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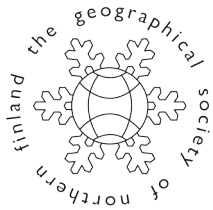

Discussions and interventions

The nightless nights of the 'Nazi camp': The Finnish far-right's anti-climate politics in urban space

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Abstract

The globally growing climate justice movement has drawn attention to the accelerating climate change and the structural changes that climate mitigation would require. At the same time, there has been a surge and normalization of radical and extreme right-wing groups and parties. Their central element is not only ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism but also anti-climate politics, as they seek to obstruct climate politics, mobilize anti-scientific fictions and discredit scientists and activists. The far right's intimidation of climate justice activists has been studied by examining its textual and visual discourses in online spaces, but less attention has been paid to far-right anti-climate practices in urban spaces. Drawing on social movement geographies, I aim to contribute to the discussions on far-right anti-climate politics by analysing the spatial strategies of the Finnish far-right's counterprotests (the so-called 'Nazi camp') during Extinction Rebellion Finland's 'Summer Rebellion' in June 2021 in Helsinki. By doing so, I show that far-right anti-climate politics (in the form of climate scepticism and intimidation of climate activists) are not limited to online spaces but emerge through different strategies in urban spaces by which the far-right competes for control over space and visibility and shapes public narratives of climate change and politics.

Keywords: *social movement geography, public space, demonstrations, Extinction Rebellion, political violence, authoritarianism*

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Introduction

In June 2021 Extinction Rebellion Finland (XR Finland) organized 'Summer Rebellion', a one-week protest in the heart of Helsinki to draw public attention to climate science and planetary boundaries (Aaltonen 2021). These climate activists were not the only ones occupying the streets of Helsinki: far-right activists and politicians were there too, establishing a 'Nazi camp'[1](Huuhtanen 2021) as they themselves called it. The Nazi camp, whose size was 15 to 20 people, tried to fight for visibility and control over public space, for example by threatening, pushing, and kicking the XR climate activists. One of the intimidators was Sebastian Tynkkynen, a member of parliament (Finns Party) who in a live stream told viewers he had woken up at 2 a.m. and went to Mannerheimintie street (the main thoroughfare of Helsinki) with a big boombox so he could wake up the "law-breaking climate panic activists" with 'facts' about climate politics (Tynkkynen 2021).

The research on the entanglements of the far right and climate change has noted that the surge of the far right in an era of worsening climate crisis is not a coincidence (e.g. Daggett 2018; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021). The far right is driven by the motivation to secure a fossil-fuelled economy and a white hetero-patriarchal nation, for instance, by centralizing power and re-establishing societal hierarchies. It is also a countermovement to socially just climate politics. Whilst climate scientists and movements seek to bring about change by drawing attention to climate science and societal structures, the far right, in collaboration with different fossil fuel companies and climate denialist thinktanks, obstructs climate policies (McCarthy 2019; Lees *et al.* 2020; Barla & Bjork-James 2021; Malm & Zetkin Collective 2021; Bosworth 2022; Ekberg *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, the far right obfuscates the discussion by blaming migrants and racialized people for ecological problems (Forchtner 2019; Turner & Bailey 2021; Pietiläinen, forthcoming).

