

# Analysis of Psychological Aspects of Lone Wolf Attack in Slovak Republic.

## There's a method to the madness

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Original Article

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Source: *Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention*  
Pages: 18 – 26

Volume: 14  
Cited references: 31

Issue: 3

### Reviewers:

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### Keywords:

Extremism. Lone Wolf Terrorism. Self-radicalisation. Accelerationism. Zamocka terrorist Attack.

### Publisher:

International Society of Applied Preventive Medicine i-gap

CSWHI 2023; 14(3): 18 – 26; DOI: 10.22359/cswhi\_14\_3\_03 © Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention

### Abstract:

The presented article discusses the first accomplished terrorist attack in the history of Slovak Republic. In October 2022 a lone perpetrator killed two people and injured one other person. We analyse the terrorist act and the known information about the perpetrator and compare them to what is known about extremism and terrorism. An emphasis is put especially on lone wolf terrorism, as we believe it was the case of the attacker of the above mentioned terrorist act on Zamocka Street in Bratislava. The process of self-radicalization, role of social environment and warning behaviour before the act are described. Known information about the perpetrator, his own

self-radicalization process that happened mostly on-line and sources of inspiration are discussed. The political message of this terrorist attack, based on the perpetrator's manifesto, is consistent with the ideology of accelerationism.

## Introduction

In the Slovak Republic, terrorist acts do not have such a long and detailed history as in many other developed countries. In October 2022, a lone perpetrator murdered two people in front of an LGBTI+ café in Bratislava and shot a third person. The crime was subsequently classified as a terrorist attack by the law enforcement authorities (Deliman, 2022; SITA, 2022). Shortly before the crime, the perpetrator published his manifesto on the online platform Twitter. In this paper, we offer a view of this terrorist act in the context of the self-radicalization process of lone wolf terrorists.

## Acts of Extremism and Terrorism

Extremism is a political term describing beliefs or behaviour of people striving for political change by using extreme methods. The Anti-Extremism Strategy of Home Office in United Kingdom (2015) defines extremism as vocal or active opposition to society's fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. The opposition to the values of a society can be expressed as opinions or as actions. However not all extremist groups commit violent acts of terrorism. Violent extremism is a term used for the acceptance of use of violence (by belief or action) to achieve political goals, often leading to or supporting terrorism acts (Striegher, 2015).

Terrorist act can be defined as violent act having a political, ideological or religious goal, intention to coerce, intimidate or communicate a political message to greater public than to the immediate victims of the act (Spaaij, 2012). Execution of a terrorist act often follows the perception of a real or alleged injustice caused by a concrete political, social, racial or religious group. The perception of a terrorist act differs from the position of the referee. What can be seen as a terrorist act by some, may be seen as an act of heroism and fight for freedom by others (Anti-Extremism Strategy, 2015).

## Single Actor Terrorism

Early days of single actor or leaderless terrorism were first noted in late 19th and early 20th century. Political assassinations and bombings against representatives of the political power in Europe were staged under the banner of "propaganda by deed", often executed by solo actors (Nesser, 2012). Leaderless resistance found fertile ground among anti-communists, white racists (White Supremacy), jihadists (f. e. Al-Qaeda) and later also animal rights campaigners, environmental activists and others (ibid).

## Lone Wolf Terrorism

The term "lone wolfism" was introduced by a white supremacist Tom Metzger to popularize the image of lonesome, "patriotic" warrior. White nationalist leaders would issue generalized calls to arms but give no direct orders and have no knowledge about who was planning what. The "lone wolf" warriors should prepare and execute their attacks themselves (Gardell, 2023).

During last decades, the lone wolf tactics spread through the help of on-line platforms and quickly became a growing security threat. Internet is the most influential and far reaching tool in the self-radicalization process of lone wolf terrorists (Binder, Kenyon, 2022). Availability of information on the internet provides extremist views of society and extremist solutions to its problems (indoctrination) and study material on attack preparation on extremist webpages, including guidelines on fabrication of explosives and perpetration of low-cost, low-sophistication attacks. Internet is also a main source of targeting information (persons, sites, geolocation data, etc.) (Cohen, 2012; Siggery et al., 2022).

Lone wolf terrorists (1) act (prepare and attack) autonomously, (2) are not members of an organized terror group or network (but may identify and sympathize with an ideology of an organization, or may have been members in the past) and (3) have their own modus operandi unconnected to orders from outside, yet are externally inspired (Spaaij, 2010).

