MOTOR VEHICLE ATTACKS ON CHRISTMAS MARKETS IN THE EU: POLITICAL HOMICIDE, ORGANIZED TERRORISM OR LONE WOLF TERRORISM

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of our research is to provide the scientific and professional community with a contribution to explaining the occurrence of deadly attacks on civilians attending Christmas markets in the European Union. To fully achieve this goal, we will need to determine whether the aforementioned events fit the definition of political homicide, terrorism by organizations, or terrorism by individual perpetrators.

Design/methods/approach: Our paradigmatic approach to this research subject will be based on the political theory in the field of terrorism studies. We will use theoretical axioms from the field of political violence and the classification of terrorist organizations according to the actor criterion. We will use analysis as the basic analytical method, especially explanatory analysis. Scientific explanations of individual events will be carried out through case studies. Data collection will be carried out from open sources of information.

Findings: The outcome of this research will provide the professional and scientific community with another basis for creating policy papers in this area.

Originality/Value: The justification and value of the research stems from the outcome of the research, which is the creation of preconditions for more efficient prevention of terrorist acts that are the subject of this research. The scientific and social contribution is reflected in raising the awareness of the scientific and social community about the correct political qualification of the criminal act, from which adequate legal qualification can later result, and then adequate application of security measures.

Keywords: Christmas markets, political homicide, Jihadism, Terrorism

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INTRODUCTION

Given that terrorism is a dynamic phenomenon, it is not surprising that new forms of terrorist activities are emerging as new regularities in terrorist activities. Accordingly, it is the task of researchers in this field to constantly monitor this phenomenon in practice and make corrections to theoretical concepts so that they are useful for practical use. In other words, science must, in its constant vigilance, provide new answers and instructions for the fight against terrorism whenever the opportunity arises. Having noticed the deficit of scientific literature on the topic of attacks on Christmas markets in the EU, and primarily in Germany and France, we decided to make a contribution in the form of a scientific explanation, scientific classification, but also scientific prediction regarding this specific, recurring form of terrorist attacks. Considering that after 2022, the EU's energy security is at risk, and at the same time, sustainable development has a direct correlation with security issues (Trbojević, Jovanović, Đurđević, 2024), we believe that there is research space in other areas of security, such as the challenges that terrorism may pose to the European Union in the future.

The theoretical paradigm within which we will conduct this analysis is terrorism studies. Our research goal is to determine the form of political violence in question and to describe it, then to adequately classify it, and finally, through a concluding discussion, to provide recommendations for the fight against this form of terrorism that has become a December regularity in European cities.

The research question we pose is: To which forms of political violence do attacks on Christmas markets belong and what are their main characteristics? Our basic hypothesis is based on the assumption that these are: terrorist, religiously-founded, jihadist conventional attacks carried out by individuals and organized groups, in which the means of attack is a motor vehicle, and the method of attack is driving a vehicle into large groups of people, with the aim of committing mass political homicide according to the doctrine or openly in the name of the "Islamic State".

To demonstrate that our hypothesis is correct, we will present the characteristics of political homicide, terrorism, and explain certain classifications of terrorism. We will then explain the political context of these attacks, in order to then provide a detailed overview of specific, selected events in which attacks on Christmas markets occurred in certain cities in France and Germany, as the European Union countries that have suffered by far the largest number of such attacks. Finally, we will draw conclusions that will be useful to members of national security services.

The conclusions we reach in the described manner will also have their social justification for this scientific research, if we start from the premise that the need to secure the life of both the individual and society is the fundamental interest of every person. (Jovanović, 2021)

POLITICAL HOMICIDE

According to Dragan Simeunović, "political homicide can be defined most briefly as the ideologically, or politically motivated, complete and permanent physical elimination of a real, potential or presumed political opponent as a form of sanction for his political convictions or activities, but also preventively." (Simeunović, 1989: 103)

The basic classification divides political homicide into individual and mass according to the criterion of the number of victims. Mass political homicide can also appear as a megacide, which is always necessarily an institutionalized activity, individual political homicide can be committed by an institution, group or individual. (Simeunović, 1989: 104)

