Far-Right Extremism in the Populist Age

Briefing Paper

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DEMOS

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper was prepared to facilitate discussion at the International Summit on Far-Right Extremism, held in central London in partnership between Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Demos on 23 May 2017.

The event was held against a backdrop of 'shifting sands' across Europe and the United States, with fundamental realignments in national political contexts, a broadly spread hardening of attitudes towards cultural and ethnic diversity, and a sense that the far-right – both through attitudes and expressions of violent extremism and populist political movements – has assumed a visible and influential role of historic proportions.

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Introduction and Definitions

In tandem with, and partially as a result of national political and social differences, there is no clear definition of far-right extremism. In a fundamental sense, it refers to the opposition of the primary foundations of liberal democracy, which offers safeguards for minority groups, a civic-based conception of national identity and citizenship, and political pluralism[1]. Norris (2005) acknowledges the multitude of labels for far right political parties and social groups – 'far', 'extreme', 'radical', 'new right', 'ultra-nationalist' among many others – and consequently argues that these groups are best thought of a cluster or family of parties rather than a single category[2]. Similarly, Mudde (1995) notes the difficulty of producing a clear conceptual criteria of extreme right wing parties because of the varying ideological commitments of different parties. For instance, a contemporary contrast can be made between anti-federal groups in the US and authoritarian and strong-state parties in Central and Eastern Europe[3].

It is clear that there is a significant difference in the nature, activities and motivations of different extremist groups across Europe and the United States. For example, the National Front of Belguim; the National Democratic Party of Germany; and the UK's British National Party and National Front are categorised as "extremist sub-cultures" by Goodwin, Ramalingam and Briggs (2012). Whereas Belgium's Flemish Interest and France's Front National are the result of "nationalist foundations". Hungary's Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) and Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP), and Poland's Self-Defence and The League of Polish Families are parties founded by "post-communist authoritarian and militant politics". Their historical typology emphasizes both the cross-national variation in extreme right-wing politics as well as the fact that these movements are not new, and rather the product of evolved national identities. While these groups differ tremendously between countries, it is also useful to examine them as a common force, given they tend to exhibit similarities in their strategic, organisational and tactical approaches – and are increasingly sharing advice, pooling resources and collaborating to common aims[4].

The term 'extremism' itself has been controversial in certain national political contexts, particularly Germany following the implementation in 2011 of the *Extremismusklausel* (Extremism Clause), which requires all federally-funded associations to sign a declaration of allegiance to the German constitution and accept the same definition of extremism as the domestic intelligence agency (Verfassungsschutz) – a definition which has been heavily disputed by civil society organisations. The legal and constitutional frameworks around hate crime and extremist activities, which can be highly politicised, differ tremendously between countries, and help to propagate elite – if not public – understandings of these issues. For example, in Poland there is no mention of gender or

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[1] Albrecht (2013). 'Europe on the Far-Right: Right-Wing Extremists and Populists in the European Parliament': https://www.greens-efa.eu/files/doc/docs/692bf7d7d186ed633956d19255d3cf0b.pdf

[2] Norris, P. (2005) *Radical right: voters and parties in the electoral market.* Cambridge University Press.

[3] Mudde, C. (1995) Right-wing extremism analysed. *European Journal of Political Research*, 27(2), 203-224.

[4] Grumke (2006), Die transnationale Infrastruktur der extremistischen Rechten, p. 155

sexual orientation in hate crime laws, despite the fact that LGBT communities are among the most common victims of far-right harassment and violence[5].

The Changing Relationship between Far-Right Populism and Extremism

The increasing legitimation of far-right attitudes in mainstream political discourse, as part of a broader authoritarian and nationalistic surge channelled by far-right populist parties, has complicated the distinct relationship between far-right extremism and far-right political parties. Far-right parties have not always been successful in electoral terms, but have demonstrated substantial influence right across Europe and the United States in shaping public debate. Their candidates generally attract significant media attention, and they are underpinned by often highly sophisticated and persuasive digital campaigning strategies, which support the dissemination of their messages. As major parties previously concentrated around the centre ground begin to adopt the language and policies of far-right populist movements – whether expressly, or through allusions – the parameters of what constitutes 'extreme' views are shifting.

