



The Global Far-Right: An Interview with Julia Ebner

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Extremism researcher and bestselling author and Julia Ebner discusses the global rise and mainstreaming of the far-right.

Q. Jair Bolsonaro's recent election victory in Brazil seems to be the latest in a series of electoral victories for radical right figures across parts the globe. Are we witnessing the global spread of the far-right?

We are not just seeing a rapidly growing far-right across the globe, we are also watching it in real-time as the far right is transitioning from counter-culture movements and meta-political actors to serious political players. While a few years ago the far-right's political influence tended to be limited to media stunts, street protests and online campaigns that put pressure on centrist governments, they are now increasingly entering parliaments.

Although there are geographic nuances in the rhetoric of these emerging far-right figures, they tend to find common ground in their anti-immigration, anti-liberalism and anti-globalism elements and have actively been building a global coalition to make use of synergies and learn from each other. The fact that Bolsonaro has borrowed his rhetorical elements and received advice from European far-right populists such as Victor Orban is the latest example of an increasingly well-connected global far-right.

Q. You mention nuances. In terms of ideas and beliefs, how is the European far-right different from the American brand and in what ways are they similar?

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While the American far-right focuses more on racial differences, the European far-right stresses the divisions along cultural, religious or ethno-cultural lines. This can partly be explained by strategic considerations, as the European far-right has learnt to adopt its rhetoric to the boundaries of the politically acceptable discourse to make its ideology ‘mainstreamable’.

In the US, where racial tensions are higher and awareness of the European 1930s dynamics are lower, there is a bigger audience and potential support base for explicitly racist ideologies. Despite these ideological differences, American and European far-right influencers often find shared goals and enemies that allow for opportunistic collaboration around common rallying points such as strategically important elections, protests or other political events.

The alt-right’s Charlottesville rally, the Identitarian Defend Europe campaign and recent elections in Germany, Italy and Sweden are examples of such trans-Atlantic, cross-ideological cooperation. Their efforts to overcome ideological differences to boost their reach and impact have increasingly blurred the lines between the American alt-right and the European New Right and resulted in a common focus on ethno-cultural identity. There are clear signs of reciprocal learning too, with the American far-right adopting some of the European New Right's intellectual foundations and the European far-right copying the online tactics, counter-culture vocabulary and memes from their American counterparts.

Q. In a previous interview, you discussed some of the tropes of the modern far-right, mentioning how they draw upon conspiracy theories. Some of these conspiracy theories can now be read and heard in several popular

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media outlets. This also seems to be true of many far-right talking points. Have what were previously fringe ideas essentially become mainstream?

This is one of the far-right's biggest successes of the past few years: they have been able to dominate the topics in the newspapers, parliaments and even on dinner tables. Their ability to influence the political discourse is a result of their skillful orchestration of media frenzies and their sophisticated online campaigns. For example, the far-right frequently launches street protests and flash mobs, tailoring their optics for the media to take interest in them.

Additionally, their use of tactics to trick the social media algorithms and their increasingly networked online influencers have helped them to catapult their campaigns into the top trends and make them visible to more mainstream audiences. It is then just a matter of time until their talking points – including disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda – get picked up by journalists who are under pressure to cover them and politicians who feel forced to respond.

Q. You've recently published research on the way far-right groups and movements use the internet. What did you discover in this study and how important is the internet to the US and European far-right's activities? Would they have much success without it?

The internet and social media have played a major role in far-right mobilisation and communication strategies. Over the past couple of years, we've seen the so-called 'alt-tech' space emerge, a mixture of globally connected 'alternative' news and blog sites and far-right and ultra-libertarian social media platforms. This new online ecosystem has not only created dangerous radicalisation echo

chambers but also new safe havens that allow the far-right to coordinate large-scale (dis)information operations.

At ISD we found that a small minority of extreme-right users is able to manipulate the online discourse by agreeing on common times and hashtags and by jointly launching coordinated social media raids. Only 5 percent of active users on Facebook were responsible for over 50 percent of the likes of hateful comments in the commentary sections of German news outlets.

Q. There have recently been two major incidents of far-right terrorism in the US, and Western security services have warned of a growing threat. How dangerous is the threat of far-right terrorism in America and Europe and are security services adequately prepared to deal with this threat?

There is no doubt that the threat from far-right terrorism has significantly surged over the past few years. The far-right terrorist attacks in Pittsburgh and Charlottesville were only the tip of the iceberg. Recently formed terrorist groups such as [National Action](#) in the UK and [Revolution Chemnitz](#) in Germany planned to murder politicians, activists and migrants but luckily many of these incidents could be foiled by the security forces. Members of far-right terrorist organisations such as [Atomwaffen](#) Division and [Creativity Movement](#) even plotted major terrorist attacks involving chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons.

Since 9/11, the security forces in North America and Europe have focused their attention and resources almost exclusively on the threat from jihadist terrorism. But with the changing dynamics, they have started to significantly step up their efforts in preventing far-right terrorism and tackling the symbiotic relationship between far-right and jihadist extremism. In the UK, far-right detentions have

increased five-fold since Jo Cox was murdered by the neo-Nazi terrorist Tommy Mair.

Q. It has been argued that many political parties often considered to be at the centre of the spectrum have adopted and accommodated more radical positions and policies in an effort to keep extremists from power. Do you agree with this assessment and, if so, is this a strategy that is likely to curb the rise of the far-right?

Although it is too early to evaluate the mid-to long-term effects of the strategy, I believe that pandering to the far-right gives the political fringes more power legitimising their rhetoric highlighting their themes and prioritising their goals. To take back control of the discourse centrist parties would have to reclaim some of the language and concepts that the far-right has twisted, reframed and hijacked.

While the far-right has smeared centre-left terms like diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism by repeating these in association with terrorist attacks and migrant crimes, it has simultaneously co-opted conservative, centre-right notions of patriotism, nationalism and family values. Mainstream parties, media outlets and activists will face a big challenge in reclaiming the political discourse and preventing that the political centre's language is being gradually eroded by the far-right.

Image credit: Flickr.

About the interviewee



Julia Ebner is author of *'The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism'* and Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). In cooperation with Facebook Germany, Julia leads the Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) to counter online hate speech. On the basis of her research, she advises parliamentary working groups, frontline workers and tech firms, speaks at international conferences and writes for Guardian and the Independent. Before

joining ISD, Julia spent two years working for the world's first counter-extremism organisation Quilliam, where she led research projects on terrorism prevention for the European Commission and the Kofi Annan Foundation, and gave evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on far-right extremism. In her role as coordinator of the pan-European network Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE), she carried out radicalisation-prevention projects across Europe and North Africa.

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