It is important to distinguish between political homicide and assassination, and in this sense Simeunović says that "not every political homicide is the result of an assassination, nor does every assassination end in homicide. The first important, logical difference between political homicide and assassination is that in addition to successful ones, there are also unsuccessful assassinations, which of course cannot be the case with political homicide, and the second is that assassination implies endangering a relatively important political figure, which is not necessarily and does not have to be the case when committing and defining political homicide, and therefore we can define assassination as a specific violent way of committing or attempting political homicide. Third, assassination implies endangering the life of one person or a relatively small number of persons, while political homicide can also have mass proportions... Then, the concept of assassination implies the existence of a conspiracy, while in the case of political homicide, especially institutionalized political homicide, this does not have to be the case. Political homicide and assassination also differ in the manner, or means, of execution. Assassination is most often carried out with firearms and explosive materials, and less often with cold weapons, while for political homicide there are no restrictions at all in the choice of means, e.g. poison can be used. As concepts, political homicide and assassination therefore intersect, but do not coincide." (Simeunović 1989: 109-110)

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

For our thesis, it is important to note that the phenomenon of terrorism is equally related to both legal science (Bodrožić, 2017) and political science. Terrorism is certainly a criminal activity, but it is also a political activity par excellence. The functional concept of terrorism implies the existence of a political goal and political motivation among actors. In this sense, there is no "non-political" terrorism. Terrorism is one of the tools of politics. (Simeunović, 2009a: 66 – 67)

"As a social phenomenon, terrorism is a multidimensional phenomenon in terms of its meaning, significance, and structure. The determinant of the multidimensionality of terrorism are its actors. With their activities, they change or maintain its meaning, give or take away its significance, add a new dimension to it or take away an old dimension." (Simeunović, 2009a: 67) It is also important to emphasize that terrorism is not the same as guerrilla warfare. (Jovanović, Milašinović, 2025)

Acts of violence that are considered terrorist are such in a special context that implies a process and duration. Acts of violence are not a simple sum of basic forms of violence, but in the context of that process they have a different nature that indicates a complex form of violence that is unique and that we call terrorism. In addition, terrorist violence must also have the ability to shock the wider public, while always being illegal. (Simeunović, 2009a: 67)

For our hypothetical framework, it is very important to emphasize that "the goals of terrorism are attempted to be achieved in a systematic manner, which implies organization and continuity of action. Terrorism is therefore both a system of actions and a social process. If there is no permanence and continuation of action, a violent political action, regardless of the severity of its consequences, remains only an assassination or some other form of political violence, but then it is not terrorism." (Simeunović, 2009a: 68)

Since one of the main goals of terrorism is intimidation, it cannot survive without the existence of a constant threat of new violence. This further implies the already mentioned continuity of terrorist activity. (Simeunović, 2009a: 69)

This means that "it is necessary to distinguish between a terrorist act and a terrorist activity. A terrorist act is only a short-term, although in terms of content the most violent and most terrible segment of

the overall terrorist activity. Terrorist activity as a concept includes, in addition to the terrorist act, a number of other actions, starting from planning to preparing for the execution of that act, and ending with the propaganda and mobilization exploitation of its effects." (Simeunović, 2009a: 70) Therefore, it is important to emphasize that "since terrorism is a process of action to achieve certain goals, which, like any process, consists of a series of diverse activities that include multiple acts, a single terrorist act is never sufficient confirmation of the existence of terrorism. Only a series of terrorist actions carried out or planned represents a system of actions and legitimizes a phenomenon as terrorism." (Simeunović, 2009a: 70)

For terrorism to perform its function, the threat of violence must be constant, and the acts of violence must be horrific and terrible. Therefore, the communication "means of terrorism is fear, and intimidation is its procedural method". (Simeunović, 2009a: 70) In other words, terrorism imitates the reign of terror in an attempt to make fear great and constant among the target of violent attacks. And terrorist attacks must, as a rule, have violence, and this violence is distinguished by its brutality in the sense that the threat of a violent attack is immediate at a distance as long as a human arm, which has the terrifying violence of a violent attack. In order to maintain a constant fear of a constantly existing threat such as the violence of a reign of terror, terrorist attacks must have the characteristic of randomness, and therefore civilian targets are the easiest and at the same time convenient for leaving the impression that a new attack can happen anytime and anywhere, and that the victim can be anyone. (Simeunović, 2009a: 70 - 72)