The far right's (anti-)climate ideologies and politics have been analysed at the regional and institutional scales, for example by studying how the far right mobilizes anti-scientific fictions and discredits or harasses scientists and activists in their political programmes, magazines, as well as social media platforms (Boren & Kahaya 2019; Agius *et al.* 2020; Vowles & Hultman 2021; White 2021; Forchtner 2023). However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the far right's anti-climate practice at the urban scale. This is surprising because urban spaces are central sites for political mobilization (Nicholls 2007; Salmenkari 2009; Vasudevan 2015) and (anti-)fascist struggles (Ince 2011; Ince 2019; Santamarina 2021; Luger 2022). Capturing public spaces (e.g. streets) is a central practice of fascist ideology (Fekete 2014) and far-right groups and activists have a long history in counter-protesting, targeting and threatening spaces of those considered political opponents and minorities (e.g. LGBTQ spaces) (Lagerman 2023). The social and spatial dimensions of life are mutually constitutive (Soja 1989; Martin & Miller 2003). Studying the far-right's anti-climate practice at the urban scale is important because it can shed light on their spatial strategies to struggle in and over public space and the geographical manifestations of authoritarian forms of socio-spatial control and power (e.g. Ince, 2019; Lagerman, 2023). In the present commentary, by turning to social movement geographies (e.g. Martin & Miller 2003; Salmenkari 2009; Featherstone 2011), I attempt to understand how far-right authoritarian anti-climate politics emerges and plays out as a spatial practice by analysing the different strategies that the Finnish far right undertook during XR Finland's Summer Rebellion in June 2021. I aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about the far right's anti-climate politics as well as the spatial politics of the far right by illuminating that far-right climate scepticism and

intimidation of climate activists is not limited to online spaces but instead that they employ different, sometimes violent, strategies in urban spaces in their attempts to convey anti-climate messages (e.g. Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018).

The far right in Finland

During the last decades, we have witnessed intensified racial border politics and a surge of far-right ideologies, parties, and movements across the globe (Rydgren 2018; Paasi *et al.* 2022). I use 'far right' as an umbrella term for radical and extreme right parties and groups whose politics are centred around ethnonationalism and authoritarianism (e.g. Pirro 2022). An umbrella term is useful because far-right groups and actors are linked through overlapping memberships and complex webs of intersection that occur through formal and informal channels (Gattinara & Pirro 2018; Pirro & Gattinara 2018). Furthermore, mutual events (e.g. demonstrations) and online spaces (e.g. social media) are focal sites for networking and information sharing (Gattinara & Pirro 2019). The rise of parliamentary radical right groups and the attention they have received has led to the mainstreaming of white nationalist and misogynist ideas, which has in part contributed to an increase in hate speech and violence towards minorities and those considered political opponents (e.g. Gökarıksel & Smith 2016; Reid Ross 2017). Importantly, political violence and different violent tactics against those whom the far right considers as a threat to the white patriarchal nation (e.g. migrants, sexual minorities, or 'leftists') is not a new phenomenon (Koopmans 1996; Karamanidou 2016; Ravndal & Jupskås 2020) but a long-embraced strategy for conveying their message and advancing social control (Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018; Ravndal & Jupskås 2020).

In recent decades, the Finnish far-right environment has transformed in many ways, following the ideas of the globally surging radical right and due to the growing influence of the Finns Party (*perussuomalaiset*), formerly known as the True Finns Party, which broke through in the national parliamentary elections of 2011 and since then has been among the three biggest parties in national elections (e.g. Hatakka 2021). The banning of the Finnish chapter of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) in 2020, due to its members' long history of violent attacks, has led to the degradation of organizational activities (Kotonen 2021) and overall to the fragmentation of the Finnish far-right environment. New groups and collectives have emerged since then, such as the youth neo-fascist group Uudenmaan Akseli and the Finnish chapter of Active Club. Among the newcomers is also the Blue-and-Black Movement, a new fascist party project established by former Finns Party members. Politically the Blue-and-Black Movement resembles NRM as its membership consists of many former NRM members and its political programmes are very similar to those of NRM (Kotonen 2021; Varisverkosto 2022).

The Finns Party has tried to distance itself from fascist groups through various internal 'cleaning' projects, for instance kicking out members or cutting ties with its youth organization (Lizotte & Kallio 2023). This internal cleaning has brought conservative appeal, contributing to the further normalization of the Finns Party's politics, and also enabling access to positions of governmental power. Yet, one-third of Finns Party members of parliament have spread fascist material, participated in fascist events, or have overlapping memberships with fascist groups (for example, six sitting MPs have a background in Suomen Sisu) (Björkqvist 2023). Furthermore, the rise of the Finns

Party has increased tolerance for white nationalist ideas among the mainstream, which has opened new spaces for fascist mobilization. As an example, three far-right terrorist investigations have been ongoing in Finland within a year (2022–2023), in which a total of ten men are being investigated for terrorism crimes (Varisverkosto 2023). In all these three cases, the actors did not operate or radicalize in a vacuum but instead were tightly connected to other far-right actors or platforms like the Finns Party and the Blue-and-Black Movement (Ruonakoski 2023; Varisverkosto 2023).

As in other countries such as Sweden (Vowles & Hultman 2021), also in Finland the far right hardly took any position on climate change before 2017 and 2018 when the climate movement started to gain attention due to global marches that mobilized millions of people. During recent years, the far right has increasingly participated in debates about climate change, offering solutions such as border walls and 'climate abortions', drawing their inspiration from right-wing ecologies and misanthropic thinkers such as Pentti Linkola (Macklin 2022; Pietiläinen, forthcoming). The far right's (anti)-climate agenda is largely constructed in opposition to the climate justice movement, which is discredited and stigmatized by the far right for instance by mobilizing different conspiracy theories and harmful speeches and arguing that the protestors are enemies of decent taxpayers, 'the people' (Macklin 2022; Kosonen & Löf 2023). Within the Finnish far right, the climate justice movement is argued to be 'political' (and thus not the right kind of environmental protection), a Trojan Horse for communism and funded by Putin. For instance, in their campaign videos for the 2023 parliamentary elections the Finns Party portrayed environmental activists as irrational and hinted that demonic possession is the cause of their 'fanaticism' (Suomen Uutiset 2023a; 2023b; 2023c).

The Finnish far right's anti-climate politics in urban space

XR Finland

During the last few years, the growing climate movement has reconfigured geographies through different, beyond-places-stretching forms of resistance, demanding climate justice and rapid action to slow human-induced climate change (e.g. Della Porta & Parks 2014). Climate justice groups such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion see climate change as a structural problem of global capitalism and push for the message of climate science by applying different strategies and tactics, including demonstrations, civil disobedience, and direct action (e.g. Piispa *et al.* 2022). The climate justice movement has grown significantly during the last decade in Finland (e.g. Piispa *et al.* 2021) – even though the climate movement is much smaller in Finland than, for instance, in Central Europe. Extinction Rebellion Finland, an autonomous Finnish local chapter of Extinction Rebellion (see, for instance, Gardner, Carvalho & Valenstain 2022), is one of the most visible climate justice groups in Finland. Its politics are based on impacting local government, advocating for stronger climate policy, and resisting business-as-usual by peacefully disrupting everyday urban activities (Axon 2019). In Finland, the movement grew enormously, especially during the years 2019–2021, which led to increased public attention and opposition. The opposition should be understood in light of broader global developments in which climate justice movements are globally subjected to tightening police repression and criminalization due to their alleged 'extremism' or 'eco-terrorism' (see, for instance, Brock 2022; Brock *et al.* 2018).

Summer Rebellion and the Nazi camp[2]

In June 2021 XR Finland staged a 'Summer Rebellion' in which the movement protested in three central areas in Helsinki (e.g. Aaltonen 2021; Koskinen *et al.* 2023). During the protest, Elokapina established a Rebellion Centre for a week (16–24 June 2021) in Senaatintori, a central square, where the group organized different programs such as speeches, music performances and workshops on topics like anti-racism and civil disobedience. On the 17th, the protest expanded to Mannerheimintie street, where the movement blocked a four-lane street in front of the Finnish parliament. On the 18th, after police negotiations, the Summer Rebellion moved to the quieter Unioninkatu street, but a small group returned to Mannerheimintie, which led to the arrest of 139 people (Aaltonen 2021). The protest week aimed to push the government to announce a climate emergency, carbon neutrality by 2025 and a citizens' assembly to support a just ecological future.

