Reflections on the implications of the European election results on the context for religion and belief in Europe

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Introduction

- EU-funded initiative in partnership with the Swedish Ministry of Justice, and with the governments of Norway, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands on board as partners, on understanding the problem of far-right extremism across 10 European countries, and what works in prevention, intervention and response.
- The 10 countries of focus have been Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.
- Necessarily, in working with governments, the working definition of far-right extremism has shifted over the years.
    - In the UK, local authorities and national government have gone back and forth on whether or not to term the anti-Islam English Defence League as a far-right extremist organisation. It is today understood not to be an extremist organisation – and yet the Tackling Extremism and Hate Crime team in Government is responsible for measures of dealing with it.
    - In Hungary, just last week the court ruled that Jobbik – a very much anti-Semitic far right party, linked with paramilitary groups that have condoned violence – can no longer be called a far right party by media outlets. Never mind the strangeness of the law ruling what independent journalists can and cannot call far right.
    - Indeed in Denmark, the Danish People's Party is a legitimately mainstream party these days, and is no longer considered 'far right' as it once was.
    - First, I was asked to focus specifically on what some call 'violence promoting extremism' and to leave radical right political parties out of it.
- Interestingly in the run up and follow on from the European elections, **there is confusion once again over what parties that fall within the 'far right' family stand for** – who is an extremist and who isn't. Who is to be treated like a pariah and who is to be engaged with on equal grounds?
- A few words about what the results mean for the context of liberal democracy, equalities:
- Contrary to the symbolic importance of some of the far right gains in the European elections – the actual electoral successes of the far right were not as substantial.
- Certainly, **two or three far right parties (depending on what you classify UKIP) became the biggest party in their country**. First time that far right parties come first in nation-wide elections in the EU.
- The far right won seats in Austria, Denmark, France , Germany, Greece, Netherlands, and Sweden. Two Neo-Nazi parties enter the EP – Golden Dawn and National Democratic Party of Germany.
- But, it is important to remember **many far right parties lost seats** in this election. Lost seats in Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and the UK.
- There are 28 member states and the far right remained irrelevant in the majority of them!
- Some of you might be watching the interesting dynamics unfold over groupings -- The European far right is a disparate group in many ways and they continue to struggle to find a

strong grouping to wield any power in the European Parliament. We will see how this unfolds in the coming week.

A few key points about the impact of these changes:

- **Europe is not entirely turning to the extremes**. To quell the alarmist approach, it is unlikely that the European Parliament will adopt an entirely different approach. The main centre-right and left groupings still hold the majority of the seats, and with the Liberals and the Greens, parliament is still pro-EU. That has not changed.
- But, **national communities and politicians cannot ignore these gains.**
- **The feelings of marginalisation, political alienation, and concerns over issues like immigration, faith, identity** are not going to disappear.
- The more these parties grow, in some cases, they may wield more influence they over national and European policy on economics, immigration, minority rights, and other social issues – where they largely put forth political programmes based on simple solutions that simply will not work.
- In other cases, they will not wield influence themselves, but by the default of being there and being noisy, they will push the public debate and the general climate on these issues.

When it comes to religion and belief:

- The European far right and radical right are challenging the narrative that many in this room have worked to foster in Europe – a liberal democratic narrative based on freedom, dialogue and understanding across and within religious communities.
- A respect for difference <u>and an understanding</u> of the fluidity and intersections across identities – faith, ethnicity, nationality, etc.
- The far right is particularly adept at picking on polemical, divisive issues – existing divides between communities, and driving a wedge between them further. A strategy of sorts aiming to divide and conquer.
- Last night I just spoke at event on the Israel Palestine situation – not because I have any expertise on Israel and Palestine – but because the far right is using this conflict to attempt to drive a stronger rift between Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe. This international conflict has become a useful anti-Muslim propaganda tool for the far right.
- If they tap into something that resonates with someone's personal identity, it can have a powerful impact, acting on latent prejudices.
- They don't <u>need</u> the facts, they rely on latent prejudice and provide tangible examples to inflame those latent beliefs.

In terms of what has generally been done to deal with the far right in Europe:

- I have previously argued and advised that European governments need to forget the strategy of ignore and isolating the far right
    o whether enacted through refusing to engage with them, removing state subsidies, or even as simple as refusing to debate them on live television, refusing to shake their hand, or debating them on live television.
- This doesn't work – and this stigmatisation strategy can backfire:

- Allows them to present themselves as the sole voice on certain issues
- Allows them to offer unrealistic promises to voters – never have to actually deliver.
- Victim's status – victims of faulty implementation of democracy
- Can simply increase curiosity and attractiveness
- Excluding them can even make them more radical over time

Instead, I suggest two ways forward:

1) **Admit the real issues.** Need to make sure we **don't fall trap to the idea that it is just economics** that leads to far right successes, nor is this simply an act of protest
   - Chancellor Angela Merkel said about the far right victories that the best response was to boost economic growth and jobs. Not enough!
   - The highest electoral results of far right parties are largely in countries that were little affected by the crisis – Austria, Denmark, France, Sweden. Hungary is maybe an exception here, in that it was hit hard by the crisis.
   - The far right is captivating a large proportion of the European population. Instead of simply dismissing this and placing the blame on structural issues, let's accept responsibility and take these concerns seriously.
   - There are real and perceived grievances among European communities about politics, about religion, about identity and cultural values.
   - The liberal democratic vision of a diverse Europe hasn't fully been sold to large portions of the European population.

