controlled is vital. This requires clear legal channels, efficient and fair asylum procedures, and effective yet humane border management that respects international law. Transparent communication about these policies is crucial to counter disinformation.
- **Investment in Integration.** Robust programmes for the integration of migrants and refugees must be implemented and adequately funded, encompassing language courses, access to employment, housing support, and civic education. Simultaneously, promoting intercultural dialogue and actively combating discrimination in all sectors – including employment, housing, and education – is essential. Successful integration effectively dismantles narratives depicting an inevitable 'clash'.

Strengthening Democratic Participation and Cohesion

Building resilient communities requires fostering participation and social bonds:

- **Legitimate Channels for Civic Participation.** Beyond the structured "Participatory Vigilance" programmes detailed above, other formal mechanisms must be promoted through which citizens can express concerns and contribute positively. Examples include advisory neighbourhood councils and platforms for regular dialogue with local institutions. The key is that such participation occurs within established, legal frameworks, supervised or facilitated by public authorities.

- **Civic and Media Education.** Education promoting democratic values, human rights, tolerance, and critical thinking should be fostered from an early age in schools. Furthermore, enhancing media literacy is crucial to help citizens recognise disinformation and extremist propaganda, especially online.
- **Support for Social Cohesion.** Funding should be directed towards local projects that encourage interaction and collaboration among people from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Such initiatives strengthen the social fabric and create positive alternative narratives to those of division.

Consistent Application of the Law against Extremism

Firmness within the rule of law is non-negotiable:

- **Zero Tolerance for Vigilantism and Violence.** A zero-tolerance approach must be taken towards illegal vigilantism and associated violence. All criminal activities linked to these groups – including assault, threats, incitement to hatred (where legally defined as a crime), illegal possession of weapons, and the organisation of unauthorised patrols that usurp public functions – must be rigorously investigated and prosecuted. Law enforcement must act firmly and impartially.
- **Monitoring and Prevention.** Intelligence and security agencies should continue monitoring extremist networks, operating strictly within legal boundaries, to prevent acts of violence. This surveillance must be carefully balanced to avoid creating a climate of generalised suspicion. Deradicalization and exit programmes for individuals seeking to leave these environments can also be valuable tools.
- **Legislative Clarity.** It is essential to ensure that national laws concerning associations, public order, weapons, discrimination, and hate speech are adequate to meet the challenges posed by these groups, eliminating legal grey areas that could be exploited for illegal activities.

The Answer Lies in Resilient Democracy

The rise of 'patriotic' and vigilante groups across Europe signals underlying social fractures, economic and cultural anxieties, and a decline in trust towards traditional institutions. These groups offer dangerously simplistic solutions to complex problems, posing a threat to the rule of law and social cohesion.

The legal and democratic alternative does not involve denying the existence of problems like insecurity or the challenges of integration. Instead, it requires confronting them head-on using the tools available within an open and democratic society. This necessitates strong, legitimate, and transparent institutions; effective and inclusive policies addressing both security and social needs; a steadfast commitment to social justice and integration; the active promotion of dialogue and regulated civic participation; and an uncompromising defence of human rights and the state's exclusive monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Countering these phenomena demands political vision, targeted investments, and the capacity to reaffirm the fundamental values upon which democratic Europe is based. It is an ongoing challenge that requires vigilance, adaptation, and, above all, trust in our societies' ability to find just and effective solutions within the legal and democratic framework. The answer to the shadow of vigilantism is not more closure, but more democracy, more justice, and more cohesion.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research has undertaken a multi-dimensional exploration of contemporary far-right extremism and associated vigilante movements within Europe, seeking to move beyond surface-level observations towards a deeper understanding of their roots, participants, operational structures, societal impact, and the responses they elicit. The findings underscore the complexity of the phenomenon and highlight the necessity of a holistic perspective that integrates various levels of analysis.

The investigation first established the significant challenge these groups pose to the foundational principles of liberal democracy (Chapter 1). Their activities demonstrably undermine the state's authority, fuel social polarisation through hate speech, threaten public security, and erode trust in democratic institutions. Recognising the gravity of this challenge necessitates understanding its origins. Chapter 2 identified the complex interplay of contextual factors driving the rise of these movements: persistent socio-economic anxieties and resentments, potent narratives surrounding migration and security often amplified by terrorist events, a palpable crisis of trust in traditional political and media institutions, and a cultural backlash against globalisation and perceived threats to national identity, all framed within mobilising ideologies of nationalism, nativism, and right-wing populism.

