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WHITE NATIONALISTS IN EUROPE LOVED TRUMP'S CHARLOTTESVILLE RESPONSE

By Tim Hume
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Few groups have enjoyed Donald Trump's rise to the White House more than Europe's far-right white nationalists, who have forged closer links with like-minded groups in the U.S. and benefited from Trump's perceived sympathy for strands of their radical politics.

But the right-wing terror attack in Charlottesville — and Trump's equivocating response, saying there were "very fine people on both sides" — has thrown up a paradoxical problem for a movement that believes it is having its moment. Charlottesville has given the radical right the international attention it craves (including from the president of the United States), while also nakedly exposing the ugliness of its beliefs.

"Obviously, this was a PR disaster," said Daniel Friberg, a prominent figure in the Swedish radical right identitarian movement, who attended the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville with a group of friends, including American radical-right leader Richard Spencer. Others in European far-right networks had voiced similar concerns about the "bad optics" from the event, he said.

"I saw a tremendous amount of violence," said Friberg. "It was not at all what I've ever experienced in Europe." But instead of condemning his fellow marchers, Friberg sought to shift the blame for the violence to left-wing protesters and the authorities.

Like Spencer, with whom he co-edits a fringe right-wing website, Friberg is a clean-cut, smooth-talking far-right activist who describes himself as an identitarian. The French-originated ideology, increasingly influential among European far-right youth, argues for the preservation of a white or European identity, while, in theory, attempting to decouple from the overt racism, violence, and fascist symbolism that have been a barrier to the far-right's political acceptability in post-war Europe. He sees "identitarian" and "alt-right" as largely synonymous terms.

But this image-sensitive, radical-right-wing group's association with Charlottesville — now indelibly linked around the world to a neo-Nazi terror attack, and the sight of crowds of angry protesters chanting "Jews will not replace us" — has given the lie to identitarian claims of respectability. That revelation has traveled across the Atlantic.

"The pictures from Charlottesville speak very loudly," said Daniel Wiklander, editor-in-chief of Expo, the publication of a Swedish anti-racism foundation, who said there had been a muted reception from the European far-right to the events in Charlottesville due to the potential damage it has done to the movement's political progress.

He said he was surprised that the members of the European identitarian movement, which had been trying to build respectability as a viable political brand, "thought it was a good idea to stand shoulder to shoulder with these open Nazis."

"They want to create a focal point somewhere where the conflict can intensify — but if that doesn't attract potential recruits, then what good is it? Because this is certain just to wake up a lot of people who are repelled by what they're doing," he said.

“Now all people are going to think of is this 32-year-old woman run over by a lunatic.”

Friberg said he was “surprised” and “a bit disappointed” to see swastikas in Charlottesville, and that it was a mistake that neo-Nazi groups were allowed to participate in the march. He said he wouldn’t make such a mistake at any event he was involved with in Europe.

“To identify as a Klan member or a neo-Nazi in contemporary society, this is sort of live-action role-playing,” he said. “It means you’re not serious about your politics.”

As Europe’s far-right picks over the potential impact of Charlottesville on their movement, self-reflection appears in short supply. Like Friberg, many throughout Europe’s far-right so far have largely sought to deflect blame for the fiasco by pinning the violence on left-wing protesters.

In Poland, where a more unreconstructed form of ultranationalism has been ascendant in recent years, Jacek Miedlar, a fiery far-right activist and former priest posted an online rant in which he blamed the violence on police, anti-racism protesters and, ultimately, George Soros, who he accused of funding Black Lives Matter.

Rafal Pankowski, of Polish anti-racist organization Never Again, said American politics had gained a particular resonance in Poland after Trump’s visit in July, which was viewed as a major win for Poland’s staunchly anti-Muslim ultranationalists. Appearing in Warsaw before a crowd that included right-wing activists from around the country, and in which a Confederate flag was waved, Trump delivered a speech high on nativist rhetoric, speaking of God, country and a clash of civilizations. “They consider it a big success, the way he seems to endorse the Polish nationalist narrative,” Pankowski told VICE News.

In Germany, an article featured on the German-language fringe-right site Blaue Narzisse sought to frame Charlottesville as a win for the far-right by hailing the way they were able to translate an online movement into large crowds on the streets, blaming the violence on police and antifascists, and accusing the press of “inventing” a neo-Nazi terror attack. One comment noted the regrettable presence of the Ku Klux Klan at the event, which “clouds the picture.”

“They don’t want to be equated with the openly neo-Nazi and racist protesters,” said Christian Weissgerber, a former neo-Nazi turned anti-racism activist, who described the article as “a rather representative stance for most of the militant identitarians and alt-right in Germany and Austria.”

The far-right’s misstep in Charlottesville may ultimately have been a result of hubris; in its wake, the movement may adopt a more cautious approach to avoid a repeat of such damaging scenes, said Wiklander.

He said the European far-right had been emboldened by Trump’s victory, and had successfully adopted many of the tactics of the U.S. “alt-right” — gaining online momentum through trolling the left and “triggering” liberals by pointing out the perceived hypocrisies of identity politics.

“It’s like Trump’s victory made these people bolder,” Wiklander said. “They have the feeling of support from the government — that their politics are with the times.”

That feeling was reinforced Tuesday evening, when the President of the United States threw them a lifeline amid a storm of international condemnation of the movement by saying there were “very fine people on both sides” in Charlottesville, and that the “alt-left” also shared in the blame.

Poland’s ultranationalist groups welcomed Trump’s statement, said Pankowski. Krzysztof Bosak, a deputy leader of the far-right National Movement, even went so far as to slam Republican politicians John McCain and Mitt Romney on Twitter for their “disgusting treason” in criticizing Trump’s account of the violence. “They stood on the side of violent antifa and against the president,” he wrote.

Friberg, too, appeared validated, and said he was happy to hear the denunciation of the left from Trump – a politician he credits with having helped Europe's identitarians in their goal of moving what was considered politically acceptable in the debate on immigration.

"I was happy that he did that (blamed the left), because he at least shifted the narrative a little bit in the right direction," he said.

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