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Europe in trouble? Concluding remarks on our blog series “Trouble on the Far Right”



This is the 27. and final article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

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by Maik Fielitz and Laura Lotte Laloire

Trouble on the far right has become troubling for Europe. Not only do right-wing motivated attacks occur regularly against Roma camps, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI people and Jewish institutions. At the same time, a xenophobic discourse on refugees has gained momentum in politics and society and further blurred the lines between far right agitation and mainstream politics. In order to classify these events adequately, far right activism should not just be regarded as a security issue that can be eliminated by force, but as a threat that threatens the foundations of open, democratic and pluralist societies. Hence, we should be aware that far right politics are neither a new nor an isolated phenomenon but often bank on existing cultures of (gender, competitive, nativist) domination in capitalist societies.¹

Certain developments have recently accelerated a radicalization of the political mainstream in terms of rhetoric, demands and policy outcomes and transformed the institutional landscape. The Slovakian parliamentary elections and the fateful [presidential elections in Austria](#) are central events during our 10-week blog series that prove the inherent dynamic. The right-wing government in Poland that has started removing fundamental rights and facilitated the [spread of nationalist values](#) is another example.

Contrary to the one-sided academic focus on elections, far right influence on European societies should be measured on three further levels: Massive street mobilizations epitomized by *Pegida* in Germany (and beyond) and the Italian *Stop Invasione* rallies, clandestine organizing such as the [British far right militants](#) and prospering relations between state authorities and far right movements, for example in [Turkey](#), testify a growing diversification of far right activism. These scenarios demand methodologically and theoretically

innovative perspectives. Our blog series *Trouble on the Far Right* has provided them with an international forum.

Local contention and far right mobilizations

As in previous historical examples, we find a rise of grassroots mobilizations accompanied by a strong increase of racist hate crimes and the success at the ballots in almost every European society. Hannah Arendt's allegory of the alliance between mob and elite comes to mind when violent activists march under the flag of burgeoning parties like the Italian *Lega Nord*.

This sometimes leads to strange encounters and new interactional patterns. It is noteworthy that personal loyalties play a crucial role on a local level. Especially in regions where refugees pass through, vigilante justice has been practiced exceedingly, for example in Hungary or [Bulgaria](#). As our authors [Liz Fekete](#), [Daniel Köhler](#) and [Oliver Saal](#) concluded, the step from local controversies about refugee shelters to paramilitarism or right-wing terrorism is not as big as is often presumed in the mainstream public discourse. At the same time, case studies such as about the Turkish *Gülen Movement* reveal that [violence as a strategy](#) of the far right is adaptable to the political circumstances and can be conducted in very ensconced or even clandestine ways, too.

Often neglected due to a focus on the larger frame, far right micro politics in form of entryism into youth subcultures, the infiltration of (un)civil society organizations and/or the subversion of direct democratic procedures will have to receive greater academic attention. Those grassroots dynamics reveal local strategies and practices that quickly connect with other seemingly isolated incidences to form a (self-)perceived flourishing movement far right entrepreneurs can rely on.

The dynamics of restructuration of the far right and the political mainstream

Comparing today's European far right with the third wave of right-wing extremism of the late 1980s and 90s², we witness tremendous change in the constellation, representation and acceptance of far right politics. Patterns of mobilization are being altered, including a more excessive use of social media for propaganda ends. Nevertheless, the issues of far right politics are constantly modified and renegotiated. Far beyond the focus on migration, the far right cultivates a [multifaceted appeal](#) to voters and is flexible to [align themselves to mainstream discourses](#). In order not to be blinded by these "[strategies of normalization](#)" and accordingly harmless rhetoric, this blog series has aimed to look at official as well as hidden agendas. Beyond local, temporary manifestations of far right activism, the contributions have dealt with long-term strategies that can stretch over decades and include the adaptation to changing realities. One aspect of this development are the professionalized political appearances that have contributed to the disappearance of a so called *cordon sanitaire* spanned by the political mainstream against far right influences.³

Schisms in far right activism have created dynamics of changing boundaries between different actors of the far right and also between them and representatives of the political order. Conflicting issues emerged and new forms of activism were negotiated among far right cadres while the interaction in the far right constantly oscillated between competition and collaboration. Traditionally, research on the far right has distinguished between radical and extremist right politics. However, with the rise of neo-fascist movement parties like [Golden Dawn in Greece](#) and New Right militant formations like the [Identitaires in France](#),

categorical distinctions are increasingly difficult to maintain. Hence, we could detect in several instances a mix of different, sometimes even contradictory, influences as the case of ideological and organizational hybridization of [CasaPound in Italy](#) illustrates. Similarly, this process fosters the diversified appearance of the far right with new actors springing up and others ceasing to exist. The case studies of [Ukraine](#), [United Kingdom](#), [Finland](#), [Romania](#), [Bulgaria](#) and [Latvia](#) shed light on this trend.

