The importance of local political activism in reducing the rise of extremist parties: the impact on young people and migrants

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Executive Summary

This policy paper outlines the relevance and importance of local political activism in reducing the rise of extremist parties, and what the EU can do to encourage its Member States to have greater success in this area. It details why policies implemented in the past, whilst being a good start, are not comprehensive enough, and nor do they offer sufficient scope for local policymakers to implement effective changes directly within their communities. The threat that extremism faces to society is undeniable, and thus this paper outlines two methods that can be utilised to best mitigate its effects by focussing primarily on the most vulnerable groups: young people and migrants. Overall, it calls for the EU to continue encouraging local action and training as outlined in RAN,[1] but in addition to this, utilise social media to effectively engage the youth, and provide linguistic and cultural education for migrants, and make these measures compulsory action for Member States.

Introduction

The last decade in particular has seen a considerable rise in the presence of extremist parties, especially those which fall towards the far-right of the political spectrum. This is a trend that is evidenced all across the EU and is visible in countries that are both more conservative, such as Hungary, where Fidesz gained 49% of the vote at the last election, and in more liberal countries such as Denmark and Sweden, wherein the Danish People's Party and Sweden Democrats gained 21% and 17.6% of the vote, respectively.[2] The rise of extremism is undeniable, as has been evidenced by the formation of Identity and Democracy (ID) Bloc in the European Parliament, composed of 9 far-right European parties.[3] The European Union has certainly made efforts to minimise the impact of extremism on democracy and stability as outlined in both the 2014[4] and 2016[5] European Commission Communications on Preventing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, however these efforts have been primarily focussed on tackling radicalisation and violent extremism or terrorism, rather than sociopolitical extremism evident in daily life. Additionally, much of the current policy framework endorsed by the European Commission shows Member States taking as much action as they see fit on a national- or local-level, leading to significant discrepancy amongst States when tackling political extremism. The EU should take a firmer stance and, as well as continuing its current policies, should develop more comprehensive and targeted policies that Member States must undertake and adapt according to what is suitable for their local communities. If discrepancies amongst Member States are lessened, the EU will be better prepared to tackle extremism.

Problem Description

History is an ode to what can occur if a more comprehensive effort is not made to tackle the increased political extremism across Europe. As was evidenced most clearly in the rise of the Nazi Party in 20th Century Germany, if extremist parties remain unchallenged and unmonitored, they continue to push the boundaries of what is considered normal or acceptable in public discourse, and with sufficient time, are able to normalise their ideology. This then

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[1] "Prevention of radicalisation," European Commission, accessed April 23, 2020,
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation_en.
[2] "Europe and right-wing nationalism," BBC News, accessed April 26, 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36130006.
[3] Ibid.
[4] European Commission, "Preventing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism," 2014,
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/e-library/documents/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/docs/communication_on_preventing_radicalisation_and_violence_promoting_extremism_201301_en.pdf.
[5] European Commission, "Preventing Radicalisation leading to Violent Extremism," 2016,
https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2016/EN/COM-2016-379-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF.

enables even more extreme attitudes to enter the view of social discourse, thus pushing the Overton window[6] to progressively further extremes. If insufficient action is taken, the majority can be left unable to counteract or respond to the actions of the extreme. The impact of an uncontrolled rise in extremist parties is undeniable: it bolsters social divisions, polarisation, and hostility, and leads to the creation of an 'us vs them' mentality within a society. The effects of this are harmful to all as a reduced ability or will to cooperate can impair both the economic output and resilience of a country — consumers may be less likely to support businesses run by a group that their extremist ideology may deem as inferior or unworthy. On a larger scale, if migrants, for example, feel that they are unwelcome in a society due to the prevalence of anti-migrant rhetoric, for example — which is often central to right wing extremist parties — they may be less willing to integrate and assimilate into their new society. As well as reducing their ability to thrive socially, it may limit their economic progression and mobility by preventing them from accessing better careers with higher incomes, thus limiting their individual disposable income, and accordingly, their personal consumption and spending. The overarching impact remains that an environment where political tensions and social divisions are high will likely be extremely unpleasant and uncomfortable for residents and citizens, and can trigger emigration and social exclusion, thus failing the basic fundamentals of upholding societal and communal wellbeing.