As citizens' trust in institutions has reached historical lows[6], the proliferation of a widespread anti-establishment sentiment, propagated by the far-right but also the far-left, has goaded appetite for disruptive political forces and 'radical' perspectives. A distinction can certainly still be made between 'unfavourable' views outside common standards of decency, and views that seek to intimidate, provoke or expel certain groups, or motivate towards criminal and violent behaviour. However, it certainly is the case that the proliferation and open visibility of previously 'fringe' perspectives on racial superiority, exclusionary language regarding immigrant populations, nationalistic rhetoric and ethnically based conceptions of national identity and border policies, are contributing to a more favourable and normalised public environment for far-right extremism that has been the case for some decades.

Immigration and Far-Right Ideologies

Both far-right extremists and populists need to construct clearly defined enemies in order to also define the nature of the citizens (generally, an ethnically 'white' native population) their activities seek to privilege, protect and defend. In this sense, there is a clear relationship between far-right extremism and both migration and terrorism. The roots of the animosity towards different migrant groups may be both cultural and economic in nature, and generally pertain to the notion that the previously dominant cultural group has been exposed to some form of perceived disadvantage or threat from

[5] Wąsik &Godzisz (2016). 'Hate Crime in Poland': http://interwencjaprawna.pl/wp-content/uploads/Hate-Crime-in-Poland-2012-2016.pdf
[6] Edelman Trust Barometer (2017). See: http://www.edelman.com/trust2017/

one or more minority groups. While very established and previously supreme nation states are prone to this mixture of scapegoated nostalgia – as evidenced in the call to Britain's 'return to Empire' and Trump's promise to 'Make America Great Again', as Segert observes, this feeling is also particularly acute in Eastern European countries where the nation's youthful fragility encourages hostility towards external forces[7].

The visibility and strength of far-right groups in Western Europe and the United States has risen concurrently in recent years with both the increasing levels of migration from predominantly Muslim nations, and the incidence of Islamic terrorism since the September 11 attacks in New York[8]. Muslim communities have become a focus point for xenophobic activities and hate crime, with spikes in violent and threatening behaviour consistently observed after terror incidents[9]. At the same time, a broader cultural disenfranchisement from particularly white working class communities in parts of Western Europe and the United States has fostered a more focused expression of far-right rhetoric and hate crimes towards more traditional minority targets, such as the Jewish, African American or Roma communities[10].

There is certainly evidence of a normalisation of some aspects of far-right ideologies, and research has reinforced the fact that far-right activists themselves are in many cases 'perfectly normal people, socially integrated, connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas'[11]. Far-right supporters are not always anti-social 'outsiders'; in some places they are well-integrated members of the community. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung *Mitte Study*, which examines attitudes towards both high-level and niche, specific ideologies and conspiracy theories on race, immigration and authoritarianism, in 2016 found that while there is a consistent but relatively small segment of German society with well-established far-right viewpoints, ethnic prejudices – particularly towards Muslims and Jews, and newly arrived migrants and refugees – are widespread across the population, and particularly acute in the East[12]. In the United Kingdom, the members of the English Defence League are primarily under 30 years of age[13].

That said, it is important to recognise where beliefs are grounded in extreme attitudes towards racial supremacy, and which might risk dangerous manifestations, and where they are more reflective of privately held discomfort, or fears based on personal experience or even defences of liberal beliefs. Recent Demos research in Europe found

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[7] Segert, Zur Lage des rechten Extremismus in Osteuropa und den Bedingungen seines zukünftigen Erfolgs, 2006, p. 67

[8] Ser (2016). Public Radio International. 'Data: Hate crimes against Muslims increased after 9/11':
https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-12/data-hate-crimes-against-muslims-increased-after-911
[9] Levin (2016), Centre for the Study of Hate Crime and Extremism, California State University:
http://csbs.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/SPECIAL%20STATUS%20REPORT%20Final%20Draft.pdf
[10] See ie. – (2016) 'American Jews Alarmed By Surge in Anti-Semitism': http://fortune.com/2016/11/17/anti-semitism-donald-trump-jews/
[11] B. Klandermans and N. Mayer. (2005) *Through the Magnifying Glass: Extreme Right Activists in Europe.* Routledge
[12] Zick et al. (2016). Right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany 2016. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung:
https://www.fes.de/de/gespaltene-mitte-rechtsextreme-einstellungen-2016/ (currently available in German only)