Repertoire variation and strategical re-framings of far right claims are hardly understandable without considering their contagious potential for the political centre.⁴ Building on wide-spread prejudices, authoritarian sympathies and disenchantment with liberal democracies, actors of the far right may function as catalysts of a general right-ward shift (*verrechtsing*) in European societies.⁵

Scrutinizing processes of transnational diffusion

Beyond the national consensus, far right actors interact on the transnational level; discourses and practices diffuse beyond borders. This includes, on the one hand, establishing new platforms and (in)formal cooperation in the European parliament as well as [on the streets](#). Besides traditional party coalitions in the EP, [new right actors](#) like the *Identitaires* constitute European projects that frame nationalist sentiments in European terms. On the other hand, more subtle processes of cross-fertilization take place and contribute to a collective experience of political situations. This means that what happens on the streets of Athens, for example, may serve as inspiration for local disputes in Great Britain; and electoral gains in Austria may have ramifications on the political situation in France. The increasing overlap of discourses and the mutual exchange of strategies and mobilization patterns in different places – though geographically far apart from each other – prove that we have to understand far right activism in international contexts.

Subsequently, several blog posts have referred to these international processes in far right structures and explained it in conjunction with local disputes and national mobilization. The translation of discourses and practices from one region to another remains understudied as much as the mechanisms behind the adapting and refusing of transnational tendencies.

More than connecting the dots – Academic research into far right trouble

Since the global economic crisis that was followed by discord in the political mainstream, alternatives to the market economy based liberal democracy have been demanded and sentiments of both hope and fear have been created among the European publics. Uncertain situations can trigger a power vacuum and provoke a questioning of the status quo. Thus, newly opened spaces are also filled by actors of the far right with their claim of offering something radically different.

In these times of turmoil, political positions are renegotiated and social sciences are decisive in their responsibility to guarantee a pluralist analysis of society and to prevent authoritarian twists. As [Tamir Bar-On has learned](#), far right actors also rely on (pseudo) academic knowledge production⁶, re-interpret existing approaches and adorn themselves with borrowed plumes of renowned philosophers or researchers to boost their message. Scholars, but also journalists and practitioners alike, need to consider how to handle far right intrusion when faced with the threat of being monopolized by far right actors. Hence, researchers may hardly be just neutral spectators or commenters, but increasingly need to justify their stance and position themselves in running debates on migration, citizenship, economy, etc.

To realize the blog series' aim of sharing scholarly research with a broad audience we have included some contributions that are more abstract, some less, texts in English as well as in German and scientist's but also [filmmakers](#)' or [educational workers](#)' perspectives. We would like to express our gratitude to all the contributors, readers and commenters who engaged with the contents of the blog series. Special thanks go to the critical and professional assistance of our colleagues and friends Andrea Jonjic and Martin Schmetz (in terms of the blog administration), Janusz Biene and Lisa Bogerts (in terms of assisting in the conceptualization of the blog series) and Maéva Clément, Philip Wallmeier and Ben Kamis (in terms of proof-reading). Since we prepare to publish some of the texts in a printed volume we are delighted to receive further feedback and comments. In conclusion, we are convinced that the exchange beyond borders, disciplines and academia provides new insights on critically intervening into far right polarization and scrutinizing the conditions the far right breeds.

1. Birgit Rommelspacher (1998): *Dominanzkultur. Texte zu Fremdheit und Macht*. Berlin: Orlanda-Frauenverl. [↗](#)
2. Klaus von Beyme (1988): *Right-wing extremism in Western Europe*. London: Cass. [↗](#)
3. William M. Downs (2002): How Effective Is The Cordon Sanitaire? Lessons from Efforts to Contain the Far Right in Belgium, France, Denmark and Norway. In: *Journal für Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung* 4 (1), 32-51 [↗](#)
4. Jens Rydgren (2005): Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family. In: *European Journal of Political Research* 44 (3), 413–437 and Aristotle Kallis (2013): “Far Right ‘Contagion’ or a Failing ‘Mainstream’? How Dangerous Ideas Cross Borders and Blur Boundaries”, in: *Democracy and Security* 9 (3), 221–46. [↗](#)
5. Cas Mudde (2013): Three decades of populist radical right parties in Western Europe. So what? In: *European Journal of Political Research* 52 (1), 1–19. [↗](#)
6. The *longa manus* of the far right into scholarly debates becomes obvious when looking at new right circles that operate in university contexts in France or the strong presence of Jobbik cadres in university positions in the case of Hungary. [↗](#)

Tags: [europe](#), [Far-right politics](#), [hate crimes](#), [nationalism](#), [neo-fascism](#), [right-wing extremism](#), [xenophobia](#)

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