

Diverting People from Getting Involved



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

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[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

Diverting people from getting involved

Introduction

Far-right extremist attitudes are often far from confined to the margins of society, but increasingly found in the mainstream. In many cases far-right individuals are perfectly normal, socially integrated, and connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas. In some countries, like Hungary, far-right attitudes are widespread amongst young people. In others, like the UK, younger generations are progressively more tolerant than older generations. However, even in these places, it is important that front-line professionals do not assume this trend will continue without programmes in place to promote tolerance and democratic behaviour among those vulnerable to far-right ideologies.

Key approaches

1. Contact across community divides

Aims to promote meaningful contact between individuals from different communities, and across divides. This might be done through informal social networking, sports clubs or mentorship programmes. It might also involve

cross-community dialogue programmes to bring together individuals to discuss grievances in a frank way.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Artemisszio Foundation, Hungary

Aims/Objectives:

The Artemisszio Foundation works to encourage cross-cultural communication and better relations among diverse communities in Hungary.

Description/Activities:

The Artemisszio Foundation's work is framed around the idea that the greatest barrier to understanding and empathising with the 'other' is that individuals carry a whole cultural system that is not easily visible to oneself. Sustained interaction and training can make people aware of this cultural weight and how it affects their interactions. Its youth training programme organises events to encourage communication across social and economic strata, and diverse ethnic backgrounds. The Foundation pairs individuals of ethnic minority background with ethnic Hungarians to do joint mentoring and volunteer work.

Additionally, the Foundation provides training for social workers in effective communications with clients to prevent misunderstandings and stop the spread of stereotypes and prejudices. They also run training seminars for private sector businesses, aiming to reduce conflict between social and ethnic groups in the workplace. These two-day seminars are designed to break down mutual prejudices and serve as a starting point for frank discussions about identity and discrimination in the workplace.

2. Diversion and alternative activities

Aim to undercut far-right groups' abilities to contact and recruit young people.

This can be as simple as providing young people with meaningful spare time activities, particularly targeting susceptible youth, including football, extreme sports and outdoor activities. In some cases these are led by individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Mixed Martial Arts Club, Poland

Aims/Objectives:

Using sport to push skinheads out of the far right scene and challenge their perceptions of the 'other'.

Description/Activities:

This unique programme engages skinheads interested in fighting clubs and trains them in martial arts. The programme has brought in Mamed Khalidov, a well-respected Polish mixed martial artist of Chechen descent to work with them. Chechens are often victims of far-right crime in Poland, and discovering Khalidov's ethnic background and being trained by someone they admire so much, has shaken prejudices about Chechens.

3. Educational programmes

Aim to shift attitudes through tailored curricula. This includes Holocaust and religious education as well as more targeted programmes such as teaching people about the multicultural history of a place and the plight of refugees. Educational programmes may work specifically to challenge myths and prejudices harboured by particular groups.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

The Tolerance Project, Sweden

Aims/Objectives:

To provide opportunities for young people susceptible to extremist or white power subcultures to take part in an educational programme that seeks to challenge their perceptions and disengage them from these movements.

Description/Activities:

The Tolerance Project was developed in 1995 in Kungälv, Sweden and is a model that has since been rolled out across Sweden. A mapping exercise is done in partnership with teachers, social workers, youth workers and students themselves to identify the target group, key activists and their followers. Those deemed most 'at-risk' are given the option to apply for participation in the project as part of their regular school curriculum. The main incentive to apply is the promise of an international field trip to Poland.

The Tolerance Project mixes a traditional Holocaust education model with a challenging educational experience to enable students to re-evaluate their existing belief structures. There are three stages to this strategy: splitting activities; focus on the future and re-socialising activities.

First, the programme offers new meaningful activities that are designed to create a boundary between the core group and their followers. Then, the project focuses on helping participants focus on their future, to visualise a successful life that is detached from the extremist group. Finally, at-risk students are pushed to develop new social strategies in groups that they are unfamiliar with, as the Tolerance Project mixes them with high-achieving students who are not at risk. This mixed approach pushes those on both sides to re-evaluate their conceptions of the other. The programme culminates in a trip to Poland, where the students explore the history of the Holocaust and engage in a series of exercises to humanise this history and apply lessons from this to the students' own lived experiences.

4. Dialogue on the hard issues

Aims to engage directly with difficult viewpoints, to tackle grievances that can underlie racist or prejudiced attitudes. It might be done through peer education programmes to train individuals to have hard conversations with peers who may exhibit extreme views, or public dialogue forums on tough and divisive issues, including foreign policy, immigration and employment. It also includes programmes that engage directly with far-right extremists, rather than simply talk about them.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

The Think Project, UK

Aims/Objectives:

To strengthen and empower young people in Wales by building inner self-resilience to the growth of far-right sentiment in the UK and Europe.

Description/Activities:

The Think Project was inspired by the Swansea Ethnic Youth Support Team's (EYST) work supporting victims of racism, and the realisation of a critical need to work with those vulnerable to the far right and challenge the growth of negative views surrounding asylum and immigration.

