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Consequences of the Terrorist Attacks in Norway for Norwegian Internal Security and Immigration Policies

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The terrorist attacks in Norway could have profound consequences for its internal security policy and the future framework of Norway's immigration policy. The Norwegian debate on these issues will be closely followed by the EU and the other European countries, which also face challenges related to the integration of immigrant communities and the prevention of violence motivated by anti-immigrant sentiment.

Terrorist Attacks in Oslo. On 22 July 2011, consecutive terrorist attacks took place in Norway and resulted in 77 deaths. The method of their execution (a diversionary bombing in downtown Oslo followed by Mumbai-style shootings) seemed to suggest that Al Qaeda or its affiliates or local adherents might have been responsible. The suspected perpetrator, however, is a non-immigrant Norwegian citizen whose deeds appear to have been motivated by his rejections of a liberal immigration policy favoured by the governing social-democratic Norwegian Labour Party (Ap). Targets of the attacks included the party's youth, the current prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, and the former head of government, Gro Harlem Brundtland. Contrary to the suspected attacker's expectations, the attacks led to an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy for the party, including a rise in opinion polls from 28% to 41%. The prime minister's approval rating now stands at 94%.

Norway's Internal Security. The attacks surprised the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST), which is the primary agency responsible for counterterrorism in Norway. Recently, its focus had been on countering threats related to Islamist terrorism, and its reports characterized the right-wing extremism in Norway as an unpopular and diminishing or marginal phenomenon. Europol reached a similar conclusion while attributing only six terrorist attacks to right-wing extremism in all of the European Union between 2006 and 2010.

This year's PST annual threat assessment, however, noted an increasing risk of international contacts between right-wing extremists, which could allow them to take their activities to a new level to, for example, involvement in terrorism. Such contacts might have been developed by the suspected perpetrator of the 22 July attacks who is unlikely to have been able single-handedly to plan, prepare and carry them out. The need to locate possible co-conspirators might lead to the intensification of PST investigations of the circles associated with the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim right. This will probably occur at the expense of resources devoted to countering other types of terrorism and the activities of foreign intelligence services in Norway.

Norway's Immigration Policy. With the exception of the capital, in which 27% of its population is composed of first- or second-generation immigrants, Norwegian society is largely homogeneous. The development of the oil and gas sectors in the 1980s and an influx of immigrants after the EU enlargement in 2004 resulted in a more intense flow of immigrants. Despite the introduction of a restrictive law in 1975 prohibiting, among other things, the issuing of new work permits, the influx of immigrants has continued. They came in the '80s and '90s using the right of family reunification or seeking asylum mostly from so-called "culturally remote" countries such as Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia. After 2004, the gradual introduction of more liberal rights of movement in the EU and European Economic Area caused a flow of immigrants from the "culturally closer" new Member States.

Today, Norway strictly regulates the influx of immigrants. The ruling Labour Party implies the gradual opening of the labour market based on the national treatment principle. Moreover, increased expenditures on the integration of immigrants should result in equal opportunities for professional development and provide for their full participation in society.

The necessity to allow immigration for the development of the Norwegian economy was defined only in 1999, in a report by the government committee on the prospects of immigration. Moreover, policies about the integration of immigrants also was delayed. The basic requirement to know one of the Norwegian languages was introduced as late as 2005. As a result, the integration policy was formulated too late to cover the influx of immigrants from the '80s and '90s and increased their social isolation. This was used by the populist Progress Party (FrP), which had based its programme on anti-Muslim slogans. Despite an ease in party rhetoric and the fact that Muslims constitute only 4% of the Norwegian population, FrP continues to use anti-immigrant sentiments for the political mobilization of its supporters. In the last parliamentary elections it gained 22% support.

Conclusions and Recommendations. In light of the events in Norway, the EU sectors responsible for counterterrorism are bound to review the character and scale of the threat. Radical Islamists are likely to remain counterterrorism's priority but one should not be surprised by the strengthening of different national intelligence departments that monitor right-wing extremism. Europol already has signalled its intention to do so. Such activities seem perfectly reasonable in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Norway, but are unlikely to produce immediate results. Moreover, a decision to boost counter-extremist departments should not be done at the expense of resources dedicated to countering Al Qaeda and its followers.

Simultaneously, the European Union should not attempt to further institutionalize the European counterterrorism system. The existing mechanism is far from ideal, but the drive to continuously reform it in the aftermath of each and every major terrorist attack in Europe will not directly improve the EU's ability to limit the risk of such attacks in the future.¹

Poland and other EU members should attempt to gather all the information they can about the 22 July attacks and offer Norway all necessary assistance in its investigation of the events. As the country holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, Poland rightly called a meeting of the working groups responsible for counterterrorism, including representatives of Norway. These actions were aimed at initiating and coordinating the working debate on counterterrorism at the EU level and legitimized one of the Polish presidency's priorities, widely understood to be European security.

Events in Norway illustrate the social difficulties associated with the process of an intense immigration flow into a homogenous and conservative society. They also show the risks caused by the delayed formation of a coherent immigration policy by subsequent governments and the consequences of not communicating that policy to society. The attacks of 22 July will most likely cause a change in Norway in the tone and scope of the political debate on immigration during the campaign for this year's local elections. So far, the debate has predominantly focused on the costs incurred by the state budget in connection to the intake of immigrants. Now all political parties, including FrP, will have to avoid populist rhetoric and the debate will focus on well-tailored solutions to the precise problems of immigrant communities.

The developments in Norway are of an utmost importance to European countries that have had less-restrictive immigration policies in the past. During the current economic crisis, the grounds of these policies often have been challenged by parties with an anti-immigrant profile.

Poland is currently facing demographic problems caused by low birth rates and an aging society. To some extent, these problems have diminished with the influx of immigrants from places such as Belarus, Ukraine and Vietnam. It is advisable for Poland to prepare an information campaign and start a wide-ranging debate about the causes and effects of increased labour immigration into the country. These steps could reduce the risk of a long and deep polarization of the society. Their implementation is necessary to reduce or eliminate social tensions and to diminish the risk of the social exclusion of immigrants, especially those from more "culturally remote" countries.

¹ K. Rękawek, "European Counterterrorism: Current State of Affairs and Prospects," PISM Bulletin No. 47 (796), 11 May 2011