

## International Seminar on Right-Wing Extremism

Monday 23 May 2017, central London

### Opening and Introduction

On Tuesday 23 May, Demos think tank joined with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung to host a high-level international seminar on far-right extremism in London, with a particular focus on its complex and changing relationship with the rising prominence of far-right populism. The event was held against the backdrop of the Islamic terror attack in Manchester the previous evening, which provided a poignant reminder of the culture of insecurity plaguing both Europe and the United States – which profoundly influences our political environments, our social cohesion and the attitudes of citizens. All participants acknowledged that these kinds of incidents are a profoundly galvanizing force for the groups that would be a focus of the discussion, and the importance of recognising that far-right extremism is one of a multitude of radical, ideologically motivated threats our societies are facing at the present time.

### Presentation and Question and Answer with Jamie Bartlett

The event opened with a short presentation from Jamie Bartlett, the Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos and the author of *The Dark Net*, to impart some insights gained through the development of his new book, *Radicals*, which provides a snapshot of radical movements around the world. Mr Bartlett explained how he has observed an astonishing transformation in many Western far-right movements over the past decade, from “up-starts, green-faced movements, to brilliant internet users and innovators on Facebook long before anybody else, to becoming defenders of Western secular values, as they often call themselves, and indeed serious political and electoral force”.

One important characteristic he has witnessed first-hand through his immersive research methods, including many months spent alongside Tommy Robinson – the former leader of the English Defence League – is that many far-right groups in particular have a strong social underpinning to their movements. In coming together and forming friendships, they have “somehow managed to achieve that almost impossible to describe alchemy {common to} a counter-culture”, and that recognising this nature helps to explain some of their appeal amongst different demographic groups.

Reflecting on the Manchester attacks, Mr Bartlett explained how our restrained collective response to these kinds of events will be used as further evidence of “utter cowardice” and a lack of honesty on the part of the mainstream political establishment, and a significant vindication of their viewpoints. That said, Mr Bartlett was keen to stress that he does not consider that far-right populist or radical movements will continue to dominate

political thought, and that the next anti-establishment movements may well come from other parts of the political spectrum – or fall outside of our common conceptions of the traditional Left-Right axis.

*“When I look at the future challenges facing modern society, particularly technological change, notably automation, which is going to have a serious effect on jobs, plus climate change, plus significant movements of people, plus a fiscal crunch, all coming together in around 10-20 years, I do not see that the policies of the populist right are going to provide any long-term solutions” he said. Nonetheless, he noted that until this confluence of change comes together, there is likely to be a “continued spiral of frustration at broken promises”.*

During a short question and answer session, Mr Bartlett was asked by a representative from the Mayor of London’s office about the kinds of change that far-right extremists were seeking in society, to which he responded that many struggled to articulate a clear answer beyond their inherent desire for abstract action. “Part of the reason populism is so popular is that there isn’t ever really anything to be done”, he said.

A representative from Wilton Park asked what the moderate British response should be to those seeking to leverage incidents like Manchester for their own gain, to which Mr Bartlett responded that it’s important to acknowledge where the ‘mainstream’ have also perhaps unwittingly contributed to stoking far-right sentiment, through “adoping too much of a sneering attitude” without listening to their concerns. Nonetheless, he feels that social media has “matured” over the past year and there is an increasing swiftness to the response to fake news and manipulation, and a more forceful suite of counter-speech messages against those that seek to use these events to whip up support for divisive principles.

When asked by a representative from Moonshot CVE about the restrictions of the ‘Westminster bubble’, Mr Bartlett contested that the accusation of being out of touch or elitists is a simple way to silence voices, and that, “I think we’re actually getting towards the point at which we are actually afraid of speaking our mind because we might be accused of being elitist”. He also pointed out that extremists live in their own ‘bubbles’, so have no right to be throwing stones.

In conclusion, Mr Bartlett stressed that we could all benefit from holding a broader church in the opinions we access, and that there is much to be learned from immersing oneself in a far-right echo chamber for a few days, to help to understand the mood of anger and rage and violence that can stem from being perpetually surrounded by such negative material.