In order to achieve its goals, terrorism uses various basic and complex forms of violence as a tool, such as the threat of force, and certainly individual and mass political homicide. The victims are most often civilians and employees of the political system, and the main opponent of terrorism is actually the institutions of a state. (Simeunović, 2009a: 80)

For our hypothetical framework, we underline the importance of the regularity that terrorist violence does not exhaust its function only by causing and maintaining great fear in the population. In addition, terrorist violence also has the function of pleasing political like-minded people, encouraging them to engage in political activity, and demonstrating the state's powerlessness through humiliating attacks, thereby encouraging broader political support. This means that terrorism also has a mobilization function by maintaining the extreme beliefs of the followers of the idea they are fighting for. (Simeunović, 2009a: 70 - 73) In this case, that idea is Islamist extremism, which in its ideologically profiled form is called jihadism. (Simeunović, 2009b: 70 - 73)

ORGANIZATIONAL TERRORISM OR "LONE WOLF" TERRORISM?

In order to be able to study the phenomenon of terrorism methodologically correctly, an appropriate scientific classification is necessary. Simeunović instructs us that it is important to include the principle of predominance and sufficiency as a principle for classifying phenomena such as terrorism because in the field of real events, ideal-type divisions have less scientific basis. In this sense, there are several most important criteria according to which appropriate classifications are made. The criterion of the political goal and program of the terrorists, then the criterion of the means and methods used by the terrorists and the no less important criterion of the subject of terrorist activity. (Simeunović, 2009a: 82)

When it comes to means, we distinguish "conventional, biochemical and nuclear terrorism, and according to methods, conventional, suicide, cyber and narco-terrorism." (Simeunović, 2009a: 84) When it comes to classification according to the criterion of actors, we notice that we have several types of actors. Actors are certainly victims of terrorism, then the perpetrators themselves, and finally those who are the main targets of terrorists – those to whom fear is communicated through violence. As we

mentioned earlier, in addition to the direct victims of terrorist violence, there are also all those who want to be intimidated by it. (Simeunović, 2009a: 85)

When we talk about perpetrator actors, we also have several types that we distinguish according to the criterion of hierarchical rank. These can be: "leaders of the action core, activists, followers and sympathizers." (Simeunović, 2009a: 85) This classification is particularly important for our hypothetical framework, bearing in mind the main lines of dispute about the terrorist nature of the attack on the Christmas markets.

Further, according to the actors as subjects of terrorism, we can classify it as: "1) individual terrorism, 2) terrorism of organizations and groups, 3) institutional terrorism." (Simeunović, 2009a: 85)

It is important to note here that "lone wolf terrorism" belongs to the meaning of "individual terrorism" in this latter classification. We believe that this qualification is more appropriate, especially if we bear in mind that in contemporary studies of terrorism, the use of the term "lone wolf terrorism" is increasingly discouraged because it contributes to the glorification of terrorists, one of whose goals is certainly to achieve exactly that effect among possible ideological supporters.

JIHADISM AND THE DOCTRINAL BASIS OF TERRORIST ATTACKS ON CHRISTMAS MARKETS

Although it was thought that terrorist activity in the European Union would be decreasing, and that the decreasing number of suicide terrorist attacks would be a sign of a significant decline in terrorism, it turned out that conventional terrorist attacks by Islamists continued to maintain a significant presence on European territory. In the wake of suicide attacks, conventional attacks re-emerged, which began to take precedence on EU soil in the second half of the previous decade. For researchers of terrorism studies, the striking terrorist practice of attacks on Christmas markets during the Christmas holidays in various European cities stood out. Attacks on Christmas markets were mainly carried out using conventional means and methods, and firearms and bladed weapons are certainly noteworthy as means due to their frequency. In addition to these common means, terrorist practice of attacks on Christmas markets shows an increasingly used means in the form of a motor vehicle. This will be shown by the analysis of selected cases of attacks on Christmas markets with an emphasis on those attacks in which the means of attack was a motor vehicle.