[13] Goodwin (2011) "Far-right extremism is much more than a political irritant.", The Guardian, 2 November 2011:
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/02/far-right-extremism-committeeradicalisation

that attitudes towards cultural and ethnic diversity are increasingly distinct from other aspects of social liberalism – particularly in countries such as France[14]. In particular, Islamic migration appears to attract specific concerns at a community level for its perceived incongruence with Western liberal values. In the UK, surveys confirm that large portions of the population (31 per cent) would feel 'bothered a lot' by the presence of an Islamic institution in their community, and 37 per cent of voters would be more likely to support a party that promised to reduce the numbers of Muslims in the country[15]. In a similar vein, in Hungary, over 80 per cent of recently surveyed young people would not sit next to a Roma child in the classroom[16].

While terrorism has increased the public hostility towards Muslim communities, concerns are clearly not contained to security fears, and yet there is a risk that broadly held negative public opinion towards these minority groups can both obscure and legitimize far-right activities that capitalize on terrorism as a motivating force - as evidenced in the doubling of hate crime incidents following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France[17]. Indeed, it is true that in the United States, right-wing extremism has taken more lives since 2002 (the year following the major September 11 attacks) than Islamic fundamentalist terrorism[18]. The Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security reported that, based on surveys of 382 law enforcement groups, "law enforcement agencies in the United States consider anti-government violent extremists, not radicalized Muslims, to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face"[19].

The public understanding of the threats posed by far-right extremism tends to be highly vulnerable to media influence – with journalists tending to depict far-right terrorism as singular, disconnected acts by mentally troubled individuals, rather than the manifestation of any kind of connected, or even coordinated, ideology. This is clearly evidenced in the reporting around the Anders Breivik massacre in 2011 – Norway's worst peacetime atrocity – and the murder of British Labour Party politician Jo Cox by Thomas Mair, portrayed as a 'lone wolf' attacker[20].

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[14] Gaston (2016). Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself?, Demos: https://www.demos.co.uk/project/nothing-to-fear-but-fear-itself/

[15] Goodwin and Evans (2012) *From voting to violence? Far-right extremism in Britain.* Hope not Hate and YouGov. London, UK.

[16] Interview, Hungary (September 2013).

[17] Chazan (2015). 'Hate crimes against Muslims and Jews soar in France'. The Telegraph: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/12075018/Hate-crimes-against-Muslims-and-Jews-soar-in-France.html

[18] Bergen et al (2017). 'Terrorism in America After 9/11', New America: https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/part-i-overview-terrorism-cases-2001-today/

[19] Kurzman & Shanzer (2015). 'Law Enforcement Assessment of the Violent Extremism Threat', Triangle Centre: https://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2013/06/Kurzman_Schanzer_Law_Enforcement_Assessment_of_the_Violent_Extremist_Threat_final.pdf

[20] Burke (2017). 'The myth of the 'lone wolf' terrorist', The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/mar/30/myth-lone-wolf-terrorist

Influence of Political Contexts on Far-Right Extremism

Political contexts play an important role in supporting, encouraging or sanctioning far-right behaviour – as do economic contexts and public policy-making. Over time, these factors can cumulatively build an environment more favourable to hate crime and far-right ideologies. For example, in the decade following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, the United Kingdom received large-scale migration from a number of Eastern European countries. While the vast majority of these migrants found gainful employment, in certain localities that had received concentrated in-flows, tensions began to simmer as a result of both cultural (ie. erosion of White British identity) and economic (ie. the perception of downward pressures on wages in certain trades) concerns held by some local residents. The Brexit Referendum campaign elevated these concerns to mainstream discourse, and emboldened far-right activists to begin more open campaigning in public spaces – as a result, the Home Office observed a 41 per cent increase in hate crime incidents in the month following the Referendum, compared to the same month a year earlier[21].

In the United States, far-right activities have been steadily increasing since the election of President Obama, with the Southern Poverty Law Centre reporting a significant spike in militia groups from 42 in 2008, to 276 in 2015. Similarly, the election of Donald Trump as President, and a campaign characterised by the visible presence of White Supremacist, nationalist and exclusionary nationalist ideologies, has ushered in a new period of racially motivated violence. The number of 'hate groups' has increased to a 30-year high, with anti-Muslim groups in particular jumping almost 200 per cent in two years[22]. That said, there is reason to believe that just as many far-right parties in Europe have been neutralised when their rhetoric and policies are adopted by mainstream parties, Trump and his team's espousal of patriot, nationalist and racist ideologies may somewhat diminish the active presence of vigilante groups across the United States.

