

Populism Research Unit



YEAR IN REVIEW REPORT

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About the Populism Research Unit

The CARR Populism Research Unit (PRU) features international experts whose research examines the ‘rise’ of populist radical right parties in Western Europe (Switzerland, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom) alongside Central-Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine & Georgia), Northern Europe (Norway) and the Balkans region (Montenegro). The PRU is also available for media commentary alongside consultancy relating to topics that examine populism, the radical right and the ‘mainstreaming effect’ of radical right discourse in European and Global Politics.

About the CARR Year in Review Reports

The CARR Year in Review reports feature the latest research from CARR Fellows reflecting back on significant developments over the course of the year, specifically on topics pertaining to the individual Research Units. CARR Year in Review reports aim to provide a useful resource within a broader network of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers focusing on key dynamics of the radical right.

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About the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right

The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) is a UK-based research centre and pedagogical outreach initiative focused on the study and countering of radical right extremism and intersecting phenomena (e.g. populism, gender, antisemitism, and Islamophobia) that aims to support a variety of mainstream groups, from government agencies to grass-roots charities, through podcasts, commentary, research reports, presentations, media interviews, and commissioned work.

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INTRODUCTION

JAMES F. DOWNES

The authors of the CARR Populism Research Unit (PRU) 2020 annual Year in Review Report have decided to focus on two areas that have played an important role in shaping the radical right landscape in Europe during 2020.

James F. Downes and Valerio Alfonso Bruno provide a snapshot of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on radical right electoral support in Europe, from a comparative perspective. Carmen Aguilera-Carnerero then provides a brief analysis of Spain via the radical right Vox Party in 2020.

Secondly, the report showcases the increasingly significant role played by contemporary music in recent years on radical right discourse in Europe. The issue of music has tended to be neglected in the academic scholarship on the radical right. In this section, Sabine Volk and Maximilian Kreter provide a two-fold approach in examining how (a) contemporary radical right parties in Europe seek to exploit music as a strategy to increase their support. This section then (b) investigates how music has been used as a counterstrategy against the radical right.

SECTION I: The 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic & Its Impact on the Radical Right in European Politics

(a) The Electoral impact of COVID-19 on the Radical Right in Europe

JAMES F. DOWNES & VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe's shores in 2020 has transformed the political landscape in European politics. The pandemic has generated a wide range of academic scholarship on the radical right, both in European politics and also within global politics. This section of the CARR PRU Year-in Review Report briefly reviews the main findings from the academic literature on how COVID-19 has impacted overall support for the radical right.

The electoral impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the radical right varies considerably. A number of academic studies published in 2020 demonstrates wide ranging electoral variations for the radical right. The [CARR book volume](#) edited by Bàrbara Molas and Tamir Bar-On, *Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic by the Radical Right* (2020, Ibidem) contains a wide range of articles from academic experts on the effects of COVID-19 this year. The book highlights the responses and strategies of the radical right in the wider context of the pandemic.

In his recent CARR Right Rising podcast episode titled "[Understanding Populism During COVID-19](#)", James F. Downes explores how the pandemic is affecting the growth of the populist radical right in European politics. Downes finds that there have been considerable variations across Europe, with both increases and decreases in support for a number of radical right parties in 2020 European politics. Downes also remarks on the electoral decline of a number of radical right parties this year, such as in Western Europe with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party. The episode also includes discussion on how a number of radical right parties in Central-Eastern Europe, such as Fidesz in Hungary, have continued their electoral dominance in 2020.

In their chapter "COVID-19 & The (Temporary) Fall of the Populist Radical Right in European Politics?" for the aforementioned edited volume, Valerio Alfonso Bruno and James F. Downes focus on the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on radical right

parties in Europe, through a case study of Italian politics. They find that in the Italian political context, the empirical evidence is mixed overall. Whilst the radical right Lega (The League) has lost considerable electoral support in the polls in 2020, the radical right ‘challenger’ party, Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) has gained increased levels of support. Also in the edited book volume, Hans-Georg Betz writes that radical right parties are likely to be the main electoral beneficiaries from the post-crisis period and have a [“potentially bright future ahead.”](#)

Bruno and Downes further outline that the decline suffered by some populist radical right parties in Italy and Europe may well be temporary. In particular they [state that](#) “once the COVID-19 crisis is over, this is when mainstream parties may lose their perceived competence in how they handled COVID-19, and doubts about trust may resurface amongst voters, particularly towards the resulting economic impact. In turn, voters in Europe may be likely to hold incumbent mainstream parties to account, and PRR parties will likely be the main beneficiaries from protest politics, alongside a ‘rise’ in Euroscepticism, renewed anti-immigrant sentiment and increased salience of this key issue.”