It is important to note here what is the ideological and doctrinal basis for such terrorist actions. Jihadism is an ideologized Islamic fundamentalism that we could place on the ideological spectrum in the far right. (Jovanović, Radonjić, 2021) Jihadism as an ideology has its own ideological subspecies, such as Al-Qaedaism. Al-Qaedaism is a particularly extreme form of jihadism that emerged as a global ideology on September 11, 2001, with the terrorist organization "Al-Qaeda" and its leader Osama Bin Laden. (Simeunović, 2009a: 209) "The formula of al-Qaida is simple – fighting by all means until the final extermination of all enemies of Islam, which includes Jews, Christians ("crusaders") and bad Muslims – traitors." (Simeunović, 2009a: 209) What makes al-Qaida's contribution known is its focus on the suicidal method of committing terrorist acts. (Simeunović, 2009a)

Since the middle of the last decade, the dominant form of jihadist ideology has been that in the practice of the so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS hereinafter). The doctrinal basis of IS is actually al-Qaida. Instead of focusing on the suicidal method of fighting, the focus is on diversifying the means and methods of terrorist fighting in order to inflict maximum losses anywhere and anytime. In addition, ISIS has the form of a transnational network that does not rely on a strictly centralized organizational structure, and the reach of terrorist attacks is expanding not only by recommending that means

and methods should be various, but also by suggesting that any Islamist can become an ISIS soldier. (Simeunović, 2019)

This doctrine implies a practice in terrorism studies known as "Homegrown terrorism". Homegrown terrorism implies that the actors are citizens of the state in which they carry out terrorist activity against their fellow citizens. This type of terrorism by homegrown actors can include lone wolves, i.e. individual actors, smaller groups that are self-organized and who have independently trained and practiced their terrorist actions, to actual members of terrorist organizations and previously planted sleeper terrorists who would be activated at some point. (Simeunović, 2011) If we add to this the almost decade-long increase in both Islamist and nationalist extremism in the EU as a consequence of mass migration to Europe, then we can actually complete this entire theoretical picture with the demographic context, which is an increasingly important political issue for the EU. (Simeunović, 2015) And that Islamist terrorists manage to cause great and constant fear in German cities is also shown by the news that many German cities have begun to introduce physical blockades and roadblocks around Christmas markets to such an extent that the prices of special mechanical barriers have jumped several times in the last few years. (Rujevic, 2025)

SELECTED CASES OF CHRISTMAS MARKET ATTACKS IN FRANCE AND GERMANY

Dijon, France December 21st 2014.

Nasser B., driving a Renault Clio, injured 13 people, two of them seriously, (Mazzetti, 2016) while driving into groups of pedestrians in five city zones over a period of half an hour in the city of Dijon, France. During the attack, he shouted "Allahu Akbar", carried a knife and claimed to be acting on behalf of the children of Palestine. (Corner, 2017) Police determined that the attacker had a documented history of severe mental illness and that there was no evidence of any connection to terrorist groups. Therefore, the investigation ruled out that the attack was motivated by terrorism. (Driver targets, 2014) However, the media claimed that the attack was inspired by a video made by the Islamic State that had been circulating among Muslims in France encouraging attacks on non-believers (Christians) using vehicles. The same claim was repeated for the attack that took place in Nantes a day later. (Martin, 2016) It must be noted that this attack, together with the attack in Nantes, was declared the first attacks in France linked to the Islamic State. (Jones, 2016)

Nantes, France December 22nd 2014

Sébastien Saron, a farmer by profession, hit ten pedestrians with his white van during a Christmas market in Nantes, France, after which he unsuccessfully attempted to kill himself with a knife. Although the injuries were not thought to be life-threatening, one of the victims sadly died the following day. (Le chauffard, 2016) The attacker hanged himself in prison in April 2016 while awaiting trial. (Le chauffard, 2016) As in the previous attack in Dijon, the French police assessed the attacker as mentally unstable. (France to deploy, 2014) A later investigation found that the attacker believed that the French secret service would eliminate him and that he had a blood alcohol level four times the legal limit during the attack. (Drame de Nantes, 2015)