## Panel Presentations

Demos and FES were privileged to be joined by an outstanding panel of international representatives from the frontline in analysing and countering right-wing extremism, representing the United States, Hungary, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom.

The first speaker was **Heidi Beirich from the Southern Poverty Law Centre**, the leading institute in America specializing in tracking and exposing the activities of far-right hate groups.

She outlined the situation in the United States, where the election of President Trump has “brought hate into the mainstream”. She explained that the phenomena behind his election has been building over many years, and that those involved in monitoring the far-right would not have been surprised by the result in November. Fundamentally, she believes there has been a backlash from some parts of America to the country’s increasing diversity, which has only accelerated under President Obama and as the long tail of the global financial crisis has set in. What is so particularly disturbing about these recent developments is that it signals a new phase in American politics – which had previously punished those who were outwardly racist or connected to White Supremacist groups.

Empirically, the statistics are gravely concerning – the White Supremacist movement is larger in scale than it has ever been, and is galvanized by an online presence that has doubled in the past year alone. Ms Beirich noted that hate crimes are increasing significantly, with 900 incidents in the first 10 days of Trump’s presidency alone – a fifth of which were allegedly committed in his name. For Ms Beirich, this drastically challenges the narrative that the United States had adopted since the time of Martin Luther-King, that society was become more united and that there is a positive arc of justice.

The second speaker was **Mike Whine from the Community Security Trust** in the UK, who posited the notion that perhaps far-right extremists are becoming less visible in Britain, because counter-terror and enforcement practices were beginning to take hold. Acknowledging that the Government’s flagship Prevent programme now focuses on a large number of far-right extremists, as well as Islamic extremists, he contested that the Government appears to appreciate the threat they can pose to society. But we should not be complacent, he argued, because some of the far-right plots that have been thwarted are highly sophisticated in nature, and Government forces are increasingly having to up their game.

The situation appears to be reflected in continental Europe as well, where the institutions are investing significant resources in countering extremism – and particularly in engaging civil society, who are on the frontline, and ensuring training protocols are put in place to build understanding and enhance capacity.

**Commented [MS1]:** We would consider UK as part of Europe. Please let us know your thoughts.



The third speaker was **Professor Rafal Pankowski of the Never Again Association in Poland**. He began by explaining that Poland was once a tremendously diverse country, but today, the Polish Government has clearly stated its position as rejecting multiculturalism and cultural diversity in general, and it is now one of the most homogenous societies in Europe. And yet, he explained, the country is experiencing a high number of hate crimes and there is a hostile attitude towards difference. Prof. Pankowski highlighted a particularly concerning trend in the apparent intolerance of young people, who are hardening against multicultural values. “There was a widespread assumption among the liberal elite, especially in the 1990s, that people raised in the new democratic Poland would be automatically more tolerant than their parents, but it didn’t happen,” he said, noting that a recent opinion poll demonstrated that the young are less supportive of admitting refugees to the EU than the older generations.

While many outside commentators focus on the far-right government in power in Poland, Prof. Pankowski drew attention to the success of Kukiz, another, even more radical political movement in the Polish Parliament – led by a former rock musician, who openly expresses anti-Semitic views. His popularity is particularly acute amongst the young and, disturbingly, amongst the Polish expats in Britain – who awarded his party the largest number of votes in the most recent national elections, followed by the now-ruling party, and the mainstream party was awarded the smallest percentage. This appears to reflect a broader trend in Britain, whereby the British Polish community is becoming increasingly tolerable of far-right ideologies.

