Anders Breivik – psychopath or fascist? Polish press voices on the Norwegian mass killer

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Warszawa, 2012
On July 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, a citizen of Norway, parked a car loaded with explosives outside the office of the Norwegian prime minister in Oslo and detonated it. Eight people were killed in the blast. Later on the same day, Breivik dressed up as a policeman, travelled to Utøya island and started shooting at the participants of a Workers’ Youth League camp. He killed 69 people, mostly between the ages of 15 and 19, and surrendered voluntarily to the police when they arrived. On the day of the attacks, Breivik published his political manifesto 2083 – \textit{A European Declaration of Independence} on the internet, wherein he describes both what he considers the biggest dangers for Europe and Norway, that is in his view mass Islamic immigration, cultural Marxism (meaning, according to him, political correctness and tolerance), multiculturalist policies, and feminism, and the ways in which those alleged dangers should be fought. Breivik claims that the purpose of his attacks was to save Europe and Norway from being taken over by Muslims. He targeted Labour Party Youth members because he blames the party for allowing large numbers of Muslim immigrants to settle in Norway.

The attacks were the most tragic events in Norway since the Second World War and generated very intense public and media discussions also in Poland. For the purpose of the current report, Polish press articles, published in July and August 2011 (just after the attacks) and in April and May 2012 (when the trial of Anders Breivik began) were analysed. All articles were taken from the two biggest daily newspapers, \textit{Gazeta Wyborcza} and \textit{Rzeczpospolita}, as well as from six of the most popular news magazines in Poland: \textit{Polityka}, \textit{Wprost}, \textit{Newsweek Polska}, \textit{Uważam Rze}, \textit{Przekrój}, and \textit{Gazeta Polska}. These titles were chosen based on their circulation and on their respective political tendencies in aim to provide a broad spectrum of views on the matter at hand. \textit{Gazeta Polska} represents the most right-wing of the studied
titles, followed by Rzeczpospolita and Uważam Rze. Newsweek Polska and Wprost are situated in a broadly defined centre of the political spectrum, while Gazeta Wyborcza, Polityka, and Przekrój are rather left-leaning publications.

The three main findings of the press analysis were: (1) the striking differences of opinions about Breivik’s mental health between left- and right-wing writers, (2) important differences in the interpretation of his political views, and (3) the prevalence of two conspiracy theories constructed around Breivik’s attacks in right-wing papers.

Just after the attacks, Breivik was put on psychiatric observation and underwent an examination which resulted in his being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in November 2011. According to the second evaluation conducted in April 2012, however, Breivik was not psychotic and suffered from a personality disorder rather than a mental illness. The final decision about his sanity will be made by a Norwegian court of justice and is likely to be announced together with the sentence in August 2012. The lack of a definite diagnosis leaves a lot of space for media interpretation of the situation. A striking and quite consistent pattern concerning this interpretation can be found in the Polish press. The right-wing newspapers and magazines overwhelmingly describe Breivik as mentally ill, often ascribing his acts of violence to a psychosis or to being a psychopath. On the other hand, left-leaning publications typically treat Breivik as a healthy person motivated by an extreme right-wing political ideology. Elaborate investigations of Breivik’s manifesto, of possible connections he could have had with other extreme right-wing European groups and activists, and the ways in which those groups pose a threat to democracy, dominate the debate on the left of the political scene.

Concerning the political views of the Norwegian terrorist, right-wing publications focus mostly on denying the possibility that Breivik is a Christian. At times, they also claim that he
should not be placed on the right of the political spectrum at all. In articles published by Gazeta Polska the authors argue time and again that Breivik only used Christianity as a pretext to fight Muslims and that a real Christian would never kill children for political purposes. Right leaning authors are thus very focused on fighting the “Christian fundamentalist” label that Breivik received after publishing his manifesto and go so far as to claim that his frustrations were a product of the left-wing and Norwegian democracy at-large, the latter of which is seen as promoting tolerance, being based on social trust, and readily accepting immigrants. Newspapers and magazines of a more left-wing affiliation, tend to focus mostly on the xenophobic and racist ideology of Breivik, while linking it to other right-wing parties in Europe. They emphasise the influence that anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant rhetoric may yield over people and, by the same token, call for a stronger promotion of political correctness and tolerance policies.

Two conspiracy theories are voiced exclusively in the right-wing newspapers. They are concerned with an alleged role of the Russian government in the attacks, on the one hand, and with the supposedly biased mainstream media portrayal of Breivik as a right-wing extremist, on the other hand.

The very conservative, right-wing news website niezalezna.pl [independent.pl] suggested, as early as July 2011, that the attacks may have been instigated by Russia, which the writers understand to be interested in destabilising Norway due to economic reasons as Norway is the biggest exporter of gas and oil in Europe. The topic was picked up by some Gazeta Polska authors who elaborated on the possible involvement of Russian intelligence in the Norwegian tragedy and the similarities between the rhetoric used by Breivik and by a well-known Russian neo-Nazi activist Wiaczeslaw Datsik.
The conviction that Breivik is not actually Christian and that the left and mainstream media selectively pick and publish information about him, which creates the image of a 'right-wing terrorist', was widely discussed in Gazeta Polska, Rzeczpospolita, and Uważam Rze. Authors of several articles argue that one of the aims of the mainstream media is to create a link between the Norwegian massacre and right-wing ideology in general which could serve to discredit the latter.

In accordance with social representation theory (Moscovici, 1988; Breakwell, 1993), one of the very important motivations of people is to make sense of the world that surrounds them. In an aim to do so, and via communication with other people, meanings are ascribed to things and events. Thus, individuals create a set of beliefs and values commonly shared by members of certain groups (i.e. social representations). In the case of the reception of Anders Breivik in Poland, it is possible to distinguish two, significantly differing representations. People on the right of the political spectrum appear to be motivated to distance themselves from the perpetrator, who happened to be close to them ideologically. They do so by claiming that Breivik is insane rendering any and all of his political beliefs meaningless, or that he cannot be considered a “real” right-wing activist. On the contrary, leftists happily discuss a variety of perceived connections between Breivik and other extreme right-wing groups and are very willing to state that he is completely sane because this allows them to blame right-wing ideology for the tragic events of July 2011.

References: