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Right-wing extremism in Central and Eastern Europe: Context, challenges, latest research results and best practices[1]

Richard McNeil-Willson[2] **|** Main Researcher for BRaVE project, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute | @mcneilwillson

This policy brief offers an overview of how Far Right violent extremism in Central and Eastern Europe has developed in recent years, including specific regional trends, tactics used and their place within global Far Right patterns. Drawing on existing research and practice, the paper develops recommendations for responding to the Far Right on local, national and European-wide levels. It concludes that there is a need for a more proactive and coordinated EU response, including stronger European policy and better regional monitoring infrastructure.

Central and Eastern Europe offers a specific set of challenges: in a region still grappling with historical legacies of fascism, recent years have seen a surge in right-wing populist parties, as well as various irregular groups with links both East and West. Some legislation has looked to tackle Far Right militia, but such groups have still gained substantial regional legitimacy and footholds. Whilst COVID-19 may have dampened the ascension of the Far Right, new coalitions have formed in response to restrictions, whilst the exacerbation of existing patterns of inequality may spur the Far Right in future.

Regional Far Right trends

Much of the drive behind contemporary Far Right groups in Central and Eastern Europe comes from the development of a highly exclusive formation of Social Conservatism, weaponised against minority groups. In very recent years, this has included the targeting of both ethnic and non-racialised minority communities, with attacks against LGBTQ+ rights, marriage and parenting (Bustikova, 2019). This is largely framed as a pushback against the accommodation of cultural and political minorities – the advance of minority education, language rights and revisionist readings of WWII. This weaponisation is relatively recent, with prior waves of immigration, such as that from the Bosnian Genocide, not resulting in such politics.

A key tactic utilised by regional Far Right is that of the public demonstration. Studies show that, despite a growing online presence by Right-wing Extremists (RWX), demonstrations continue to play an important role both in cementing the support of existing members, recruiting new members, networking between groups and claiming a space in the public sphere (Zeller, 2019; Zeller 2020). Several existing marches have been claimed by the Far Right, including: the Day of Honour (HU); the Lukov March (BG); Independence Day (PL); and the Bleiberg Commemorations (HR and AU). Regional marches have also provided fertile ground for international cooperation, with activists participating from Western and Central Europe, as well as North America.

One significant concern is the role of state support or sponsorship in Far Right activism. State support is locally and internationally, with some MEPs engaging positively with governments of similar views, such as those of Modi, Bolsonaro, Netanyahu or Trump. These engagements are often linked together through anti-Muslim discourse, couched in the language of the 'War on Terror' and demographic concerns over the growth of Muslim minority communities (Leidig, 2019).

The mainstreaming of the Far Right has been advanced by the framing of Eastern Europe as the 'Christian frontier' against Muslim immigration. Research by the EU Commission-funded project *YouthRightOn: Resilient YOUTH against far-RIGHT messages ONline*, by the *Centre for the Study of Democracy* (CSD), found several Far Right sentiments had been mainstreamed in Bulgaria, including: anti-Roma (found to be held by 70% of those surveyed), anti-migrant (63%), anti-Islam (46%) and anti-EU or anti-systemic narratives (30%). This problem is exacerbated by EU counter-extremism approaches which over-emphasise

the threat of so-called 'Islamist' extremism, neglecting Far Right groups and tacitly securitising Muslim minorities. However, such attitudes were also shown not to be embedded, with young people quick to respond to alternative information or critical discussion.

Policy Recommendations

- **A common, joined-up European approach to the Far Right:** More coordination in implementing European responses. For instance, Far Right groups have circumvented national bans by operating just beyond a country's legal jurisdiction. A single policy response or common European framework would create a consistent and impactful response.

- **Challenging the legitimisation of Far Right politics:** The growth of the Far Right has been legitimised by some state governments and actors. The EU needs a stronger stance on member states that encourage Far Right support.

- **Better monitoring to understand the scale of the problem:** Under-reporting plagues efforts to understand the Far Right, leading to difficulties in assessing, and an underplaying of, the problem. Better

monitoring, through EU research projects, support of non-governmental organisations and clearer legislation, is required.

- Measures to **restrict the public platform of Far Right organisations**. This can be done through European-wide proscription, the banning of certain symbols or coordinated online responses. Greater engagement between the EU and researchers and activists is necessary, with states currently only acting in response to consistent external pressure.

- Responses should **combine online and offline activities**. Online workshops are crucial to support critical thinking, digital literacy and develop means for combating Far Right narratives. Combined online and offline efforts is particularly valuable against RWX networks. Giving youth the space and means to critically explore Far Right narratives enables wider community resilience-building.

- **More research is needed on the impact of COVID-19** in the region, particularly as to how RWX interacts with pre-existing regional inequalities.

Consulted & Recommended Sources

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