

Europe Right-wing violence escalates

Shock at spike in racist abuse

Emma-Kate Symons
AFR correspondent

Paris | The murder of an 18-year-old far left student activist, beaten to death by neo-Nazi skinheads in the centre of Paris, has ignited fears of a wave of extreme right violence across Europe.

On both sides of the Channel evidence of a spike in savage attacks and racist abuse emerging from nationalist movements is worrying mainstream politicians, immigrants, and militants on the left targeted by ultra-right gangs.

An Islamic cultural centre and mosque was burned down in suburban London this week with right-wing extremists from the English Defence League key suspects, after firefighters say EDL was seen daubed in the ruins of the Somali Muslim community hub.

The arson, committed allegedly in retaliation for the stabbing murder two weeks ago of British soldier Lee Rigby by self-declared Islamists was condemned by the political class.

France was also in shock on Thursday following the killing of anti-fascist student Clement Meric, and the arrest of seven young skinhead men accused of being involved.

The teenager, who had demonstrated against homophobia during the anti-gay marriage protests, was beaten in a street in the heart of Paris's shopping district right near the Printemps and Galeries Lafayette department stores. He and his friends were pursued by a group of youths identified with the far right National Revolutionary Youth. One of the skinheads reportedly punched Mr Meric so hard he immediately knocked him to the ground where his head hit a bollard. He died less than a day after the attack.

Centre and far-left figures in politics and the media condemned the murder as the end result of a climate of violent extremism that developed around the fringes of anti-gay marriage protests across France in recent months. The centre-right UMP has been criticised for marching with National Front politicians against the law.

Pierre Bergé, widow of the designer Yves Saint-Laurent, and a co-owner of *Le Monde* newspaper immediately accused opponents of homosexual marriage in the Demonstration for All and its leader, Frigide Barjot, who had promised President **Francoise Hollande** "there will be blood" of being implicated in Mr Meric's killing.

The French President and his administration flagged plans to ban extreme



Clement Meric, 18, was beaten to death in the heart of Paris's shopping district. PHOTO: AP

right associations under French law forbidding hate speech and violence. "There is no place for small neo-Nazi groups whose enemy is the nation," said Interior Minister **Manuel Valls**.

"A group of the extreme right is at the heart of this. We need to pay attention to this, because they threaten our values."

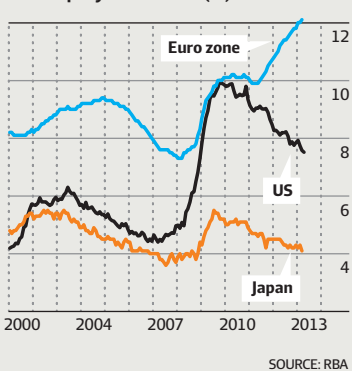
The leader of France's biggest extreme right movement and political party The National Front **Marine Le Pen**, trying to distance her organisation from the incident, said the killing was "appalling".

But skinhead Serge Ayoub, the head of the openly fascist cell Jeunesse Nationaliste Revolutionnaire (Nationalist Revolutionary Youth) group, whose members are accused of killing Mr Meric, said the dead young man "was the aggressor".

As spontaneous student demonstrations took place across France in memory of Clement Meric, a conga line of French politicians rushed to the site of the killing to pay homage to the young man described as a "model student" at the prestigious Sciences Po university.

Idle hands

Unemployment rate (%)



But the teen's friends and fellow militants from a student anti-fascist group insisted the youth, who had identified as an anarchist, had no time for the mainstream Socialists nor established far left groups like the Front de Gauche.

Only a few weeks on from the murder of soldier Rigby, and an attempt at a similar act, with the stabbing of a

French soldier by a radical Muslim convert at Paris's La Defense train station, the far right in the United Kingdom and France is seemingly emboldened.

In Ireland, authorities have expressed concern at a sudden rise in hate speech and racist abuse of immigrants after xenophobic messages and racist posters were seen across Dublin.

However, politicians keen to avoid more gloomy economic news appear also to have jumped on the bandwagon.

On the day Mr Meric was pronounced dead, French unemployment rose above 10 per cent, the highest level since 1998, and is almost triple that for young people. As the left seeks to draw political capital from the alleged murder, it has ignored its role in giving the far right National Front legitimacy on economic questions.

The "de-demonisation" of the extreme right in France and its rising popularity has also occurred because the mainstream left has shirked the task of reforming the economy, thus giving too much oxygen to the fascist fringe.

Putin ends 30-year marriage

Kim Traill
AFR correspondent

Vienna | Russian President **Vladimir Putin** and his wife **Lyudmila Putina** have used a night at the opera at the Kremlin to announce that their three-decade long marriage is over.

In their first appearance together since Mr Putin's third-term inauguration in May 2012, the Russian leader and his wife ended years of speculation by confirming to state TV channel Rossiya 24 what they described as a "civilised divorce". Ms Putina blamed the couple's estrangement on Mr Putin's high-profile position.

"I don't like publicity and flying is difficult for me," said Ms Putina, who first met her husband in 1980 while working as a flight attendant for Aeroflot. "We virtually never saw each other."

Mr Putin's high-profile "friendship" with glamorous former Olympic rhythmic gymnastics champion turned state Duma deputy, **Alina Kabayeva** – 30 years his junior – has long fuelled rumours of trouble in Russia's first couple's marriage.

It is widely believed that Mr Putin and the super-bendy Ms Kabayeva – who met in 2000 when she was just 17 – have two children together, a four-year-old boy and a baby girl, born last November.

But when the tabloid newspaper *Moskovsky Korrespondent* reported in 2008 that the President had secretly divorced Ms Putina to marry Ms Kabayeva, Mr Putin was furious.

The paper's owner, billionaire **Alek sander Lebedev**, reacted immediately, retracting the article and shutting down the publication.

Ms Kabayeva and the children are rumoured to be living in Mr Putin's palatial Black Sea retreat in Sochi, near where Russia's tsars once spent their summers. Ms Putina has apparently been residing principally in a guest house built by the state in the grounds of an ancient monastery near the town of Pskov near the border with Estonia.

The divorce rate in Russia is one of the world's highest, yet public divorces of high-ranking officials are rare. Less than a fortnight ago, the Kremlin announced measures to try to reverse Russia's population decline, including the imposition of a tax on divorce.

Yet it remains to be seen whether Mr Putin, one of Russia's richest men, will be subject to this new tax.

Suu Kyi says she wants to run for Myanmar presidency

Thomas Fuller

Naypyidaw | Yes, **Aung San Suu Kyi** would like to be president of Myanmar.

Since her election to Parliament last year, the winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize and the leader of Myanmar's opposition has alternately dodged the issue, parried it with rhetorical questions of her own and more recently answered with what sounded like a qualified yes.

But this week, speaking to an audience of foreign business executives, she was explicit and unequivocal about her political ambitions.

"I want to run for president," she told a room packed with executives at a meeting hosted by the World Economic Forum here. "If I pretended that I didn't want to be president I wouldn't be honest. And I would rather be honest with my people than otherwise."

Ms Suu Kyi was jailed by the military



Aung San Suu Kyi. PHOTO: AFP

for almost two decades, and her ascension to the presidency would be a kind of Mandela moment for this impoverished and formerly hermetic country that is now opening to the world.

Unlike previous occasions when she was asked about the presidency –

including during recent trips to the United States and Japan – Ms Suu Kyi also laid out her intentions in the Burmese language on Thursday. Burmese journalists said this was a first.

"It's natural that a leader of a political party says he or she is ready to lead the country and the government," she said in Burmese.

She also did not hesitate to answer the question in the presence of the man who many analysts presume would be her rival for the office, Thura Shwe Mann, the speaker of the lower house of Parliament.

Even before her comments on Thursday, there was little doubt among political analysts in Myanmar that she aspired to the presidency in elections scheduled for 2015. In recent months, she has surprised some of her followers by wooing the country's powerful military, her former jailers, whose support she needs to change the Constitution.

(Under current rules, her marriage to a foreigner – her husband was English – disqualifies her from the presidency.)

The 2015 elections threaten the dominance of the party formed by former military officers that currently holds the majority of seats in Parliament.

Ms Suu Kyi commands allegiance verging on idolisation among her ethnic group, the Burman, who make up about two-thirds of Myanmar's population of 55 million.

But over the past year, she has been accused by ethnic minorities in the country and by foreign human rights organisations of playing politics and pandering to the Buddhist majority. She has been criticised for her restrained reaction to eruptions of violence against Muslims that have killed more than 200 people. The violence has been led by Buddhist mobs.

On Thursday, Ms Suu Kyi did not dispute she had been muted in reacting to

the violence. Asked about the killings in western Myanmar, she said she was afraid of stoking the violence and giving fodder to the "more extremist elements in these communities".

"I do not want to aggravate the situation by saying that one community is wrong or the other community is wrong," she said. "If they have not enjoyed the sympathy of politicians or influential groups then it makes them more extremist."

She said she was seeking to avoid "a vicious cycle of people getting more and more aggressive and more and more extremist."

As a measure of the distance that the country has travelled since Ms Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010, one of the country's most powerful ministers, U Soe Thane, shared the stage with her in a debate, and referred to her as "my respectable elder sister".

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