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New haircuts, old ideology: film warns of shifting far-right strategy in Europe

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They've ditched the shaven heads but, despite recent setbacks, they remain a threat, says film-maker Christian Schwochow

Inside a university auditorium in Prague, a young man in a crisp black shirt and white trainers is railing against the pro-immigration politicians he holds responsible for a recent Islamist terror attack in Berlin. To build a safer Europe, he yells, "we have to get rid of those responsible for these murderous policies".

A woman in the crowd voices her support with a shout of "Sieg heil!", but he is quick to shut her down: "That was yesterday." Like-minded movements of the future will succeed by remaining outwardly respectable: "We can protect the foundations of Europe by occupying them," he proclaims, his blue eyes sparkling, "by becoming economists, teachers, judges."

The scene, from a new film by German director Christian Schwochow, nods back to the 1968 student movement's idea of a "long march through the institutions" that would culminate in revolution. But [Je Suis Karl](#) looks fearfully towards the future: a ruthless and committed group of far-right activists, the film imagines, could soon use the same strategy to upend Europe's political order – and succeed.

Premiering at the digitally held Berlin film festival this week, Schwochow's cinematic warning cry comes at a timely moment. In France, Emmanuel Macron's government is expected from Monday to start formal procedures to [ban Generation Identity](#) ([Génération Identitaire](#)), a social-media-savvy youth movement founded in 2012 that eschews the extreme right's traditional antisemitism and nationalist rhetoric and instead advocates defending Europe's "identity and culture".

The [Identitarian Movement](#), which serves as more than just a loose inspiration for the "Re/Generation Europe" youth activists in *Je Suis Karl*, is also facing renewed scrutiny in Austria, where chancellor Sebastian Kurz's conservative-green coalition government is weighing up whether to ban the group's symbol, a yellow lambda letter supposedly inspired by the shields of Spartan soldiers.

In Germany, where the Identitarian Movement is under enhanced surveillance by the country's domestic intelligence agency, a [court in 2019 confirmed](#) that the group can be classified as rightwing extremist in spite of its hip and cosmopolitan outward appearance.

But the latest government crackdowns and Schwochow's filmic study also inadvertently show how difficult it is to get a grip on a slippery movement with a knack for constant reinvention.

Schwochow, who has already directed an acclaimed docudrama about the origins of the National Socialist Underground (NSU) neo-Nazi terror group, came up with the idea for *Je Suis Karl* almost seven years ago.

"After doing a lot of research into the story of the NSU, we wanted to look more closely at the state of the far right now," Schwochow told the *Observer*. "We found that the far right nowadays is less easily identifiable by their shaved heads or Doc Martens boots. They might be students with trendy haircuts.

"We wanted to think one step ahead: where could this movement end up?"

But in the time it took to research and produce the film, the Identitarian Movement has gone through its own cycle of boom and bust.

Following a series of [headline-grabbing stunts](#) in the mid-2010s – scaling the roofs of prominent buildings, interrupting theatre shows – the group overreached itself with an attempt to ferry rescued migrants across the Mediterranean Sea to Africa. In 2017 their chartered boat had to suffer the indignity of [being offered help by a pro-immigration NGO](#) after suffering an engine failure off the coast of Libya.

In 2018, the Identitarian Movement was kicked off Facebook; last year its Austrian leader Martin Sellner lost his YouTube channel and Twitter account. Sellner, the thinly veiled inspiration behind Schwochow's protagonist Karl (played by Jannis Niewöhner), conceded in a recent article for German far-right magazine *Sezession* that censorship and deplatforming had made it harder to achieve his ambitions.

"We have learned that certain strategies against the so-called new right can work", said Andreas Peham, a researcher for Vienna's Archive of Austrian Resistance. "For example to clearly and without exaggeration identify the way in which these movements are not as new as they claim to be. And sometimes it can help to not take them as seriously as they take themselves."

Schwochow nonetheless believes that the kind of far-right strategies he identifies in his film remain a threat. "Historically, far-right movements have often drawn advantage from being underestimated," he said.

"Our initial reaction is often: let's laugh these guys with their funny uniforms and rituals out of town. But I believe there's a real danger in not taking them seriously – in America, we have recently seen where that can lead to."

In *Je Suis Karl*, which will come to German cinemas in September, the hipster radicals develop a twin strategy to achieve their goal: infiltrating political and social institutions "through the main gate" while simultaneously carrying out false flag terror attacks to sway public opinion against Muslim minorities. Student leader Karl even manages to seduce the survivor of one of those attacks in Berlin (played by Luna Wedler) to support his cause.

Julia Ebner, a researcher at London's Institute for Strategic Dialogue who infiltrated the British branch of the Identitarian Movement and wrote a [book](#) about her experience, said she thought it was unlikely that a far-right movement would pursue such a twin strategy with the same personnel.

"I don't think the key players in the Identitarian Movement would risk being exposed for actually planning or carrying out a terror attack," said Ebner. "But they have many sympathisers who listen to their words and act on them."

One of these sympathisers included the far-right terrorist who killed 51 people in an attack on a Christchurch mosque in 2019, who was later shown to have donated money to the Identitarian Movement's French and Austrian branches, and exchanged messages with Sellner.

As European governments now react to these findings with crackdowns on the Identitarian Movement, however, its protagonists have already donned new guises. In Austria, leading members have in recent months been seen at anti-immigration marches and rallies organised by new outfit, Die Österreicher (The Austrians).

Instead of expounding the white supremacist conspiracy of a Grand Replacement to replace Europe's white population with migrants from Africa and the Middle East, the new group now invokes the "great reset" narrative beloved by followers of the QAnon cult.

In a recent article, Martin Sellner said he believed the "metapolitical shock" of the global pandemic could potentially increase the growth potential of his movement and "maybe even take us within proximity of political power".

"At the moment, the movement is a dormant volcano," said Ebner. "But it is not hard to see how the aftermath of Covid-19 and a looming economic crisis could enable it to become more active and bigger. In the long term, I fear the pandemic could make them more and not less dangerous."

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/28/new-haircuts-old-ideology-film-warns-of-shifting-far-right-strategy-in-europe>