Berlin, Germany December 19th 2016

Anis Amri from Tunisia drove a hijacked truck belonging to a Polish transport company through a crowded Christmas market in central Berlin for a full 50 meters, killing 13 (the last victim died of his injuries after five years), and injuring 56 participants. (Berlin attack, 2021) One of the victims was the murdered truck driver, Polish Lukasz Urban, who was killed by Amri during the hijacking of the truck. (Automatic brakes, 2016) Immediately after the crime, a suspected migrant from Pakistan, Naveed Baloch, was arrested and later released due to lack of evidence of involvement in the crime. (Man wrongly arrested, 2016) After the attack, Amri fled the scene of the crime and was killed four days later in a shootout with police near Milan, Italy, where he had arrived by train from France. (Hundreds attend funeral, 2016) The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, and it released a video of the attacker pledging allegiance to the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr. (Prince, 2016) Amri's family has said that Anis was vicious and not originally overly religious, but that he had become radicalized during his two-year stint in an Italian prison for robbery. (Argouby, Nasr & Scherer, 2016) Due to the large number of victims, this attack is considered the worst Islamist terrorist attack in German history. (Islamistisch motivierter, 2019)

Potsdam, Germany December 1st 2017

German police found an explosive device filled with nails in a suspicious package near the Potsdam Christmas market in a pharmacy in southwest Berlin. Police have not determined who sent the device, to whom it was sent, or whether it was prepared to explode or was just some kind of test. Shortly afterwards, police caused a controlled explosion of the device, which had explosives, batteries and wires, but no detonator. (Potsdam Christmas, 2017)

Strasbourg, France December 11th 2018

Chérif Chekat, a suspected Islamic extremist, opened fire with a revolver at a Christmas market in Strasbourg, France, killing five and wounding eleven people, four of them critically, before fleeing in a taxi. (Strasbourg shooting, 2018) Witnesses claim the gunman shouted Allahu Akbar during his killing spree. (Chrisafis, 2018) Chérif Chekat was killed in a shootout with police two days later. (Strasbourg Christmas market, 2018) Chérif was of Algerian origin and an Islamic fundamentalist. (Décugis, Pelletier & Pham-Lê, 2018) Police later said he had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, as a video of the oath was found among his belongings during a search of his belongings after he was killed. (Strasbourg gunman Chekatt, 2018) Interestingly, shortly before this revelation, the Islamic State itself claimed responsibility for the attack, but French Interior Minister Castanet denied this and called it an opportunistic claim of credit. (Chrisafis, 2018a)

Trier, Germany December 1st 2020

Five people, including a nine-week-old baby, were killed, while a sixth died of his injuries a year later, (Sixth victim dies, 2021) and a total of 23 were injured when a car drove into a pedestrian zone in the western German city of Trier at full speed. (Amok-Fahrt, 2020) The suspect was immediately arrested and, after a trial, sentenced to life imprisonment and placed in a psychiatric facility after being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. (Erneuter Prozess, 2024) The killer was a homeless German who lived in his car. The police found no evidence that he was motivated by political or religious reasons, but believed that he had mental problems that were exacerbated by alcoholism. The perpetrator stated that his desire was to kill and injure as many people as possible. (Five die as, 2020)