Moving from context to actors, Chapter 3 dismantled simplistic stereotypes of participants, revealing a diverse landscape encompassing digitally-native youth activists, middle-aged individuals rooted in communities experiencing economic or social strain ('geographies of frustration'), and older adherents often aligned with more established political structures. Rather than a single profile, participation is shaped by varied demographics, local identities, and often underpinned by a unifying 'fear of decline'. Chapter 4 further illuminated the operational dimension, demonstrating how financial capacity serves as a key indicator of organisational maturity and how tracking financial flows can reveal crucial transnational networks. The ability of these groups to leverage the diverse skillsets of their members and build resilient structures, both online and offline, was also highlighted. Chapter 5 then grappled with the tangible impact of these movements, particularly concerning violence and public order. While acknowledging the inherent challenges in obtaining perfectly comparable data specifically on informal vigilante violence, the analysis of Europol reports and comparative hate crime statistics indicated a clear correlation between the presence and activity of these groups and heightened levels of hate incidents, physical assaults, and public disorder, even if many falls below the threshold of officially defined terrorism.

Subsequently, the research examined the current institutional landscape. Chapter 6 surveyed the varied and often fragmented responses across European states, revealing a 'regulatory patchwork' that underscores the inherent dilemmas and inconsistencies in how different nations address this phenomenon. Considering these challenges, Chapter 7 explored pathways toward more robust and democratically sound solutions, proposing a comprehensive framework for strengthening security and justice within the rule of law, emphasizing community-oriented policing, legitimate avenues for civic participation, robust integration policies, and the unwavering application of democratic principles and human rights.

Taken together, these findings paint a picture of a resilient and multifaceted phenomenon deeply embedded in contemporary societal fissures. It is neither solely a product of economic hardship, nor simply an expression of cultural anxiety, nor merely an organisational challenge, but rather a complex interplay of all these factors. Understanding this requires acknowledging the connections between macro-level socio-political trends, micro-level individual motivations and group dynamics, organisational capacities, real-world impacts, and the varied nature of state responses. Consequently,

developing effective strategies necessitates moving beyond purely reactive security measures or simplistic condemnations.

A comprehensive understanding of patriotic street groups requires this dual focus on financial structures and participant demographics. Mapping economic flows reveals the organisational capacity and networks, while analysing participant profiles uncovers the motivations, grievances, and social dynamics at play. This fine-tuned analysis, sensitive to age, education, income, location, and life experiences, offers a pathway beyond purely reactive or punitive responses to incidents of violence or intimidation. By understanding the recruitment pool and the socio-economic factors that make individuals receptive to these movements, it becomes possible to develop strategies for socio-economic prevention. The goal is to address the underlying vulnerabilities and reduce the appeal of such groups before discontent materialises into organised aggression on the streets. Only by understanding both the money and the militants can we effectively comprehend and counter the challenge posed by street patriotism.

A comprehensive approach should arguably address the underlying socio-economic grievances and cultural anxieties identified as key drivers, engage with the specific local contexts where these groups take root, and counter the divisive narratives that fuel hatred, alongside necessary measures to uphold the rule of law and protect public safety. Only through such a nuanced understanding can strategies be developed that effectively mitigate the challenge posed by far-right extremism and vigilantism to democratic societies in Europe.