In Poland, which has a well-established far-right movement, a far-right populist party - Law and Justice (PiS) – has been in power since 2015, offering an interesting example of the dynamics between far-right populism and extremism. The Law and Justice party's rise to power comes on the back of an exclusionary nationalist trajectory – between 2009 and 2012, Poland experienced a significant rise in hate crimes of 25 per cent[23]. It is true that the government itself has absorbed a significant proportion of the radical nationalist ideology[24], but it has also emboldened other far-right expressions in civic contexts: in 2016, it was estimated that the National Independence Day march – a major far-right event for seven years – attracted 75,000 supporters to the streets.

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[21] Tarling & Foy (2016). 'Hate crimes surge as racist abuse of foreigners in UK condemned', Financial Times: https://www.ft.com/content/d6c3c43e-3c66-11e6-8716-a4a71e8140b0

[22] Potok (2017). 'A Year in Hate Crime and Extremism', Southern Poverty Law Centre: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism

[23] Rebala (2013). 'Another dark Independence Day in Poland', Christian Science Monitor. 21 November, 2013: www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2013/1121/ Nationalists-arson-and-rioting-A

[24] Pankowski (2012), 'Right-Wing Extremism in Poland', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09409-20121029.pdf

Hungary has also seen a far-right government come to power, both somewhat neutralising the agency of extremist fringe groups[25], and also reflecting the increasing prominence of the anti-Roma and anti-refugee 'Jobbik' movement, which in 2014 became the strongest opposition party in the Hungarian Parliament[26]. The marginalisation of the Roma community in particular looks set to continue, as the lack of political will to support integration and community development measures for them undermines efforts to challenge myths or build tolerance; and the fact remains that the Roma remain overrepresented in crime and unemployment statistics[27].

The Spread and Fragmentation Far-Right Extremism

The growth of social media as a political information source and networking tool has been harnessed by both right-wing extremists and populists, who have been bolstered by its anonymity and ease of both facilitating meaningful new communities and sharing ideological material. In some ways, they have sought to mimic the tropes of traditional political and media organisations, creating websites to present their views as 'news media'; but they have also capitalised on the 'vigilante-ism' the internet can support, both through slow and steady efforts to influence social and political narratives, and through frenzied campaigns to discredit and destabilise mainstream political actors.

Demos' research into far-right activities on Facebook identified scores of dedicated pages across four European countries (UK, France, Italy, Hungary), with hundreds of thousands of posts in just one two-month period, contributed by tens of thousands of unique users[28]. Furthermore, Demos' social media analysis following terror attacks across Europe and during major political campaigns, including the European Referendum in Britain, demonstrated a clear spike in online hate speech on a staggering scale, directly linked to these events – suggesting the internet has created a new 'safe space' for expressions of violence and discrimination otherwise unseen in 'offline' behaviour[29].

The alt-right in the United States, and the 'New Right' in the UK, are increasingly agitating to influence not only public opinion but also political campaigns and electoral outcomes – even outside of their own nations. As Hope Not Hate's recent report noted, "That a young man sitting in a small flat in south London can create headlines in the US or a Belfast-based extremist can use the Hungarian capital as a base to influence politics

[25] Csomor (2015) ' Right-Wing Extremism in Hungary', Budapest Institute:
http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/Right-wing_extremism_in_Hungary_final.pdf
[26] Rona, D. (2014) *The Jobbik phenomenon. Reasons behind the strength of the Movement for a Better Hungary*. Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem.
[27] Dena Ringold, Mitchell A. Ornstein, Erika Wilkens. (2005) *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle.* The World Bank.
[28] Bartlett & Krasodomski-Jones (2016), Counter-Speech on Facebook, Demos:
https://www.demos.co.uk/project/counter-speech/
[29] Miller & Smith (2016), Anti-Islamic Content on Twitter, Demos: https://www.demos.co.uk/project/anti-islamic-content-on-twitter/

in central, eastern and southern Europe makes monitoring and countering such individuals groups very difficult"[30]. But even aside from the challenges presented by the shift to online mobilisation, part of the difficulty for national law enforcement agencies is the sheer scale and complexity of far-right groups, many of whom operate with very distinct ideological frameworks and unique behavioural patterns.