2) That takes me to my second point. **So we need to sell it better.**
   - This means firstly, systematic engagement with the concerned public, listening to concerns – yes even those that may be unpleasant to hear -- and addressing them directly
   - The fact-free emotional rhetoric of the radical right must be met with *equally compelling* arguments, underpinned by the facts.
   - Facts alone will not triumph; people need to feel listened to – and we need to appeal to the emotions. This needs to happen not just in the national arena, but at the local level, where local actors need to be having the difficult face-to-face conversations with their constituencies.

And this is where the importance of grassroots work comes into play:
- As part of the EU project I'm currently running, I set out on a yearlong journey to do field visits to all 10 countries of focus
- I interviewed and gathered experiences from front-line professionals and activists who are coming face-to-face with this issue on a regular basis, whether it is those working specifically on countering extremism, or those who encounter the far right as part of their daily responsibilities policing communities or educating young people.
- We gathered over 100 case studies of different approaches to tackling far-right extremism and intolerance.

I want to present 8 key learnings on dealing with far-right extremism and intolerance in its daily manifestations in our communities; this is really for front-line professionals and community leaders:

1. **Importance of promoting meaningful contact across community divides, and doing this well.**

• First aim of preventive efforts should be to change attitudes.

• Attitudes will only change through opportunities for people to engage with and form meaningful relationships with people who are different from them.

• Some of the most successful are methods include mentoring programmes across different communities, mixed-ethnicity sports clubs or work experience initiatives, and the promotion of role models from minority communities. This is really about forming meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds.

• But bringing people together on its own is not enough (i.e. for one-off events), we need a methodology for this. 2 key points:

   o **Experiential learning rather than simply myth-busting:** Myth-busting is notoriously difficult to do. Providing facts to undercut far-right narratives is often not the most effective way to change attitudes.

   o 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 and feel comfortable asking difficult questions first-hand.

   o For example: through engagement with a Muslim programme instructor who is willing to field tough questions about their identity and who is trained in how to do this appropriately. Simply saying someone is wrong can shut down the conversation – need to approach the intolerant in a non-judgemental manner.

   o **Long-term programmes rather than one-off events:** Though organising one-off events like a football tournament can be meaningful for a day, they will not on their own 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.

2. **Importance of peer education for longer-term impact**

   a. Initiatives will have a wider impact if they can help to train up young people to ask the right questions, critically engage with the arguments they head, and have tough conversations themselves with their peers who express intolerant views.

   b. There are some great interfaith initiatives I know of in the UK that train young people on how to engage in dialogue with their classmates who express racist views, or undermine conspiracy theories they hear in the classroom.

   c. Or some initiatives which equip young activists with the tools they need to run effective campaigns against the far right.

3. **Tackle grievances head on:**

   a. 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.

b. 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.

c. 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.

4. **Along with prevention, need to focus on deterrence – which means offering alternatives**

   a. Prevention needs to be accompanied by deterrence measures that <u>offer</u> alternatives for young people and also help to build a sense of purpose and self-worth. Need to get young people excited about positive community activism and engagement.

5. **Get the community involved in positive ways**

   a. When it comes to dealing with the far right's presence in a local community, communities may feel fear, powerlessness and frustration surrounding far-right demonstrations.

   b. Communities may not know how to show that they stand against the far right. Counter-demonstrations are valuable in that, in the best scenarios, they are peaceful displays of communities uniting against hatred, demonstrating that the far right is unwelcome in a community. However the risks of counter-demonstrations are that, in the worst scenarios, they can inadvertently inflame the actions of the far right, and end in clashes between groups.

   c. There are other ways that community members can take action, and some of the best initiatives get the community involved in more positive ways, whether it is involving community members in demonstration management, local businesses declaring themselves extremism-free or inclusive zones, or organising alternative community activities.

6. **Consider who to target. In some contexts, focus on youth**

   a. 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.

7. **But -- Don't forget adults!**

   a. Perhaps for obvious reasons, prevention has tended to be carried out amongst young people; youth commit the overwhelming number of right-wing related violent crimes, and even in Scandinavian countries we're seeing astronomically high percentages of students that are, for example, sceptical of the Holocaust.

   b. However, adults are also susceptible to far-right ideologies and activism so there is a need to widen the focus for preventive efforts.

    c. This has been done in some places through public roundtables on divisive issues for example – methods timed around the work schedule and made accessible to working adults.

8. **Finally, learning the ropes in the online space is non-negotiable**.
    a. Many front-line professionals and community leaders struggle to grasp new media, alongside their traditional responsibilities. However, they need to make the time and investment to understand this space, and how it can be used to maximise their own work**.**

Final point:

- Front-line professionals and local communities often develop innovative solutions to these challenges, though these rarely make headlines or send ripples beyond the community immediately affected.
- But more often, these are much less exciting news stories than the far right and the intolerant have to offer.
- Next week, in Stockholm, I'll be launching a practitioner's handbook on tackling far-right extremism and intolerance, which includes some of the 100 case studies we gathered and many more learning points.
- But next month we are launching an online resource called The FREE Initiative – FREE stands for Far-Right Extremism in Europe. But Free also means it is a resource for those working for a Europe free of far-right extremism. It will include case studies, films, and other resources by this really inspirational network of individuals tackling the far right across Europe. So please do look out for it. It will be at thefreeinitiative.com.