Policy Option

Local-level policy should be enhanced to combat the rise in extremist parties, but it is critical to ensure that the aim is not to appease extremists and justify or endorse their sentiment, but rather to foster a clear sense of community and togetherness and ensure that a logical counter narrative is always present. Firstly, there is much to be gained from focussing on the youth and ensuring they are engaged and able to think critically when faced with extremist narratives. Young people are a very vulnerable and easily manipulated group, and when exposed to such ideologies, are amongst the least likely to resist. Encouraging local awareness and activism amongst the youth can be achieved by utilising social media platforms effectively. Currently, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter lessen the impact of extremism by condemning illegal hate speech on their platforms[7]; however, directly targeting young people through educational campaigns encouraging them to think critically about extremist rhetoric should also be present across these platforms. Exercises testing logic and critical thinking can be gamified as online challenges or quizzes that young people can participate in using social media. Incentives to participate can be increased by hosting competitions, where essays, speeches, campaigns or policy ideas are submitted to local policymakers, detailing young people's own thoughts, ideas, and experiences with extremist parties. Social media can also be used to promote the Erasmus+ programme through targeted advertising, and local educational authorities should ensure that all eligible students are made aware of the programme and its benefits. In addition to this, it is critical to ensure that young people are continually provided with safe spaces in and out of school, such as youth centres and after school clubs, which promote key EU common democratic values of openness, freedom, equality and liberty. This will foster a sense of community and ensure that the risk of a young person's vulnerability or loneliness being exploited by the rhetoric of extremist movements is minimised, as often, voting for the extreme can also be the result of a 'desire to be part of mass culture.'[8] Basic political education programmes, as well as voluntary community work, should be implemented as part of the curriculum, and young people should be made aware of the state of affairs in their country and globally. The Commission should also continue to develop its 'specific toolkit'[9] so young people continue to 'increase their democratic resilience, become media literate and think critically, on how to... resolve conflicts and respect the views of others and on how to spot and react to early signs of radicalisation.' Additionally, local educational authorities should also ensure that young people maintain regular contact with 'representatives of civil society and role models'[10] to motivate and prevent them from drifting to the margins of society. Secondly, much of the current extremist rhetoric across Europe is centred around immigration, with one of the many issues being cited by extremists being the apparent inability or reluctance of migrants to integrate and assimilate into their

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[6] "The Overton Window," Mackinac, accessed April 28, 2020, https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow.
[7] European Commission, "Preventing Radicalisation," 2016.
[8] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, "Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe," 2000, http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=8818&lang=en.
[9] European Commission, "Preventing Radicalisation," 2016.
[10] Ibid.

host country. A key policy countries such as Denmark and Sweden[11] adopted is to host subsidised language[12] and culture classes for new migrants. Through EU encouragement and support, other Member States can develop similar programmes in their communities. This will ensure that the barriers to entry towards language classes that several migrants face are removed, and will allow them to gain a deeper linguistic and cultural understanding of their host country, thus enabling them to progress and better assimilate into society.[13] Local authorities should develop budgets and raise awareness amongst their residents, so that native speakers or lifelong residents can volunteer as language or cultural coaches, and if they are taking on a more intensive managerial or administrative role in setting up a programme, can be reimbursed at national living wage level.

Recommendations

Overall, policies that should be implemented to further encourage local political activism in an effort to mitigate the rise of extremist parties should have a twofold focus: on young people and on migrants. Both of these groups are fairly vulnerable and, be it for different reasons, are frequent targets of extremist groups, thus it is logical that in order to best reduce the impact and appeal of extremism, these two groups are most supported and prioritised. For young people, social media should be utilised by local and national policymakers as a medium for raising political awareness and encouraging the ability to think critically and logically about divisive rhetoric. Policymakers must also ensure that community spaces are kept intact and funded for young people, thus ensuring that they do not feel lonely or detached. For migrants, it is key that local policymakers cooperate with their communities to ensure that new migrants feel accepted in their new society and feel encouraged to integrate into their host country, rather than feeling rejected from the outset. Policymakers should ensure that effective systems are in place for migrants to gain the relevant cultural and linguistic skills needed in order to thrive in their new environment.

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[11] "Daily chart - Europeans remain welcoming to immigrants," The Economist, accessed April 29, 2020, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/04/19/europeans-remain-welcoming-to-immigrants.
[12] "Swedish Academy to launch new language lessons for immigrants," TheLocal.se, accessed April 29, 2020, https://www.thelocal.se/20171023/swedish-academy-to-launch-new-language-lessons-for-immigrants.
[13] "Vassiliou: Immigrants must learn the language of their host country," Euractiv, accessed April 29, 2020 https://www.euractiv.com/section/languages-culture/news/vassiliou-immigrants-must-learn-the-language-of-their-host-country/.