The project aims to test and develop new ways of working with the most disengaged young white people in Wales.

It targets youth offenders and individuals excluded from mainstream schools. Its approach involves discussing the definitions of divisive terminology related to 'hot' political issues (such as *asylum seeker*, *extremist*, *terrorist*) with participants, and encouraging open and honest dialogue. Educational courses are supported by films, interactive exercises, particularly focused on bringing a human face to these issues.

The project equips young people with the knowledge, understanding and experience to refute and challenge racist myths, as well as to hear and address young people's real and perceived grievances. In doing so, the project

seeks to strengthen and empower disadvantaged young people in Wales to become more confident in their own identities, more secure of their own belonging, and more resilient to extremist ideologies.

Getting it right

Profile

Whether or not a preventative programme will reach its intended audience depends on how it markets the programme to these groups. Project titles should be non-judgemental and positive, avoiding references to extremism or racism. Make educational and experiential learning programmes relevant to the local community and lives of the participants. Some organisations like the Jewish Community Center Krakow have shown participants the hidden Jewish history of their local community, or the immigrant background of major local institutions.

How to do meaningful contact

Though organising one-off events like a cross-cultural football tournament can be meaningful for a day, they will not on their own build long-standing relationships across communities, or lead to long-term attitude changes, unless they are repeated at regular intervals with the same groups, incorporated as part of a broader programme, or mainstreamed within schools. Front-line professionals need a methodology for meaningful contact. This can include having diverse staff members run a programme, those who are prepared to field difficult questions and challenge stereotypes. Intercultural education methodologies, which specifically train young people to engage directly with those who have different cultural backgrounds, can be valuable here.

How to do the hard conversations

In many cases, prejudiced and racist ideas can be traced back to perceived grievances about different groups, and in some cases real grievances, such

as experiences of being bullied by ethnic minority gangs. When individuals express ideas contrary to popular norms against racism, there is a tendency to deny them the right to be open about these grievances. The tendency to deny and shut down conversation with ‘don’t be a racist’ can inadvertently push people further down the path to radicalisation. It is important for those with grievances to have their views listened to and heard, before they can be challenged. This kind of approach is often not easily achieved in a mainstream educational setting, and may require special educational programmes that can provide a safer environment for people to express and discuss unsavoury opinions.

How to myth-bust

Myth-busting is notoriously difficult, and providing facts to undercut far-right narratives is often not the most effective way to change attitudes. Myth-busting has to be done in conjunction with experimental learning. This means rather than telling someone the facts about people from different backgrounds, give them the opportunity to engage with someone from that background, for example through engagement with a Muslim programme instructor or the opportunity to meet an asylum seeker and ask questions first-hand. In some cases, this may be the first time someone has engaged with a person from this background. ‘The facts’ must be embedded in wider learning process. Humanising anti-racism education can have an impact, and can push people to think about the human impact of their words and actions. For example, the Think Project provides a space for young people to speak to staff members from minority backgrounds about how they feel when they are called by popular derogatory slang specific to their ethnic or religious group.

Helping young people challenge one another

Initiatives will have a wider impact if they can help to train up young people to have tough conversations themselves with their peers who express intolerant views. The Tolerance Project specifically brings high achieving students alongside those vulnerable to extremism in a Holocaust education model, with the aim of not only building tolerance among the intolerant, but also helping those not at risk to come to terms with their own

prejudices against their intolerant peers. This also includes training young people to run projects to tackle far-right extremism: An initiative by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung in Germany aims to equip young activists with the tools they need to run effective campaigns and local initiatives to tackle far right extremism.

Keeping people involved

Activities that empower people and give them a sense of achievement are more likely to keep the vulnerable involved. This might include mentoring (professional or social), leadership programmes, or sports and music programmes. Once participants feel empowered and engaged in an initiative, those running a project may be in a position to negotiate the terms of involvement and push for small changes. For example, an initiative by Oslo Municipality Preventative Police officers to get young kids in the neo-Nazi scene snowboarding was ultimately able to get the group to replace their skinhead bomber jackets with snowboarding jackets.

Particularly when it comes to sports, it may be important to offer activities that are not 'the usual.' In Norway, preventative police have offered activities such as American Football and snowboarding. Some organisations, like Cultures Interactive in Germany, use alternative youth culture: hip hop and other music genres, skateboarding and street art.

Using creative methods and action-oriented activities can help to hook people. For example, getting participants involved in film production through video diaries, documentary creation and interviews with the community, as has been done by the Anne Frank House in the Netherlands. Some organisations have experimented with developing mobile phone applications which aim to challenge racist ideologies, like an app developed by All Together Now in Australia. This might also include more mainstream methods of creative outreach, such as theatre, traveling exhibitions or comic books. For example, Exit Fryshuset in Sweden has developed a play called *The Voice of Hate*, which brings the personal stories of Swedish former far-right extremists to young people in schools.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

