

Austria: Who are Europe's far-right identitarians?

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Europe has a major blind spot: the online reach of its far-right extremists.

The Continent's far-right groups are digitally savvy; they know how to distort public perception, drive the political agenda and intimidate journalists. They've disrupted democratic processes and put pressure on politicians to back down on migration policies.

[Newly revealed connections](#) between Austria's offshoot of Generation Identity — one of Europe's fastest growing far-right movements — and the man [charged with killing 50 people](#) at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, suggest they are also inciting violence and terrorism.

The attacker's so-called manifesto referenced a conspiracy theory dubbed "The Great Replacement." The theory — which claims that white populations are being gradually replaced with migrants — has been at the heart of identitarian campaigns for years. Just a week after the Christchurch attack, Austria's Generation Identity group — known as Identitarian Movement Austria — [held a protest](#) against "The Great Replacement" in Vienna, calling for "remigration" and "de-Islamization."

The group's demands go beyond calls to deport criminals, extremists and rejected asylum seekers, which would be in accordance with migration law. "Remigration" is, in fact, a euphemism for the mass deportation of all European residents with a migrant background or non-white skin.

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What makes this ethno-nativist ideology so dangerous is its invention and promotion of the idea that its members face an imminent existential threat from an outside group.

Generation Identity does not publicly endorse violence, but its members prepare for combat and their training materials read like a call to arms. Every summer, members of the movement from across Europe organize [military-style training camps](#) in rural France. Their manuals use [militarized vocabulary](#) such as "sniper mission" and "massive air strike" when describing online attacks.

One of the leaders of Identitarian Movement Austria is a former neo-Nazi named Martin Sellner. If the Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary is the foremost European hate-preacher to inspire Islamist terrorism, then Sellner can be considered his equivalent for the far right.

Sellner, whose house was raided by intelligence forces last week after reports emerged that the

Christchurch attacker gave money to the movement, has spearheaded sophisticated radicalization efforts across Europe. The far-right activist — who was also a mentee of Holocaust denier Gottfried Küssel — counts over 90,000 YouTube subscribers and 16,000 followers on Telegram.

In a manual called "[The Art of Redpilling](#)," Sellner's movement provides instructions for step-by-step far-right radicalization. It recommends leveraging widespread grievances related to free speech or gender equality as a starting point, before gradually introducing new recruits to identitarian ideologies: "You sow the soft redpill seeds and then you water them constantly. An honest question to start with, a news piece here, an email there, and in the evening an anecdote over beer."

Generation Identity also trains its members in the tactics of deception and manipulation.

Their successful [playbook](#) for online "Media Guerilla Warfare" has seen their [transgressive campaigns](#) go viral and reach a global audience. Leading members of Generation Identity have told me they want to create offshoots across the world, from Australia to Canada.

The ideology of the pan-European movement has transcended the fringes of society since its start in France in 2003. Far-right populists across Europe — from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the Italian League and the Spanish Vox party — have brought the language and policy recommendations of Generation Identity into the mainstream. These political movements share the ideological premise of an impending "invasion of the Occident." Their smear campaigns against the "lying press" and minority communities cross-pollinate and strengthen one another.

In Austria, the movement has been allowed to grow largely thanks to a lax approach from the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), a member of the governing coalition whose politicians have now come under fire for their links to Generation Identity.

There is no shortage of evidence exposing the FPÖ's marriage of convenience to the movement. [Pictures](#) show leading party officials — from leaders of the parliamentary club to vice mayors — side by side with identitarians at protests, campaign events and parties. Austria's vice chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache, and FPÖ City Council Member Ursula Stenzel have even retweeted Generation Identity campaigns. Like Generation Identity, the FPÖ has called for "remigration."

The movement also played a key role in pressuring Austria to [back out of the U.N. Migration Pact](#) in late 2018. Research from the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) found that Sellner and the Austrian movement mobilized in dedicated encrypted channels on Telegram before launching large-scale disinformation campaigns across social media to turn public opinion against the pact.

In response to mounting public pressure, the Austrian government is now considering banning Identitarian Movement Austria. But proscribing the group will do little to prevent the spread of nativist ideologies. The approach is out of sync with today's reality of increasingly loose transnational far-right networks, which no longer operate as closed-off group units. Identitarian activists are likely to continue finding innovative solutions to circumvent laws and transport their messages to the wider public.

Security forces, policymakers and tech firms have been slow to catch up and only dealt with a small fraction of the online extremism problem. They have compelled social media companies to take down extremist content related to Islamist messages but failed to tackle far-right content at the same speed and scale.

Smaller fringe platforms that have become safe havens for the international far right have largely

been ignored. Unobserved and unchallenged, the far right has been free to spread its violence-inciting messages on ultra-libertarian platforms such as Gab, 8chan and Bitchute.

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Christchurch should be a wake-up call. We urgently need to make our removal mechanisms faster, our algorithms more transparent and our anti-hate speech measures more balanced and comprehensive.

Not all harmful content is illegal or breaks platforms' policies, however, and groups like Austria's Generation Identity expertly uses these legal loopholes to its advantages. To close these gaps, we will have to invest in upscaling our digital resilience initiatives to shield users from harmful content that falls into legal gray zones.

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