Actions of lone wolf terrorists are not accidental acts of violence, nor are they a result of acute mental condition or an extraordinary situation. Rather, they are clearly pre-meditated, planned actions, with clear interest (unlike other perpetrators of violent crimes) to communicate a particular political message to the public (Cohen, 2012). Lone wolf terrorists tend to publish, frequently, their own manifesto, video-recording or a letter to the media, public, etc. (Siggery et al., 2022).

Although lone wolf terrorists prepare and execute their attacks alone, they are not completely independent from the world around them. On the contrary, their interest in the world around them is significant. Terrorism as a political act is also essentially a social act, because the perpetrator would like to achieve something for the group he/she identifies with (Hamm, Spaaij, 2015).

### **Ideology and background of Lone Wolf Terrorist**

The ideology of a lone wolf terrorist may be multifaceted, frequently amplified by personal frustration in combination with resistance towards a cause or a group (e.g. race, religion, politics, society). Most frequent ideologies of lone wolf terrorists include right-wing extremism and white race supremacy (17%), radical Islamism (15%), anti-abortionism (8%), nationalism and separatism (7%). In as many as 1/3 of cases the ideology can not be determined, it either remains secret, is unspecified or unclear (Spaaij, 2012).

Social background of lone wolf terrorists may vary. Frequently, lone wolves are well educated and originate from privileged social environment. They can have a history of child abuse or early trauma (Cohen, 2012).

### **Psychopathology of Lone Wolf Terrorist**

Lone wolf terrorists experience a greater degree of psychological issues than other terrorists or the population at large (Pantucci, 2011; Spaaij, 2010). The most-frequently represented issues include personality disorders (as many as 4 out of 5 lone wolf terrorists), depressive episode in case history (4 out of 5), lowered competence in social interaction and loneliness are also frequent. In some cases an acute psychotic episode, autistic spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder or substance dependence

may be present (Spaaij, 2012; Al-Attar, 2019). The most common personality disorders present in lone wolf terrorists are narcissistic, antisocial, paranoid, borderline and schizotypal personality disorder (Al-Attar, 2019).

It is important to understand that the presence of a concrete mental illness or disorder does not represent a risk factor for extremism in general population. Presence of mental illness or disorder is relevant only to the extent that the individual is already susceptible to extremism (e.g. might have a history of aggressive behaviour against targets and/or an impaired tendency to perceive reality). The very fact that the lone-wolf terrorist is able to plan and execute a violent, politically motivated act would usually disprove the thesis of a serious mental illness (Cohen, 2012; Hamm, Spaaij, 2015).

### **Selfradicalization process**

The process in which an individual becomes inclined to use political violence is called radicalisation or in case of “lone wolves”, self-radicalisation. This process might be of different length, but more often is longer than shorter. Lone wolf terrorists have no clear-cut profile, no clearly defined personality traits or experience which would direct them towards the path of self-radicalization (Al-Attar, 2019). A crucial role in self-radicalization is played by propaganda and freely available information, especially on-line.

The process of self-radicalization is more or less unique for every lone wolf terrorist, but the cornerstone of terrorism is a sense of grievance, a perceived injustice (to themselves or witnessed injustice to others), (Cohen, 2012). Personal grievance is elevated to a group grievance; both the victim and the attacker are classified as a group (white race, Jews, Blacks, etc.). Lone wolf identifies with the group perceived broadly as victim or under threat (positive identification) and which should benefit from the terror act (e.g. “for the future of white children”).

If strong enough, the grievance evokes a desire for justice and revenge on those considered responsible for the injustice (negative identification). Intensity of perceived conflict with a group grows, while simultaneously, any restraints against the use of premeditated violence decreases. Negative identification of enemy

group is an important element of radicalization as it enables the terrorist to demonize and/or dehumanize the enemy, justifying his resort to violence (Cohen, 2012). The potential lone wolf terrorist enters a state of mind where he is able to commit a pre-planned violent act with the goal of achieving an ideological objective. A potential lone wolf terrorist feels, apart from all the others who share a violent ideology, the sense of an obligation to act (Cohen, 2012). A political motive bestows a certain degree of moral justification upon the violence (ibid).

### **The role of social environment in selfradicalization**

Most lone wolf terrorists don't maintain satisfying social contacts, lack close relationships and therefore obligations towards loved ones. Having few interpersonal obligations, they have ample time and means to study ideology and plan an attack. Lack of social contact also leads to missing feedback from the environment that might lead to a different view. Non-existent or only a few close friends or relatives in real life can not beat the broad community of like-minded individuals in online space.