Magdeburg, Germany December 20th 2024

Taleb Al-Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old doctor, psychologist and psychiatrist, originally from Saudi Arabia, later assessed as an alleged Islamophobe, attacked visitors to the Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany with a car. Taleb moved to Germany in 2006, and was granted permanent residence in 2016, as a political asylum seeker. (Suspect arrested, 2024) The car was moving at a speed of 48 kilometers per hour and ran over visitors to the fair for a length of 400 meters. (Anklage gegen, 2025) Six people died in the attack, five on the spot – 4 women and 1 child, while the sixth victim died in hospital from his injuries, while according to final information, a total of 338 people were injured (29 without physical injuries). (Suspect admits, 2025) The attacker's motive remained unclear, (Germany Christmas market, 2024) and German officials did not characterize the attack as a case of terrorism. (Generalbundesanwalt lehnt, 2025) The authorities of Dr. Taleb's home country have repeatedly warned Germany that he is a threat to the safety of Saudi diplomats, but the German authorities have dismissed this as an attempt to defame a political asylum seeker. (Benoit & Pancevski, 2024) The German court began the trial of Dr. Taleb on November 10, 2025, when he admitted in his first statement that he was driving a car and that he acted without an accomplice, and that the motive for the attack was not the fact that Christians had gathered at the Christmas market. In his statement, he criticized Islam, Saudi Arabia's policy towards women, and the German government for its openness towards migrants. (Monecke, 2025)

Dingolfing, Germany December 13th 2025

Five men were arrested in a police pre-emptive operation. The arrests were made after it was established that there was a plot to carry out an Islamist-motivated attack. According to the plan of the Islamist extremists, the target of the attack was to be the Christmas market in this Bavarian city. The plan was to carry out the attack with a motor vehicle. Those arrested were: an Egyptian aged 56, a Syrian aged 37 and three Moroccans aged 30, 28 and 22. The Egyptian had previously called for an attack on the Christmas market in a local mosque. (Taha, 2025)

Incident in Giessen, Germany December 22nd 2025

A 32-year-old Azerbaijani man drove his car off the road and hit at least three people standing at a bus stop. At least one person was seriously injured. The Azerbaijani is a permanent resident of the city. Just before hitting the pedestrians, he collided with two other cars. (A car crashes, 2025) The entire incident occurred near the Christmas market in the city. (Nearby Incident, 2025) No further information was available at the time of writing this research.

CONCLUSION

Of the nine selected cases of attacks and attempted attacks on Christmas markets that we have presented in this paper, six were carried out or were planned to be carried out by driving a motor vehicle at high speed and directly killing and injuring several civilians. In four of the nine attacks and attempted attacks, it was explicitly established that the perpetrators were Islamist extremists. In three of the nine cases, it was established that the attacks were committed either in the name of or with the open support of the "Islamic State". For the attack in Magdeburg in 2024, the motive of the mass homicide was political, but it remains unclear for a deeper qualification of the crime. Despite various allegations in

the media that indicate that the perpetrator was an Islamophobe, it remains unclear why an Islamophobe would attack a Christian Christmas market as part of a political mass homicide.

Based on the analysis of selected cases of attacks on Christmas markets, and within the theoretical framework we used, we can determine that a typical attack on Christmas markets has the following characteristics:

- It is predominantly a case of non-institutional, mass political homicide. In these cases, mass homicide does not have the characteristics of a megacide;
- It is always a terrorist act as part of an existing and regular terrorist activity, by different perpetrators of the same political principles of Islamist extremism;
- It is always a terrorist act within the ideological framework of jihadism, and more narrowly in accordance with the elements of the combat doctrine of the "Islamic State";
- It is predominantly terrorism by an organized group, and less often an act of individual terrorism;
- It is a terrorist act in which a motor vehicle is primarily used as a means of attack;
- It is a terrorist act in which the method of execution is primarily the driving of a motor vehicle at high speed into civilians;
- This is a terrorist act in which all victims are presumably exclusively Christians.
- The lessons that can be drawn from this research indicate that the measures of national security authorities must be adjusted to the following conclusions:
- Stopping specific terrorist acts will not stop terrorist activity;
- Neutralizing individual terrorists cannot prevent the emergence of a new terrorist group;
- If the liquidation of an entire terrorist organization or group is achieved, this does not mean that the network of Islamist extremists who radicalize Muslims in common gathering places will disappear.

We would like to emphasize that the specificity of choosing a permanent target, which may even indicate a specific period of the attack, contradicts the rule that terrorist attacks should adhere to random strikes in both spatial and temporal terms. This may indicate attempts by terrorist groups to elevate religiously-based political struggle to a new level of conflict.

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