In their [recent article](#) forthcoming in the *Nationalities Papers*, as part of the Cambridge Coronavirus Collection, Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde adopt a more cautious approach in outlining that “it is highly unlikely that the [radical right] will win or lose” from the pandemic period. Wondreys and Mudde also [argue](#) that the radical right party family will see both electoral ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ alike.

Likewise, [Matthijs Rooduijn](#) examined how thirty-one radical right parties fared in the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis. In a similar manner to both Wondreys and Mudde, Rooduijn also finds widespread electoral variations in public opinion polls for the radical right. Rooduijn also [notes](#) that electoral support for the radical right decreased in the first few months of the crisis, but eventually stabilized afterwards. Rooduijn’s conclusion is that the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to have any real lasting negative electoral effect for the radical right across Europe. The next section explores the political landscape in Spain and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on support for the radical right Vox Party in Spanish politics.

(b) The Radical Right Vox and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain

CARMEN AGUILERA-CARNERERO

The COVID-19 crisis outbreak in Spain is linked in the collective memory to two events that occurred in Madrid on the 8th March. On the one hand, the massive public demonstration on International Women's Day and, on the other hand, the simultaneous celebration of a Vox party meeting.

Days after the event, Vox Secretary General, Javier Ortega-Smith, publicly announced that he was infected with COVID-19, but asserted that [“his Spanish antibodies would defeat the damn Chinese virus”](#) and was later followed by Vox's spokesperson in the Congress Macarena Olona and the President of the Party, Santiago Abascal, who publicly apologized for their multitudinous meeting. Nearly a week later, on the 14th March, the Spanish government declared a state of emergency that lasted for three months.

The radical right blamed the Spanish government for the spread of the virus and exploited the pandemic to keep focusing on their key issue areas, namely the independence of Catalonia, immigration, and ideological criticism towards the current government. In regard to Catalan independence, Vox emphasized the importance of the unity of the country to overcome the pandemic, a message particularly addressed to the separatists in Catalonia who, in their view, were trying to boycott this plan for their own benefit.

During the lockdown, immigrants kept on arriving en mass to the Spanish coasts. Vox instigated fear in the population by [stating that](#) most of the immigrants arriving, as well as the non-accompanied minors admitted in social community centres (MENAS), were infected with the coronavirus, stigmatising this sector of the population in one of the worst affected countries by the pandemic in the world.

Abascal's Vox party also accused the Spanish government of hiding the real number of figures of deceased citizens from COVID-19, whilst also exploiting the vulnerable state of the country to impose their socio-communist political agenda. The radical right Vox party also directly responded to the lockdown by organising different demonstrations against the lockdown measures, such as the [“Revolución de los Cayetanos”](#) (the Cayetanos'

Revolution), referring to the group of upper-class citizens who protested in elite neighbourhoods in Madrid.

Section II: Contemporary Music & the Radical Right in Europe

This section of the CARR PRU Annual Year-in-Review Report provides a brief and recent review of the key developments relating to music and the radical right in European politics. This section provides a two-fold approach in examining how music is (a) often deployed as a strategy by the radical right and (b) as an important counterstrategy against the radical right. A number of important country examples are drawn from both Western Europe and Central-Eastern Europe in both sections. This section sheds further light on the important role played by music in shaping the discourse of the radical right and counterstrategies against the radical right.

(a) Music as a strategy by the Radical Right

SABINE VOLK & MAXIMILIAN KRETER

A recent phenomenon within the European radical right is the use of music as a propaganda tool. In 2020, a striking example was the participation of Polish president [Andrzej Duda](#) in a popular rap challenge for charity purposes. Duda, who has close ties with the governing radical right party Law and Justice (PiS), [performed](#) a rap song dedicated to medical workers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst severe restrictions to public life in Poland. Posing in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, the president thanked the country's medical staff for their efforts in fighting the pandemic in the style of romantic Polish poetry, hinting to a mystical 'sharp shadow of the fog'. The rap served as a strategic tool to distract the Polish public from the failed PiS policies in the context of the pandemic and public healthcare more broadly.

Whilst Poland suffers from one of the [weakest](#) public healthcare systems in Europe, Duda recently [signed](#) a legal bill to increase state funding for public media—the government's principal propaganda arm—only shortly before taking part in the rap challenge. Alarming, democracy in Poland had just suffered a major [crisis](#), given PiS's last minute decision to postpone the presidential elections scheduled for the 10th May due to delays in organizing a safe electoral process via postal voting.

