

Germany

Germany fears far-right influence in police and security forces

Recipients of death threats say their names had been searched for on official databases



Police stand in front of demonstrators protesting against a neo-Nazi march marking the death of Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, in Ingelheim, Germany, in August 2019 © Michael Debets/EPA-EFE

Erika Solomon in Berlin JULY 28 2020

When it comes to threats from the [far-right](#), leftwing German politician Martina Renner has developed a thick skin. She rattles off the various kinds of threat she has received over the years: detailed descriptions of her murder, sexual violence, or even graphic videos of assaults.

But since April, the MP for Die Linke party has received seven letters that were different. The sender, “NSU 2.0” — a reference to a neo-Nazi group from the 1990s, called the National Socialist Underground — shared personal details the public would not know. And her situation is not unique.

Last week, the interior ministry of the German state of Hesse confirmed such messages had been sent to some 27 people in recent months — most of them women, people of migrant heritage, or on the political left. At least three targets had been searched for in police databases before the threats were sent. Ms Renner and others say details in the communications — sent by email, fax or text — appeared to require access to official records, or perhaps surveillance.

“There’s a feeling we’re being threatened by the ones who should be protecting us,” she said. “We can’t rule out that police officers we speak to are feeding our information into the computer, where other policemen can just grab it.”

The reports have ignited fresh debate in Germany over the presence of far-right sympathisers inside its security forces.

The problem is not confined to the police. Just a month ago, Germany's defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, announced she would [disband a company in the country's special forces](#) after a scandal involving far-right sympathisers.

Many countries grapple with far-right infiltration of their security forces, criminologist and police analyst Thomas Feltes said. But only now is Germany being forced to confront its own problem. "We are surprised by the fact that we might not be better than others," he said.

The "NSU 2.0" death threats are not even new. An investigation into them has dragged on for over two years, involved 60 law enforcement officers, at least 30 witnesses, and an Interpol inquiry — and the culprits have still not been found. On Monday, Frankfurt's public prosecutor announced that a former policeman and his wife in the southern state of Bavaria had been briefly arrested on suspicion of sending threats to MPs and others. However authorities have yet to clarify how the couple is connected to "NSU 2.0".

The first known NSU 2.0-related threats were received in 2018 by Seda Baysal-Yildiz, a German lawyer of Turkish descent who represented one of 10 victims killed by the original NSU group. Investigators later discovered her name had been searched for in a Hesse police database.

In recent months, the emails, some signed "Der Führer", have proliferated, targeting some of Germany's best-known opposition politicians. Now authorities have confirmed that two other women — a leftwing politician and a comedian of Turkish descent — were also searched for in police databases shortly before receiving threats.

Hesse's interior ministry and attorney-general declined to comment. But the head of Frankfurt's public prosecutor's office, Albrecht Schreiber, has said the investigation into the emails has "absolute priority".

Some critics have asked why it is only now that police have come under pressure given how long ago Ms Baysal-Yildiz was threatened. The NSU trial she worked on, which started in 2013, also sparked concerns about racism and far-right sympathies within the police and security forces.

New life was breathed into that debate this summer in the wake of worldwide [Black Lives Matter protests](#). Many politicians, however, argue that charges of racism within the police undermine morale among loyal officers. Horst Seehofer, the federal interior minister, has rejected calls for an investigation into the use of racial profiling. Instead, he proposed a study into violence against police, after some were targeted during recent riots in Stuttgart and Frankfurt.



Leftwing German politician Martina Renner has received many threats over the years, including detailed descriptions of her murder and sexual violence © Clemens Bilan/EPA-EFE

It is not clear yet what “NSU 2.0” even is, or whether some letters are copycats. In the wake of the special forces scandal last month, investigators said networks may have developed from within. Peter Beuth, Hesse’s interior minister, now says he cannot rule out the possibility of a network inside the region’s police force.

Some targets say current police behaviour has heightened their concern. Deniz Yücel, a commentator at Die Welt newspaper, was named in another NSU 2.0 letter sent two weeks ago to Mr Beuth and other officials. Yet it was Mr Yücel’s newspaper colleagues reporting on the subject that alerted him. He was not contacted by police.

“Perhaps they assume I will dial the telephone exchange of the Hesse ministry of the interior and ask myself,” Mr Yücel joked on Twitter. “Or that potential rightwing extremist murder boys are off duty at the weekend.”

Mr Feltes estimated 15-20 per cent of Germans have far-right sympathies, but only became emboldened after 2015, when nearly a million asylum seekers arrived in the country and stoked anti-immigrant sentiment.

Today, he said, “the lines between a seriously committed network and supporters who might join this network is a very fine line, easy to be crossed”.

Ms Renner believes it is unlikely that a broad network exists. But she worries about the risks that a few dozen well-trained and “battle-ready” sympathisers could pose. “Even just one of them is a threat,” she said.

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