

Capacity Building ‘How to Counter Right Wing Populism and Extremism in Europe’

[Published on Nov 06, 2015](#) by Lukas Spielberger

Across Europe, democracies are increasingly under pressure from right-wing parties and movements that often combine radical anti-immigrant and Islamophobic positions with populist rhetoric. Those movements differ strongly in their party programmes, ranging from Eurosceptic to overtly racist but share a disdain for the existing political institutions. Often their policies go against internationally recognised human right and hijack public discourse whilst ignoring the complexities of the real world. Yet, it is difficult to stop these parties and so far in only a few countries the current swing to the right has been contained.

From October 12 – 16 2015, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union hosted a capacity building for 16 young Europeans from France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Sweden and the UK. The aim was to give the participants the possibility to compare the right-wing movements in their respective countries of origin and to jointly develop policies to combat this disquieting trend. Together with approximately 50 experts from academia, civil society, journalism and politics they analysed factors that contribute to the success of far-right parties, their ideology and strategies and worked on counter measures.

The group could hardly have been more diverse: it comprised high school and university students, researchers and academics with PhDs, as well as activists and aspiring young politicians; many of them coming from an ethnic minority background. Nevertheless, it did not take long before a general consensus on the core issues was found and everybody agreed that the New Right threatens to reverse many of the positive developments of the past decades. Its populist rhetoric cuts into the fabric of established democratic structures, undermines trust in elected politicians and its proposed policies are spreading racist, homophobic and misogynist sentiments.

Programme

On the *first day*, the goal was to understand the *root causes, manifestations and challenges of the increasing right-wing populism and extremism in Europe*. This was followed by a discussion about the influence of right-wing populists and extremists in the European Parliament which featured two Green MEPs.

The *second day* was dedicated to *Euroscepticism*. Whereas the morning session aimed at debunking the myths spread by Eurosceptic parties, the afternoon sessions sought to bring about a deeper understanding of the origins of Euroscepticism and reflected on counter strategies.

On the *third day*, the group paid a visit to *Antwerp*, the hotbed of Flemish right-wing politics. The morning session at the University of Antwerp addressed the question of what influence the media has on the success of right-wing extremist parties, whereas in the afternoon, the history and current state of the right in Antwerp and Flanders was compared with that in other European countries. The Antwerp Greens welcomed the participants in their headquarters and talked about their experiences with right-wing populists and extremists in local and regional politics.

Xenophobia was at the centre of the sessions on *day four*, first in its manifestations as racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-gypsyism, later with regard to its homophobic and misogynist components.



On the *final day*, three subgroups worked on the anti-democratic, Eurosceptic and xenophobic components of right-wing populism and extremism and ways to counter them. Back in the plenary the conclusions were further elaborated and eventually presented to a last expert panel that provided the participants with once more with feedback.

Conclusions

In their conclusions the participants spoke out in favour of a stronger stance against right-wing extremism and populism. They recommended a zero tolerance policy for hate speech and xenophobic remarks in the public and political sphere and urged mainstream parties to defend their views on issues claimed by the Right more assertively instead of watering them down in an attempt to (re)gain voters. Mainstream political parties were, however, *not* advised to build a 'cordon sanitaire' around right-wing parties; instead they should pressure them to engage in the process of finding feasible solutions to the problems they address. Finally, the participants called on politicians to give citizens more opportunities to exchange ideas with decision makers, to make decision making processes more transparent and to put people at the centre of policy making in order to give them the feeling to be respected and listened to.

Feedback

Judging from the feedback after the event, it has been an instructive and fun experience for all, participants and experts alike. The participants have expressed their wish to continue their collaboration on the issue of countering right-wing populism and extremism. The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union will offer them the possibility to exchange their ideas on a blog similar to the [Young Voices of Europe blog](#) which was the result of the 2013 capacity building [North- South: A Common Future in the Eurozone](#). The final conclusions of the capacity building will be presented on the office website before the end of the year and in the beginning of next year a web dossier containing the complete capacity building material will be on line.