

Raising Awareness of the Problem



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

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[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

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Introduction

Some of the key challenges facing front-line professionals are made more difficult by the wider climate on issues surrounding far-right extremism, diversity and race relations. Practitioners are often pushing against the grain in countries where hostility and prejudice against particular minority groups are widespread. There are, however, a number of actions front-line professionals are taking to alter the way both the general public and governments engage with this issue.

In some countries, limited awareness among the general public of far-right extremism is a concern. This includes limited awareness about the scale of the threat of violence, but also about what far-right extremists look like today. The general public can be a powerful force in prevention and intervention efforts, and low public awareness can hinder communities from self-regulating far-right extremism where possible.

Key approaches

1. Document the problem

Aims to improve public information about far-right extremism and perpetrators. This includes gathering and presenting the facts on far-right extremism and trends, and monitoring violence and hate speech.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Athena Institute, Hungary

Aims/Objectives:

To build a European-wide information database on extremist groups and actions.

Description/Activities:

Modelled after the U.S. Southern Poverty Law Center, the Athena Institute conducts several important campaigns, but the most important is its monitoring database of extremist groups and their activities. Athena has created interactive online maps, with individual country profiles, trends in cities and across borders, and overviews of extremist groups, their supposed levels of support, and their leaders (when known). The purpose of this monitoring is to serve as a tool for the media, government and the general public. As a group independent of government funding, the Athena Institute is able to act in a bold and honest manner, even noting the importance and threat of far-right groups in the Hungarian government. It also provides highly detailed data on far-right extremist groups in Hungary, noting eight major groups, their ideologies and probable behaviours.

2. Challenge misinformation

Aims to disrupt stereotypes about what far-right extremists look like today. The popular conception of a far-right extremist is an outdated one, generally based on visions of a male skinhead, anti-social, and in bomber jackets and boots, often perpetuated by mainstream media. Some non-government organisations (NGOs), are actively working with police and the media to disrupt their conceptions of far-right extremists.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, Expert Center on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism, Germany

Aims/Objectives:

Runs projects and campaigns to directly support victims, promote alternative youth cultures and networks to weaken neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. This Expert Center specifically focuses on raising awareness of the role of women in right-wing extremist groups.

Description/Activities:

The Foundation houses Germany's strongest expertise on gender in the far right scene. Right-wing extremism in Germany continues to be perceived as predominantly a 'male problem,' with the stereotype prevailing of white women as peaceful and non-violent. The Expert Center promotes a gender-sensitive approach in all strategies and actions to prevent right-wing extremism. The Expert Center has provided training sessions in kindergarten and pre-schools across Germany on this issue, and has started a network of teachers, principals and heads of kindergartens who wish for further support to deal with this issue. They have also developed training for leaders of sports associations, youth clubs and other community centres. They have initiated discussions with journalists and schools of journalism in an attempt to influence media coverage to address the gender-specific failures in reporting on right-wing extremism.

3. Changing public opinion on diversity

Aims to change stereotypes about particular minority groups targeted by the far right. In some countries, like Hungary, it remains difficult to mobilise the general public on tolerance to diversity. This also rings true in countries that easily mobilise against racism, but have high levels of intolerance towards particular groups like Muslim communities, as in the UK, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. These initiatives aim to mainstream positive stories about these groups, and change public perceptions by promoting positive role models from these backgrounds.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Syndrom, People Against Racism (PAR), Slovakia

Aims/Objectives:

Runs campaigns to combat racism, discrimination, anti-Semitism and antiziganism in Slovakia, ranging from educational programmes to billboard and TV campaigns.

Description/Activities:

PAR ran a national campaign called 'Syndrom' which presents stories of Roma who disrupt the common stereotypes of Roma in Slovak society, including successful teachers, lawyers and doctors. The campaign aimed to challenge popular stereotypes about Roma communities. The campaign profiled images and personal testimonies of several successful and inspirational professionals of Roma background, and invited the viewers to question their assumptions about Roma people. The website included split images of individuals, stating, for example 'One of them is a teacher – A teacher and Roma. Excluded? Do you also have a syndrom?' PAR has been successful in mainstreaming its publicity, even partnering with major newspapers to include their campaign images and reach wider audiences.

Getting it right

Getting the right timing

In countries where society poses a major hindrance to front-line professionals' work, as in Hungary, the focus should be on early promotion of human rights and education among young people. However, most countries will need strategies that target adults, and that respond quickly to changes in the local or national situation. The far right is particularly adept at using and abusing current affairs and major media headlines to promote their cause. Front-line professionals need to respond as quickly and with evocative messages in the immediate aftermath of national events. Though messages need to appeal to the emotions, it is important to remain calm in the face of the upsetting rhetoric of the far right. Front-line professionals can also prepare the basic tenants and principles of a communications strategy in advance of events, to be ready for crisis situations.

Good use of creative methods

Though the far right is particularly good at dissemination of emotional rhetoric without the facts, simply disseminating facts is unlikely to have the desired impact. Visualising information and data can ensure it reaches a wider audience. PAR runs a campaign called HateMeToo, which has developed visually appealing infographics to deliver key facts on Roma and immigrant groups in Slovakia. Through a partnership with a major newspaper, these infographics have been disseminated in the daily newspaper. Celebrities and other leaders can also be instrumental in getting racism and far-right extremism on the radar. Organisations like Never Again Association organise concerts and massive public events with celebrities professing their dedication to the cause.

Where to do this

Similar to alternative and counter-narratives, initiatives to change public attitudes are more likely to have an impact if placed in the mediums that those who hold those attitudes might see. Front-line professionals have developed partnerships with major newspapers to ensure they are given a space to publicise their perspectives.

Making good use of existing data and filling gaps

In some cases, there is extensive information out there on the far right, which simply needs to be coordinated. German NGO Apabiz, for example, is gathering this information to develop an online map called *Rechtes Land* for the general public to key in their postal code to see a snapshot of far-right extremist crimes and activity ongoing in their local areas.

Front-line professionals can also identify gaps where less data is available. For example, Apabiz also initiated a project to improve photo documentation of the far right, as the police were preventing photography at far right events to limit public visibility. Apabiz filled a gap by gathering photos of the modern far right in Germany.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