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- Ahram Online:** A major English-language Egyptian media outlet reporting that the phenomenon of Soldiers of Odin had international resonance. These sources cover the birth of the group, its spread and monitoring by the Finnish authorities.
- Amadeu Antonio Stiftung:** It is a well-known German NGO specialised in monitoring and combating right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism in Germany. It is an extremely credible and appropriate source for information on the 'Bürgerwehren', their links to movements such as PEGIDA and monitoring by the German authorities.
- Bayerl, P. S., Karlović, R., Akhgar, B., & Markarian, G. (Eds.). (2018).** Community policing – A European perspective: Strategies, best practices and guidelines. Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53396-4>
- Bouron, S. (2017).** Des « fachos » dans les rues aux « héros » sur le web: La formation des militants identitaires. *Réseaux*, 1 35(2), 187–211. <https://doi.org/10.3917/res.202.0187>
- Bundesministerium Inneres - Verfassungsschutzbericht 2022 (Austrian Intelligence Report) - DSN:** The official report by Austria's Directorate State Protection and Intelligence Service (DSN) mentions the IBÖ among the 'New Right' groups monitored for extremism.
- C-REX - Centre for Research on Extremism (University of Oslo):** A world-leading centre, it hosts researchers studying the ideology, parties, movements, violence and prevention related to the extreme right. It also manages important datasets (such as RTV on right-wing violence). <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/>
- Der Spiegel** published an article about the ruling by the Cologne Administrative Court (October 2022) which confirms that Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz) can continue to monitor the IBD as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation. Der Spiegel remains one of the leading sources of quality journalism in Germany and is widely regarded as a credible and reliable publication in the German and international media landscape.
- Domani** is an investigative Italian daily newspaper born in 2020. Although young, it stands out for in-depth investigations on politics and news and is therefore likely to be reliable for reconstructing the violence coordinated via Telegram by the group Article 52 and the related DIGOS investigations.
- El País** is one of Spain's leading daily newspapers. It is a very reliable source for coverage of internal social phenomena such as the city patrols, the reactions of the authorities and links to extreme right-wing groups known as Hogar Social Madrid. It reports up-to-date information on the phenomenon.
- European Liberal Forum (ELF) - The Rise of Far-Right Violence in Europe:** This policy paper (also based on the RTV dataset) analyses trends in far-right violence in Europe, offering a historical and contemporary perspective. <https://liberalforum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WEBSITE-2022-The-Rise-of-Far-Right-Violence-in-Europe.pdf>

Europol - EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2024: It provides the latest official data and trend analysis on terrorism and violent extremism in the EU, including a section on right-wing extremism.

https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/TE-SAT%202024_0.pdf

Europol. (2025, February 19). Europol answer to written question from the Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Mr Krzysztof Śmiszek to the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group (JPSG). https://ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/download/file/8a8629a89521bc970195240053c7000d/Answer_to_JPSG_written_questions_MEP_Smiszek.pdf

FARPO Project (Far Right Protest Observatory) / Report CNRS: A European research project that collects and analyses data on the extra-parliamentary activism of far-right parties and movements in Europe. This CNRS article describes its work.

<https://news.cnrs.fr/articles/screening-20-years-of-far-right-activism-in-europe>

France 24: It is a very reliable and relevant French international news broadcaster. It covers in detail the activities of *Génération Identitaire* (such as border blitzes) and its dissolution by the French government in 2021 with the reasons for it (incitement to hatred).

GLOBSEC - Mapping Right-Wing Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe: Specific report of this think tank that maps right-wing extremist groups in some Central and Eastern European countries. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Mapping%20of%20Violent%20Right-wing%20Extremist%20Groups%20in%20Central%20and%20Eastern%20Europe%20report.pdf>

HOPE not hate is the UK's leading organisation for monitoring and campaigning against the far right. It is a primary and very reliable source for detailed information on the activities, tactics (such as Christian patrols), legal status and evolution of Britain First.

ICSR - International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (King's College London): Multidisciplinary academic research centre studying radicalisation, terrorism and international security issues, also covering right-wing extremism. <https://icsr.info/>

Il Fatto Quotidiano is an independent Italian national newspaper known for investigations into corruption, crime and political movements; it is rated 'High' for accuracy by Media Bias/Fact Check. It has a particular focus on extreme right-wing phenomena and the work of the police, making it well suited to document 'security walks', prefectural bans and Police monitoring of patriots.

Independent is a well-known British newspaper with international coverage. It reports on the banning of the Magyar Gárda and the emergence of successor groups with similar paramilitary and nationalist characteristics in Hungary.

Inkstick Media: It is a US-based non-profit newsroom focusing on foreign policy and global security. It publishes investigative journalism and analysis with a critical perspective, often challenging mainstream narratives on topics like the military-industrial complex, conflicts, and authoritarianism. Its stated goal is to elevate diverse perspectives and voices often

marginalised in the debate. It is funded by several progressive or left-of-centre philanthropic foundations and is generally regarded as having a "lean left" editorial stance.

Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD): Far-Right Extremism: The ISD is a global think tank that monitors and analyses extremism. This page of their site is specifically dedicated to analysing the extreme right, with links to their research and publications.
<https://www.isdglobal.org/extremism/far-right/>

Instytut Spraw Obywatelskich (Institute for Civic Affairs): This is a Polish civil society organisation. They are often reliable sources for specific information on the national context, monitoring nationalist movements, the use of public funds and internal political dynamics such as those related to the March of Independence. Relevant source for details in Poland.