XR Finland occupied places of symbolic and strategic significance: the Senaatintori square is in the historic part of town whilst Mannerheimintie, named after nationalist hero Carl Mannerheim, is a main street located in front of the parliament. Whilst urban citizens are accustomed to seeing different events in the square (from demonstrations to commercial markets), Mannerheimintie is a main thoroughfare in the centre of Helsinki. During its occupation, cars and public transportation had to take a detour. By bringing together climate activists to three different sites and reconfiguring urban geography, for instance through blockades (Mitchell 2003), climate activists drew a significant amount of public attention to climate justice and the movement. By occupying Mannerheimintie, XR Finland also challenged the hegemony of private automobiles, disrupting the business-as-usual of a neoliberal city (Davies 2013) and transforming a busy transportation street into a space of flowers, campers, dance, poetry and singing, thus, shaping and re-imagining the landscape.

The protest occurred in a time frame in which far-right harassment towards climate activists was particularly prominent, as XR Finland had recently organized mass actions in which streets and urban spaces were occupied for many days (Riku Löf, private communication, 2023). The protest week brought a great deal of media attention to the movement and sparked anger among its opponents (Aaltonen 2021), especially among the far right, which has a habit of discrediting climate activists. Already on the second day of the Summer Rebellion, at Senaatintori a loose group of different far-right activists organized a counterdemonstration that they self-proclaimed as the 'Nazi camp'. The camp followed Elokapina to all three protest locations. The counterdemonstration was not organized by a specific group but instead was mobilized online and through informal networks, attracting random individuals as well as those associated with networks/groups like the Soldiers of Odin, Suomen Sisu, Uudenmaan Akseli and Blue-and-Black Movement as well as politicians from the Finns Party.

The Nazi camp employed different spatial strategies in their attempts to influence the discussion about climate change and in re-negotiating power dynamics in urban space. First, the far righters attempted to gain visibility and publicity for their ideologies and politics by occupying key spaces near XR Finland's protest sites. Whilst in Senaatintori the Nazi camp stayed 20–30 meters away from the square at the stairways of the main building of the University of Helsinki, at Mannerheimintie the Nazi camp occupied the busy intersection of Arkadianmäki and Mannerheimintie. The number of far righters was small, maximum 15–20 people (Tuominen *et al.* 2021), but the camp attempted to give an impression of being numerous and united (see also, Tilly 2005), for instance

Figure 1. XR Finland occupying Mannerheimintie (60°10'21.4"N 24°56'05.0"E) (17 June 2021).

Figure 2. XR Finland occupying Mannerheimintie (60°10'21.4"N 24°56'05.0"E) (17 June 2021).

by being as visible and loud as possible. The campers were shouting into megaphones around the clock, loudly playing nationalist music (e.g. Nazi marching song "Erika") and waving enormous Finnish flags. By occupying the street, the Nazi camp attempted to influence the discussion about climate politics by drawing the attention of the media and policy makers. Whilst not directly commenting on the Summer Rebellion's demands, in their 10-meter-long banner the counterprotestors spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the 'world government' and called for the resignation of Social Democratic prime minister Sanna Marin due to treason (Viltsu 32 2021). The Nazi camp framed themselves as the protectors of the socio-spatial order of the city and of society at large: according to them, they were "bringing order back" as now, due to machinations of Interior minister Maria Ohisalo, (from the Green Party, who takes her orders "from abroad"), the unlawful "anarchists" were allowed to disturb the "societal peace" and "bring chaos and bad influence" to public space (Pohjolan neito 2021a,2021b).