Other lone wolf terrorists and their past acts represent examples for the new one's to become. Their acts, videos, letters and manifestos may serve as blueprints, examples to follow, copycat or emulate. On different extremist on-line platforms, the perpetrator can receive encouragement by other extremists who would normally not commit a crime (Cohen, 2012; Spaaij, 2012).

### **Warning Behaviour Before the Act**

Any terrorist act is preceded by a period of preparation. Preparation includes a concrete intent (not visible from the outside, although it can be verbalized) and motivation (Cohen, 2012). In addition to the intent, capability to commit the act is equally important. Preparation, intent and motivation differentiate lone wolf terrorists from individuals holding extremist views, but lacking a motivation to act. Motivation to act is not always visible, however, it can be sometimes observed from individual's way of expressing himself/herself. The problem with this is that most people from the social environment of the lone wolf terrorist have only partial information about him/her.

Behavioural markers for radical violence or so called warning behaviours can indicate increasing risk of terrorist attack. Meloy et al. (2012) describe eight types of warning behaviours including research, planning, preparation or implementation of an attack (choosing a pathway); increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause (fixation); strong identification with previous attackers, close association with weapons or other military paraphernalia, identification of oneself as a person to advance a particular cause; novel violent behaviour unrelated to the eventual targeted violence, showing the capacity of violence; an increase of the frequency or variety of activities related to the target, usually in the days or weeks before an attack (energy burst); communication of intent to a third party (leakage); an expression of increasing desperation or distress, with the conclusion that there is no alternative action other than violence (last resort) or directly communicated threat.

Lone wolf terror attacks are extremely hard to prevent because perpetrators work alone and tend to be secretive. Warning signs are often almost invisible because of social isolation of the perpetrator. It is also challenging to differentiate between extremists who actually plan an attack and those who merely verbalize their extremist views, as there is a high number of groups promoting violence. Many lone wolves only perpetrate a single attack, without previous track record of past anti-social behaviour (Hamm, Spaaij, 2015).

### **Terrorist Attack on Zamocka street in Bratislava**

On October 12, 2022, shortly after 7 p.m., a terrorist attack occurred in front of the LGBTI+ cafe "Teplaren" (meaning *Heating Plant* but also *Gay Plant* in Slovak language) on Zamocka street in Bratislava. The perpetrator murdered two people in front of the cafe with a firearm and wounded one person (Kelloova, Petrovic, 2022).

After the attack, the 19-year-old perpetrator came home to his parents, where he exchanged one weapon for another. He also wrote a farewell letter. The parents became aware of their son's deed, but did not report this fact to the authorities. According to information available from the local media, the perpetrator probably

wandered all night in a nearby forest park. He was also communicating on Twitter and 4chan shortly after midnight, e. g. posting pictures of his wandering through Bratislava at night or a picture of himself with a shoe on his head when asked on-line to take such picture if “he did it (the attack)” (Filo, Kovacic Hanzelova, 2022; Vanco (b), 2022; Zdut, 2022).

As mentioned before in this text, lone wolf terrorists often publish manifestos to explain their view of the world and their political goals. So did the future perpetrator of murders on Zamocka street, who published his manifesto about five hours before the shooting. A 65-page manifesto published on Twitter contained racist, anti-semitic and homophobic content calling for violence against Jews and LGBTI+ people (Debnar, Petrovic, 2022; Filo, Kovacic Hanzelova, 2022). In the manifesto, he named, among others, the far-right terrorist Anders B. Breivik (perpetrator of the terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011), Brenton H. Tarrant (perpetrator of the terrorist attacks on the Al Noor Mosque and Islamic center in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019), John T. Earnest (perpetrator of the terrorist attack in Poway Synagogue, USA, in 2019), Payton S. Gendron (perpetrator of the terrorist attack in Buffalo, USA, in 2022) and Adolf Eichmann, the leading organizer of the Holocaust. The manifesto was later removed from Twitter and the perpetrator’s account (NTMA0315) was blocked (Aktuality.sk, 2022; Zdut, Osvaldova, 2022; Manifesto, 2022).

The perpetrator was found dead the next day in the morning hours on a street in Bratislava, the probable cause of death being a gunshot wound in the head area, while suicide is assumed. Both fire arms, the one used in the attack, and the one, with which he probably shot himself, were in his father’s legal possession (Vančo (b), 2022). As to the possible privileged social background of the perpetrator, his father was politically active in the past and ran for the non-parliamentary party called “Vlast” (*Homeland*), (Aktuality.sk, 2022; Kelloova, Petrovic, 2022; Zdut, Osvaldova, 2022).