The fourth speaker was **Professor Thomas Grumke from the University of Applied Science of Public Administration North Rhine-Westphalia**, who outlined the three crises in Western society he sees as mobilizing right-wing extremists: the crises of distribution, representation and identity. In addition to these phenomena, Prof. Grumke identifies a shift towards what he describes as ‘distant democracy’ – whereby political institutions are technically working but in a shallow capacity. Within this context, as he sees the situation in Germany, the far-right movements are confined to the fringes of society, and racism is far from acceptable in the mainstream. However, he also highlights a trend toward an ‘uncivil society’, with cleavages around immigration stoking fires of discord within German communities and forming new division lines – particularly between the East and the West. Prof. Grumke believes that opposition to immigration is not always a rational reaction, and yet liberals continue to pursue responses focusing on countering emotions with statistics.

The final speaker was **Bulcsú Hunyadi from the Political Capital Institute**, who reported on the situation in Hungary, where a far-right populist Government is in power, led by Viktor Orban, who believes “he is the only mainstream politician in the EU who dares to say what others won’t”. Dr Hunyadi pointed out that the second largest party in the Parliament is also a right-wing populist movement, and while it has distanced itself from its previous focus on anti-Semitism, it remains focused on opposition to migrants and

refugees. One of the most worrying developments in Hungary is its increasing status as a haven for far-right dissidents from other countries, with Orban having “offered sanctuary to these individuals professing anger at the liberal Western political and social consensus”. Dr Hunyadi believes the lack of political agreement against the far-right – and indeed, with two major parties promoting these ideas – makes it difficult to turn the tide of hardening public opinion towards immigration, who are being fed “divisive and exclusionary narratives”.

## Questions and Answer Session

### Have we lost the battle of making a positive case for immigration and diversity?

Ms Beirich responded that she believes the United States has a false history as a melting pot, a nation of immigrants. While its economic benefits mean the facts stand on the side of immigration, opposition to immigration is not necessarily rational.

*“When you’re talking to anti-immigrant folks in the United States, they have a vision of society rooted in a fake past, from the 1950s. Arguments for multiculturalism do not cut through with these people – it’s a battle of narratives. In places like New York, they have seen and accepted a cosmopolitan future, but there are plenty of battleground areas where there is a desire to return to the past.”*

### Angela Merkel has been held up as someone who has shown moral leadership on the issue of immigration – how inclusive was this vision?

Prof. Grumke explained that the view of Merkel’s ‘moral leadership’ is largely a narrative from outside of Germany; there, he believes the perspective of citizens is that the Chancellor is a humble, no-nonsense politician without hubris or corruption. Much of Merkel’s appeal, he contested, probably lies in the fact that so many other politicians have demonstrated relatively poor leadership.

### How has the migration crisis played out in Poland?

Prof. Pankowski said the way the migration crisis manifested in Poland provides a chilling example of “how easy it is to influence the public agenda without any link to reality”. The country was largely unaffected by the large inflows of migrants to the European continent, and yet it became a primary topic during the election campaign and was decisive in propelling the far-right government to power. The Polish Prime Minister is unafraid of spinning lies to maintain his grip on power, meaning there is now “a big distance between political discourse and fact”.

### What is the role of civil society in defending human rights?

Mike Whine explained that civil society has been instrumental in monitoring hate crime, filling in knowledge and monitoring gaps that absconded governments from taking action

against extremists. But he is also hopeful that European and national legislation appears to be moving in an encouraging direction focusing on the far-right, “putting the needs of victims at the heart of the criminal justice system”. He feels this presents a unique opportunity for civil society to have an active voice in influencing public policy.

Ms Beirich said that the majority of political movements and progress on civil rights has been driven from the bottom up in America, meaning despite the particularly troubling situation under President Trump, she is buoyed by the country’s “vibrant advocacy movement” – who are willing to donate time and resources to defend their values.

### **Has there been a resurgence in anti-Semitic attitudes?**

Mike Whine, whose organization focuses on anti-Semitism, said one of the fundamental issues is that anti-Semitism is being weaponised by Islamic fundamentalists and remains central to their ideologies. For this reason, these attitudes are being widely spread and are becoming increasingly prominent in terror plots and the propaganda that is being widely disseminated online. For enforcement officers, there is a challenge because there seems to be ambiguity about what constitutes anti-Semitism, and the distinction between valid criticisms of Israel and believing it doesn’t have a right to exist. While suggested it was time for a new definition of anti-Semitism, which can provide clear parameters in which enforcement could operate.