Although some of the far-right protestors (such as Panu Huuhtanen) are publicly against the 'overly moderate' Finns Party, the counterdemonstrators found new alliances with the Finns Party politicians. For instance, several members of parliament, such as Mauri Peltokangas, came to visit the Nazi camp, showing their support on-site and on social media channels (Kasvismafioso 2021; Peltokangas 2021), which brought institutional legitimacy to the far-right counterprotest. On social media, Peltokangas took credit for negotiating with police to stop the XR demonstration, writing that "the spread of this green glop in our society should be stopped" (Peltokangas 2021). Although neither Peltokangas nor other parliament members referred to the counterprotesters using the words "Nazi camp", many Finns Party members (and other right-wing politicians) supported the counterdemonstrators' actions publicly. For instance, Jussi Halla-aho, former leader of the Finns Party, praised the Nazi camp online, arguing that one of its loudest activists (Panu Huuhtanen) should be thanked by the police for his work countering XR Finland (Halla-aho 2021).

The second spatial strategy employed by the Nazi camp focused on intimidating individual activists by streaming and filming them at the demonstration and sharing the clips and the activists' personal information online. Filming and targeting so-called political opponents are common strategies among the far right, and, in the context of the Summer Rebellion, it was justified in terms of "national security" (Pohjolan neito 2021a). For instance, Sebastian Tynkkynen visited the Summer Rebellion several times, filming the activists from a close distance without permission. Tynkkynen also came to Mannerheimintie to wake up the Summer Rebellion's activists during the night, shouting insults with his megaphone (see, Tynkkynen 2021). His streams and videos got shared and distributed online and he also encouraged his followers to cut and distribute "humiliating clips of individual activists" (Kosonen & Löf 2023). Such streaming and targeting, according to Löf (2023, private communication), stresses many activists, who are afraid of getting targeted or becoming victims of online harassment. For instance, *Partisaani*, a neo-Nazi magazine that is run by some former NRM members, shared Tynkkynen's videos but also some of the XR Finland's activists' phone numbers and residential addresses. This exemplifies the fluidities of the relationship between the parliamentary radical right and fascist street activists and between online and offline politics, which are inherently integrated (see also, Saresma, Karkulehto & Varis 2020).

The third spatial strategy of the far-right demonstrators revolved around different forms of violence. The Nazi camp exploited specific narratives of space and place in generating their authoritarian positions (see also, Santamarina 2021), for instance

Figure 3. The Nazi camp occupying the intesection of Mannerheimintie, Postikatu and Arkadiankatu (60°10'15.3"N 24°56'12.9"E) (18 June 2021).

by arguing that since the protestors used 'unlawful' methods by disturbing the orders of public space, they had to "suffer" (Pohjolan neito 2021a). The far righters justified their violent acts also by drawing on specific nationalist imaginaries of the sites. They, for instance, argued that the "illegally behaving" activists were disgracing "the most gorgeous, historically meaningful" and "iconic site" (Pohjolan neito 2021; 2:34–3:25), which reflects how struggles over public spaces are "often justified by different ways for valuing place" (Nicholls 2007: 616). Several verbal and physical encounters occurred at all three sites. The far righters discredited the activists by shouting insults into megaphones, for instance calling the protestors a "criminal trash group" (Pohjolan neito 2021a, 2021b) and by threatening them with violence, such as "a kick in the head" (Pohjolan neito 2021; Viltsu32 2021). The threats were not only verbal, and the far righters repeatedly behaved violently towards the activists, for instance by pushing and kicking XR Finland protestors (Löf 2023, private communication; Reponen 2023, private communication; Unknown 2021a, 2021c). One of the kickers (Unknown 2021a) was the above-mentioned Panu Huuhtanen who was praised by Jussi Halla-aho. Far righters practiced violence also towards those who supported XR Finland demonstrators: for instance, Soldiers of Odin activists pushed a person who was protecting the activists (Reponen 2023, private communication). The camp itself was also targeted; objects, such as fish, were thrown at the camp.