A security analysis of the perpetrator’s manifesto was later concluded, showing that the LG-BTI+ café was only one of the targets, as the attacker also planned an attack on orthodox Jews, the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic and

other current and past political representatives of the state and public life (Mikusovic, 2022). The victims were not the prime objectives. Rather, they have been unprotected, soft targets.

The perpetrator was a student of a High School for extraordinary talented children in Bratislava. The school stated that the student did not show any negative signs or hateful communication during classes. According the school statement, he seemed to be quiet, forthcoming and easy-going. His inner world, which he led on social media, was not privy for the school (Kissova, 2022; Vanco (a), 2022).

### **Analysis of the terrorist attack on Zamocka street**

The terrorist attack is a first completed act of its kind in Slovak republic. It was executed by an independent perpetrator, with no affiliation to an extremist group or a movement.

The perpetrator was a 19 year old white male with high intelligence (a student of a High School for extraordinary talented children), speaking fluently English (his manifesto was written in perfect English), which enabled him to gain information from various on-line extremist sources (Kelloova, Petrovic, 2022).

The actions of this perpetrator match the actions of a lone wolf terrorist, as described in this text. He prepared and executed his attack alone, was not a member of any organized terror group and even though he was obviously inspired by similar lone wolf attacks (copycat effect), he did not act on any orders from outside (Manifesto, 2022).

As described in his manifesto (which the authors of this article were able to obtain), he found inspiration on the internet (8chan, 4chan, telegram ...). The perpetrator had access to firearms (in a safe in his family home to which he knew the combination) and was a competent user. His family’s socioeconomic status was not low, not in financial terms, nor in education. Father of the perpetrator was politically active (Aktuality.sk, 2022; Kupper et al., 2023).

The perpetrator was bullied and suffered from depression and exhibited suicidal tendencies, as observed by a school psychologist who advised his parents to seek the help of a clinical psychologist and / or a psychiatrist. His father rejected this possibility, he perceived seeking

professional help for his son as shameful (Osvaldova, Benedikovicova, 2022). According to schoolmates, he had few friends. He was without a prior record of serious aggressive acts (e.g. official school statement), (Aktuality, 2022; Vanco (a), 2022). Unlike the schools official statement, some other teachers and schoolmates reported the perpetrator as a high conflict type with manifestation of rage, which made it hard for him to find and maintain relationships with schoolmates (Osvaldova, Benedikovicova, 2022). The perpetrator himself described, that he had to leave his previous school because of being bullied and conflicts with schoolmates (Manifesto, 2022).

As mentioned before, 4 out of 5 lone wolf terrorists have a personality disorder and a depressive episode in their history, many have also a lowered competence in social interaction and are lonely. The personality profile of this perpetrator is unknown, yet conflict behaviour, manifestations of rage, difficulties in maintaining relationships and a previous depressive episode were reported by school psychologist, teachers and fellow students.

According to his manifesto, he was fascinated by a broad spectrum of ideologies since 2016. He was describing his gradual self-radicalization since 2019, the trigger being watching the video from New Zealand mass shooting in Al Noor Mosque. In April 2019 he even presented a school project on topic of terrorism in April 2019 (fixation as warning behavior), (Vanco (a), 2022). Then he slowly started planning the attack, identifying and localizing possible targets. He described in his manifesto, that the final straw in his decision to act was the example of Payton S. Gendron, who committed the terrorist attack in Buffalo, USA in May, 2022. He identified himself with Gendron as “a young man, his whole life ahead, willing to sacrifice his life for a greater cause” (contagion reaction), (Manifesto, 2022). After Buffalo’s attack he began drafting his own manifesto.

The perpetrator was a member of a wider international community of right wing extremists (RWE). He has not shown any inclination to topics or actions of well established RWE movements in Slovak republic. In his manifesto there is not one reference about the Romani minority in Slovak republic that is considered

a priority problem by the Slovakian RWE scene. The terminology used in his manifesto, its style and content show a strong inspiration of the perpetrator by conspirational theories of “Great replacement” or “New World Order” and an influence of the White Supremacy movement. The perpetrator perceived himself as someone “who sees what is happening and can not let it just be” (sense of obligation), a fighter for a higher goal, felt an imperative to act (to fight for his white race, the future of white children). The enemy was clearly identified as “Jewish conspiracy” and Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG). He himself identified with the white race which he perceived being in danger from the enemy (positive identification), (Manifesto, 2012).