IOM - Community Policing Without Borders: Practical Guidelines: Although focused on guidelines for community policing (one of the responses discussed), this paper offers practical insights and contextualises the community-police partnership approach as an alternative to vigilantism. <https://belgium.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11286/files/documents/practical-guidelines-community-policing-wp4-en.pdf>

IRex - Institute for Research on Far-Right Extremism (University of Tübingen): Permanent academic institute dedicated to researching the political and social dimensions of right-wing extremism and its integration into the social fabric. <https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/faculties/faculty-of-economics-and-social-sciences/subjects/department-of-social-sciences/research-on-far-right-extremism/>

Krulik, O., & Klíma, P. (2024). "Police volunteering in Central and Eastern Europe." *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2371660.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23311886.2024.2371660>

La Repubblica is one of Italy's leading daily newspapers, with a wide print and digital circulation and a 'High' rating for factual reporting by Media Bias/Fact Check.

O'Neill, M., van der Giessen, M., Bayerl, P. S., Hail, Y., Aston, E., & Houtsonen, J. (2023). Conditions, Actions and Purposes (CAP): A Dynamic Model for Community Policing in Europe. ¹ *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, ² 17, Article paad014. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad014>

Mudde, Cas. (2000). *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*. Manchester University Press.

Prospect Magazine is a renowned British monthly current affairs and cultural magazine. It is distinguished by its in-depth exploration of politics, economics, arts, and social issues, both at a British and international level. Founded in 1995, it is known for its quality journalism, intellectual debate, and considered reflection on major contemporary themes, maintaining a politically independent stance. It offers a platform for in-depth analysis, essays, and discussions, catering to an audience interested in understanding the dynamics of the current world.

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) - European Commission: This network brings together practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Their website hosts numerous publications. This specific paper provides an overview of contemporary manifestations of

violent right-wing extremism in the EU and the practices of prevention/counteraction (P/CVE). [Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices \(2021\)](#). **RAN Main Page (for further resources):** https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran_en

RUSI - Royal United Services Institute (FRET Programme): This defence and security think tank has a specific programme on Extremism and Far-Right Terrorism (FRET) that investigates transnational connections, the role of communities and gender. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/far-right-extremism-and-terrorism>

Statewatch: It is an influential NGO that monitors civil liberties and the state in Europe, with a focus on policing, borders and extremism. Both are credible sources that have covered both the trial and conviction of Golden Dawn as a criminal organisation and the persistent phenomenon of vigilantism, especially along the Evros border.

Süddeutsche Zeitung, published in Munich, is known for its high-quality journalism, in-depth investigations, and a generally liberal-progressive editorial stance with a strong focus on social issues. It covers a wide range of topics, from domestic and foreign politics to economics, culture, and society, and is considered an influential voice in the German and international media landscape. The site offers news, analysis, commentary, and multimedia content, serving as a primary source of information for a broad audience.

Veilleux-Lepage, Y., & Archambault, E. (2017). *Soldiers of Odin: The global diffusion of vigilante movements*. Political Studies Association. <https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/conference/papers/2017/Soldiers%20of%20Odin%20-The%20Global%20Diffusion%20of%20Vigilante%20Movements.pdf>

Wikipedia: Wikipedia provides a basic and general information and links to other primary and secondary sources.

Other resources

Academic research on these topics is extensive, although often published in specialised journals or books that may require institutional access (e.g. through university libraries).

Academic Databases: Use platforms such as **Google Scholar**, **JSTOR**, **Academia.edu**, or university library databases by searching keywords such as 'far-right extremism Europe', 'vigilantism Europe', 'nativism', 'populist radical right parties', 'identity movement', 'political violence Europe', 'community policing extremism'.

Key Authors and Academic Books: Look for works by academics known for their studies on the extreme right and populism in Europe (e.g. Ruth Wodak, Andreas Önnorfors, Antonis Ellinas, Matthijs Rooduijn, Manès Weisskircher, Caterina Froio, Pietro Castelli Gattinara, etc.).

Specialist Journals: Search for articles in academic journals such as [Terrorism and Political Violence](#), [Perspectives on Terrorism](#), [Studies in Conflict & Terrorism](#), [Mobilization: An International Quarterly](#), [Patterns of Prejudice](#), [Acta Politica](#), [West European Politics](#).



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