Although this text's main focus is on the spatial strategies of the far-right, the geography of protest was not only shaped by the XR Finland protestors, the Nazi camp and the Finns Party members, but also by other elements such as state power that tries to control and prevent different uses of the city (see also, Salmenkari 2009). Indeed, as reminded by Julia Lagerman (forthcoming: 4), "the struggle in and over public space is

plural". The far righters did not operate in a vacuum but the police played a significant role in defining the dynamics of the protest sites, for instance by enabling the loud and disruptive Nazi camp to stay close to the XR Finland site and leaving drunk and aggressively behaving far-right campers unattended during the night. In principle, police have an obligation to secure the right to demonstrate and to intervene in case of potential external threats, which in the Summer Rebellion did not happen. According to Tuulia Reponen and Riku Löf, the far right's threatening behaviour, such as insults and very loud and disturbing noise, frustrated and scared the climate activists. Importantly, climate activists of the Summer Rebellion were active agents and developed different strategies for how to cope with the far righters' pursuit to repress and silence. XR Finland, for instance, asked for help from local anti-fascists to identify the far righters and to evaluate the security threat. Mutual support was also offered for dealing with emotions. Yet, XR Finland's action politics are based on strict non-violent methods, which also impacts the ways the movement can defend against violently behaving far righters.

Concluding remarks: authoritarianism in the heating world

As I show in this commentary, the far right applied different spatial strategies in conveying their authoritarian and anti-climate message. In doing so, delimiting, and asserting control over public space was a crucial method. As also shown in this commentary, the far right's political violence towards Summer Rebellion climate activists and supporters was not limited to online spaces nor were they isolated events conducted by "lone wolves". Online violence is an important form of (political) violence, but it is only one part of 'the chain of violence' that spans from intimate violence to violent societal structures (Saresma, Karkulehto & Varis 2020). Whilst the far right did not pay much attention to the content of the protest, by discrediting, delegitimating and violently harassing the activists the far right tried to expel them and their climate messaging from the public space, simultaneously attempting to influence climate narratives by drawing on conspiracy theories and climate denialism. The right to public space is not self-evident but instead "struggled over and earned" (Lee 2009: 33). Although XR Finland and its supporters were not passive bystanders, their non-violent tactics limited their abilities to fight in and for public space and to self-defend the demonstration.

Despite the far right's internal disagreements and different political orientations, the opposition to XR Finland brought Finnish far righters together and tightened their informal networks. Whilst far-right politicians are "legally bound" to reject the use of violence (e.g. Weinberg & Assoudeh 2018: 415), different strategies were applied in supporting and thus legitimatizing the Nazi camp. As the examples above show, the parliamentary politicians took an active role in discrediting climate activists, as well as in agitating for further harassment and violence. Finns Party MPs legitimated the Nazi camp not only through their presence and online media support, but they themselves also took an active part in activist harassment by employing various harmful strategies (e.g. streaming) and by encouraging their supporters to carry out harmful behaviour.

Academia has an important role in countering the radical right's misinformation and denialism about climate change and biodiversity (Lees *et al.* 2020). This also includes critical engagement with the socio-spatial (counter)politics of the far right (Ince

2019; Luger 2022), especially when it comes to climate issues. Across time and place, environmental defenders and forefront communities have been harassed, repressed, and murdered by extractive corporations, states, and authoritarian leaders (e.g. Brock 2020). The presented examples show only a limited glimpse of one climate movement (one that is rather white and middle-class) in a country where, the far-right environment is relatively small and fragmented and the level of freedom of speech and press freedom is still relatively high. Yet, the increased state-sanctioned repression of environmental activists (e.g. Brock *et al.* 2018; Brock 2020; Dodd & Grierson 2020; Hover 2023) as well as the rise and normalization of authoritarian nationalism pose several challenges to democracy, critical social research and activism, which demands a critical examination of the varieties (thus, spatialities) of authoritarian anti-climate politics as well as developing counterstrategies to them.

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Endnotes

1. In Finnish the term camp (leiri) means alternatively a place or a group of people associated with an idea.
2. The analysis is based on observations from textual and visual material online (e.g., Youtube videos and newspaper articles) and field notes that I, as an external observer, collected during the Summer Rebellion. Furthermore, during November 2023 I conducted two email interviews with two Finnish scholar-activists, Tuulia Reponen and Riku Löf, who participated in XR Finland's actions.

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