According to the Manifesto of the perpetrator (2022), ZOG is responsible for the state the world is in today, including uncontrolled immigration of non-whites to Europe and USA, support of LGBTI+ community and their practices, financial slavery, brainwashing by mainstream media, social control of the masses via COVID vaccination, etc. ZOG intends to further concentrate power and wealth in order to humiliate, control and destroy the white race (sense of grievance). The only solution of this unacceptable situation, as seen by the perpetrator, was physical violence at grand scale, destruction of existing social and political world order, physical liquidation of Jews, erasure of their existence from the history of the world. So, the author of this manifesto called for attacks against enablers of ZOG (ruling elites, artists, actors, screenplays, scientists, journalists, ethnic groups, LGBTI+ community, marxists, anti-fascists, producers and distributors of vaccines and those related to them, including their families, children, their assets, etc.). He wrote that any means are acceptable in the fight for preserving one’s existence, no damage is unacceptable, “the only bad target is no target” (Manifesto, 2022). Consequences of random acts of violence serve to goal, according to the perpetrator (Manifesto, 2022), to disrupt the cohesion of a community, against which the attacks are directed, to interfere with a feeling of safety and to sow fear. The political message of his manifesto, even though based on questionable logic, is obvious (ideology of accelerationism).

Accelerationism promotes the idea that

Western governments are irreparably corrupt. The best thing white supremacists can do is accelerate their demise by sowing chaos and creating political tension. Accelerationist ideas have been cited in several mass shooters' manifestos and are frequently referenced in white supremacist web forums. Accelerationists reject any effort to seize political power through conventional means (democratic elections), believing engagement in mass politics is pointless. Their preferred tactic is violence with the ultimate goal to collapse the political system, itself. They strive a white-dominated future after that (Beauchamp, 2019; Kupper et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

According to Spaaij (2012) who provides a definition of a terrorist act and also according to Slovak law enforcement authorities, the attack on Zamocka street in Bratislava, Slovakia on 12th of October, 2022 was a terrorist attack. The first accomplished one in Slovak Republic. The perpetrator murdered two people and injured one more person because they were present at a LGBTI+ café. After spending the night wandering in Bratislava, he was found dead the morning after the attack. He had no accomplices for the act itself, yet he was inspired and also followed by various people on online platforms.

In our article we summarized the course of the attack and what is publicly known about the perpetrator. We compared this information with what is known about the lone wolf terrorism. As it turned out, the perpetrator from Zamocka street in Bratislava was a „lone wolf“ warrior inspired by other lone wolf attacks around the world.

As stated on his posts on Twitter, he was preparing for the attack, taking pictures in front of the LGBTI+ café and some other places connected to his other possible targets which he mentioned in his manifesto. The day before the attack he repeatedly published posts mentioning, that he had made the decision.

We know that he was not a member of any specific extremist or terror network or group, but he was a member of a wider international community of right wing extremists (RWE). Mostly he was lonely due to his inability to maintain good relationships with other people. On the other hand, his father expressed some of his ex-

tremist views publicly as a member of a political party (Laukova, 2022; Vanco, 2022) which might have influenced him. Also, the possibility of having an anonymous on-line mentor and co-author of his manifesto was explored (Kupper et al., 2023).

The perpetrator was also well educated attending a High School for extraordinary talented children, he spoke fluent English. As he mentioned in his manifesto, he was bullied and according to his school he was attending sessions with a school psychologist due to his conflict behaviour and manifested rage.

In addition to these information which are consistent with the characteristics of a lone wolf terrorist in general, the perpetrator published his own manifesto shortly before the attack explaining that the process of self-radicalisation started in 2016. He expressed mostly anti-semitic and homophobic views calling for violence against Jewish and LGBTI+ people. In 2019 multiple terrorist attacks inspired him to be active. Interestingly, he did a school project on terrorism at the same time.

As much as it is clear now that there were signs leading to the moment of the attack, the lone wolf terrorism is dangerous and successful precisely because it is extremely difficult to put all the warning signs together in advance. Even so, we must never give up on prevention, good mental health care and education towards mutual respect in democratic society. As difficult as it is, there is an opportunity for change laying in hands of authorities (e.g. politicians, teachers, health care specialists, media etc.) as well as all members of our society.

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