In America, white supremacists, anti-federalists, Christian identity groups, and anti-abortion crusaders each hold separate ideological underpinnings and invoke different, although often linked, motivations to sanction their activities. In Germany, there are 23,000 right-wing extremists currently known to authorities, of which 12,100 are classified as prone to violence[31]. A recent newspaper investigation has revealed that right-wing extremism is a "major concern" even within the German military, with 275 cases investigated within the past year alone. The ideology of the some far-right extremist groups in Germany is strongly linked to previous Nazi groups and holds neo-Nazi positions: anti-Semitism; xenophobia and racism; and the superiority of the German nation and the development of a so-called 'Fourth Reich'.

These narratives are now primarily being channelled through two major outlets – a street-based movement Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West), and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) right-wing populist party. Pegida has captured the support of a diverse mix of football hooligans and East Germans "who never really arrived in the Federal Republic and who now feel they have no voice", primarily from areas with negligible immigrant populations. The group has over 200,000 supporters on its Facebook page, and regularly stages protests throughout Germany that attract tens of thousands of their members[32]. At the same time, the AfD, which has set its sights on making electoral gains in the 2017 elections, has provided a more politically motivated forum for far-right views, seeking to influence through the establishment, rather than on the streets.

Government Responses

Recent government responses to far-right extremism have varied enormously across different national contexts, heavily influenced by the nature of governments in power, social cohesion and civil unrest, and also public opinion towards immigration. Where public attitudes are generally xenophobic towards certain groups or immigration in general, it can be difficult to harness political incentives to address far-right extremism[33]. It is also true that far-right extremists are frequently engaged in low-level acts of violence, "which cumulatively are having a serious impact on communities across

[30] Hope not Hate (2017), The State of Hate: http://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/HnH-2017-01-02-no30.pdf
[31] Deutsche Welle (2017), 'Germany's ever-growing right-wing extremist scene becomes more violent': http://www.dw.com/en/germanys-ever-growing-right-wing-extremist-scene-becomes-more-violent/a-37262596
[32] Economist (2017). 'The uprising of the decent': http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21638194-xenophobic-marches-continue-parts-germany-others-stand-up-uprising-decent
[33] Ramalingam (2014). 'Old Threat, New Approach: Tackling the Far Right Across Europe'. Institute of Strategic Dialogue: http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISD_New_Approach_Far_Right_Report.pdf

Europe but are less likely to make the national headlines", nor are they likely to "figure in traditional national security threat assessments"[34].

At the European level, resources have been designed over recent years to facilitate learning on the symptoms of extremism, like those developed by the EU-funded project Community Policing and the Prevention of Radicalisation (CoPPRa). In the UK, the Government has increased funding for research on victim communities and their needs – for example, through seeding the Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) project, which has sought to enhance the evidence base on anti-Muslim hate speech and crime in the UK through more innovative ways of reaching victim communities, like through social media.

In Hungary, the Government has previously led a 'securitised' approach to the far-right through its police and intelligence agencies, although viewing the issue primarily through a security lens "can lead to mistrust and suspicion between social services, civil society and security services" and under-investment in "broader preventative measures"[35]. Other European Governments have promoted a social integration-linked approach, widening the concept of integration beyond measures for ethnic minority communities, to those encouraging a society resilient to extremism and intolerance.

In Germany, local government actors responsible for integration issues, like the Commissioner for Integration and Migration of the city of Berlin, are also responsible for work to tackle far-right extremism. In Denmark and the UK, the same government departments are responsible for integration policy and the fight against far-right extremism; these approaches recognise the need for the 'majority' community to take an active role in defending and upholding standards of social cohesion and tolerance that facilitate integration and diminish the environment encouraging to far-right ideologies.

A summary paper was produced following this workshop, and can be accessed at demos.co.uk/project/far-right-extremism.

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[34] Briggs and Goodwin (2012). 'We need a better understanding of what drives right-wing extremist violence', British Politics and Policy (LSE): http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/right-wing-extremist-violence-briggs-goodwin/

[35] Ramalingam (2014).