

Pushing Public Agencies to Act



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](#)



Pushing public agencies to act

Introduction

Where municipalities have a high level of autonomy, there have been considerable challenges to push them to recognise the problem and devote resources to tackling far-right extremism. In some countries, there are even challenges convincing those tasked with prevention of extremism that it is a legitimate problem. Local government often has to be convinced they have something to gain from tackling a problem of far-right extremism in a community.

Governments are often operating with narrow definitions of extremism, and fail to see them as anything other than neo-Nazis and skinheads. In Slovakia, police don't include anti-Roma groups as far right, and in the Netherlands government doesn't include anti-Islam groups in their definitions of far-right extremism. In some contexts, like Germany and Hungary, groups countering the far right struggle with government labelling them as extremist. This is complicated by the fact that in some places, anti-fascist activists have engaged in violent methods to tackle far-right extremism, which undermines the work of front-line professionals.

Key approaches

1. Monitoring

Aims to monitor how public agencies tackle the far right and handle both high-profile and lower-profile cases. This includes building an evidence base on government and police oversights or misconduct and the impact of these failures.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU), Hungary

Aims/Objectives:

To enable and empower Roma communities, raise intra-community awareness of fundamental human rights, and shape public opinion to reduce discrimination against Roma people.

Description/Activities:

Established in 1994, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) is a human rights watchdog working to strengthen civil society and the rule of law in Hungary. They monitor government statements and rhetoric regarding the activities of the far right, to record when basic human rights legislation is contravened. The programme aims to empower Roma communities and activists by: reversing the process of criminalisation of poverty; utilising effective communication and campaigning to shift opinions against prejudices and discrimination; and drawing attention to 'double standards' within law enforcement, administrative authorities and the judiciary.

HCLU have used video testimony from the victims of racist attacks to raise awareness of hate crime and improve societal understanding of the problem. They also use video testimony as material for the judiciary to use as evidence during legal proceedings. They maintain a regular and visible media presence using visual testimony, video messages and blog posts.

Particular emphasis is placed on monitoring legislation and law enforcement measures which directly affect Roma communities.

2. Policy advocacy or political advocacy

Aims to lobby government to raise far-right extremism onto the political agenda, and push government to act where it is not. This includes fighting for justice in the aftermath of high-impact cases, like the National Socialist Underground murders in Germany.

3. Mobilising the public

Aims to raise public interest in an issue, and de-facto garner the attention of political leaders. If the community is concerned, politicians have to act.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Communication Center X (XKK), 'Their Skin Was Their Only Sin,' Hungary

Aims/Objectives:

Aims to use methods of communication to generate positive changes in social and democratic issues. XKK represents the communication interests of the Roma community during crisis periods.

Description/Activities:

In Hungary in 2008 and 2009, a series of ethnic-related attacks took place against Roma people, leaving six dead and many severely injured. XKK

made four short moving films to commemorate this, involving emotive visuals of individuals recounting the attacks with projections of violence flashing over them. The films openly comment on the failures of the state and the police surrounding the murders. XKK launched a campaign

disseminated on Facebook and in the Hungarian mainstream media. The campaign was carried out in three spheres: Hungarian and international media, Facebook, and offline events; XKK also launched a Virtual Commemoration Campaign. They asked companies, churches, and NGOs to take an active role in remembering the victims by posting and sharing the films on their web and social media sites. The campaign won numerous awards and reached over 1.2 million people, and the general public reacted.

Getting it right

How to do it

It is best to start advocating where there is some buy-in, whether this is at the national government or local government level. In some cases targeting politicians is the best approach; at other times working with policymakers directly will be the most useful approach. Carefully consider the end goals to decide on an appropriate response. Advocating for change from the top can be most effective. This is particularly relevant when working with hierarchical institutions like the police, but also when working with civil servants.

Working within government rather than outside it

Though there are often disagreements between government and civil society when it comes to dealing with far right extremism, practitioners can in some cases have a greater impact by working within the confines of the system, using the language government uses. Whether the compromise is worth making will depend on the context, but those that choose not to work within these constraints can find themselves cut out of decision making circles. It can also be important to involve governments in design of the programme, to provide a sense of ownership.

Creative use of video and social media

Videos distributed via social media can be used to lobby governments for victim justice. In addition to the films distributed by Communications

Center X, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union has published videos of witnesses' testimonies in several controversial hate crime cases to lobby the government for action.

When to do it

It is important to harness the right moment, particularly during media frenzies or following traumatic incidences. These can be difficult moments for those working closest to the issue, but these are the moments when governments are pushed to respond and take action.

Transparency and evidence

Front-line professionals will need to work hard to evidence their methodologies, and will need to be very methodical and transparent with numbers. Particularly those organisations protecting the interests of minority communities that are the victims of prejudice among the wider public, like Muslims or Roma communities, these statistics will be under harder scrutiny by those opposing them. Front-line professionals should aim to partner with academic institutions, which can be vital for validation of evidence, and producing quantitative evidence. Human testimonies can be evidence too. When confronted by media or other criticism about evidence, practitioners should stick to the script, and stand their ground – if the evidence is sound, there is nothing to be worried about.

Lead by example

Even when the problem of far-right extremism has been acknowledged, questions often remain concerning who is responsible, and at which point interventions should be made by each actor. Local government may be scared to engage directly with the far right. Civil society can train up authorities on how to work with far-right extremists. For example, Cultures Interactive in Germany gives authorities guidelines and vocational training on how to work with young right-wing extremists.

Pushing for long-term structural changes

Governments may be inhibited by structural discrimination or racism. Though there is a broad field of activists specifically tackling institutional

discrimination, working to monitor attitudes and get more minorities into key sectors, it is important for this to remain part of the discussion when dealing with far-right extremism. This has certainly come to the forefront in the aftermath of the National Socialist Underground murders and the Parliamentary Inquiry that followed along with its report published in August 2013. In 2014, the co-plaintiffs issued a public statement noting the absence of recognition for institutional racism and how it impacted the case and the treatment of the victims' families.

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.