Prof. Grumke noted that anti-Semitism isn’t a large part of the political culture in Germany, with the far-right largely preoccupied by anti-Islamic sentiment.

By contrast, Professor Pankowski said that anti-Semitism in Poland remains a persistent problem, even though the Jewish population is extremely small. The vast majority of attacks on the community are therefore directed at monuments, synagogues and other symbolic buildings.

Dr Hunyadi agreed that anti-Semitism is also a problem in Hungary, as the Jewish community is seen as a symbol of liberal values, and there is a disturbing trend towards a narrative of a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ propagated by members of the Hungarian government.

### **What is being done at the community level to respond to the increasing incidence of hate crimes?**

Mike Whine said that, at the behest of the Foreign Office, the Community Services Trust has been working to train Polish community organisations in the UK on hate crimes – particularly responding to the surge in incidents after the Brexit vote.

Ms Beirich noted that hate crimes are particularly pernicious because their impacts make entire communities fearful. “After Trump became elected,” she said. “All of the groups that he had singled out during the campaign were terrified of attack. There were attacks

in wealthy neighbourhoods, threats against community centres, random violence in the street – all of these contributed to a sense of fear.”

Prof. Grumke said that local responses are critical – not just in defending communities against hate crimes, but also in promoting the smooth integration of migrants and ensuring they can become active members of society.

### **Where should we be directing our efforts to respond to far-right extremism?**

Ms Beirich said that managing extremism online is going to be crucial – it has become a breeding ground for hate, educating white supremacists and helping them to mobilise.

Mr Whine said it is important to remember that children are not born hateful, but rather absorb these attitudes from their environment. We need to focus on parenting, the school curriculum, and also encouraging inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue.

Prof. Pankowski added there is probably a role for civil society and other types of non-formal learning, as these can be more effective at reaching young people.

Prof. Grumke said “we need to put life back into democracy – which has become too institutionalized”. He feels that young people are becoming disengaged from democratic practices and that there is a worrying trend where they are turning away from its principles.

Dr Hunyadi said that there is a need to defend the centre ground in politics, and to ensure that parties that represent these values are able to remain strong.

### **Conclusion**

This discussion provided a snapshot of some of the distinct national manifestations of far-right extremism, and highlighted a mixed picture of successes and set-backs towards challenging the influence and spread of its ideologies.

While there was consensus that security monitoring and enforcement agencies at both national and European level are becoming more attuned to the severity of the threat posed by far-right extremism, the growth of social media as a platform for mobilizing groups and disseminating extremist messages poses a profound new challenge for the containment of these pernicious narratives. The internet is also, increasingly, enabling inter-state communication between these groups, enabling them to build global followings, pool resources and learn from the progress and impact of international actors.

Similarly, while there appears to have been a shift in public attitudes in some countries against certain types of discriminatory and racist narratives, such as anti-Semitism, the progress in these areas has been overshadowed by the development of new forms of exclusionary rhetoric – particularly towards Muslim communities. These viewpoints have also been emboldened amongst far-right groups by the support of political leaders –

particularly in the examples of Hungary, Poland and the United States – who are not just sanctioning hostile and hateful attitudes towards minorities, but in many cases, propagating such messages themselves. At a community level, this has fostered an acute culture of fear and insecurity amongst different ethnic and cultural groups, who are having to turn to civil society for agency and protection.

Despite the concerning trends towards a mainstream legitimization of attitudes aligned with far-right extremist viewpoints, the participants were hopeful that there is sufficient majority basis of citizens holding liberal, tolerant and inclusive values to restore balance in the future. The tremendous influence of recent political leaders in shifting public opinion and creating fearful, resentful moods in countries also suggests that steadfast moral leadership to defend and promote liberal and pluralistic narratives could also prove similarly successful.