With his rap performance Duda followed in the footsteps of one of the most prominent populist politicians to use music to further his ideological and political goals: the former leader of the radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache. In 2013, “HC Strache” produced rap songs in which he performed a core part of his political campaigns, strongly opposing immigration and the centrist coalition government. After he had to resign from his post as Vice Chancellor in 2019 following a broadly publicized [corruption](#) affair, Strache recorded a new propaganda [song](#) for the Viennese municipal elections in October this year, proclaiming that “HC is back” in the singing style of the late Austrian musician Falco.

Beyond powerful politicians who occasionally use music as a propaganda tool, the radical right also includes actors in the music industry. A pertinent example is the Croatian ultranationalist band Thompson with singer Marko Perković. In [mid-July 2020](#), it came to unexpected attention when a video of Manuel Neuer, a key football player at Bayern Munich and the German national team goalkeeper, went viral showing him singing along to Thompson’s most popular song “Lijepa li si” (You are beautiful). Written in reference to the Croatian national anthem “Lijepa nasa domovino” (“Our beautiful homeland”), the song is an expression of nationalist fantasies of a “Greater Croatia”.

Even the German Chancellor Angela Merkel was – most likely unwittingly – clapping her hands to the song back in 2019 at a campaign rally for the EP election of Croatia’s governing party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Furthermore, in 2018, after the defeat against France in the World Cup final, [Perković was on the bus with the players](#) singing the same song. In 2014, after the Croatian team secured the World Cup qualification, former Hamburg player Josip Simunic encouraged the stadium crowd to salute [“Za dom – spremni”](#) (For the home (land) – ready!) which was a salute used by the fascist Ustaša movement that ran the Nazi vassal state Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (Independent State of Croatia) in the 1940s.

This also served as the introduction to the Thompson’s second popular song “Bojna Čavoglave”, referring to Perković’s hometown battalion Čavoglave (Bojna Čavoglave) in the Croatian War of Independence in the early 1990s. Perković came too late to get one of the regular, or better, firearms so that he just got an old Thompson submachine gun. From this point, his comrades started calling him “Thompson” which should later become his stage name as well as the name of his band.

The band Thompson is successful and both politically and socially influential despite the rather low quality of their simple rock music. The band's success is largely rooted in the recognition value of national motives, which the rock musicians adapt lyrically. The lyrics build on an imagined ethno-national community, including elements such as the national language, historical territory, symbols such as a flag, anthem, a national allegory in personified form, alongside the core narrative of a historical determination of this community. Furthermore, these [ideological stances](#) are not hidden in camouflaged lyrics or vague insinuations. Rather, Thompson uses popular, nationalist narratives, which are not only linked to recent wars, but also to Croatian history and mythology.

These narratives are celebrated in songs and shows (such as in the Zagreb national stadium, Maksimir, in 2007) in front of audiences of several tens of thousands of people, many (former) high-ranking army members among them. [Even two former State ministers](#), Dragan Primorac (Minister of Science, Education and Sports) and the foreign secretary Miomir Žužul (both members of HDZ), regularly visited Thompson's shows. These visits might take place deliberately to gain and attract public attention because Perković is perceived as someone who has rendered outstanding services to (the defense of) the homeland.

Furthermore, whilst ultranationalist bands in other countries are absolute pariahs, for example Saga in Sweden, the so-called [“Madonna of the Far Right”](#), Skrewdriver in the UK, or Landser in Germany, Thompson is part of the political and social establishment of Croatia. Remarkably, Perković [even attended an audience with Pope Benedict XVI back in 2009](#).

(b) Music as a counterstrategy against the Radical Right

SABINE VOLK & MAXIMILIAN KRETER

Music plays an important role as a peaceful and inclusive counterstrategy against the physical manifestations of the radical right, such as street demonstrations and rallies. A key example includes the musical counter-mobilization against the Dresden-based radical right populist movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA). The PEGIDA political movement has mobilized on the streets against immigration, Islam, and the German political establishment since 2014. At the same time, PEGIDA has been frequently confronted with leftist counter-protests. Over time, the [Banda Internationale](#) (formerly Banda Comunale), a brass band which gathers musicians from around the world, including refugees from Northern Africa and the Middle East, as well as the samba band Rhythms of Resistance, have become regular participants of these counterdemonstrations against PEGIDA.

These musical performances have served to both entertain leftist counter-protestors and disturb PEGIDA events with noise. Most recently, this occurred in a rally on the occasion of PEGIDA's [six-year anniversary](#) in October. In addition, [Banda Internationale](#) launched a [petition](#) entitled "No more public spaces for racist, radical-right and hateful rallies in Dresden" in March, demanding to ban PEGIDA events from their typical locations on the picturesque squares in Dresden's city center. With nearly 22,000 signatures, the online petition was by far the most successful petition ever launched in the city.

Nonetheless, the continuous efforts of counter-mobilization have had limited success overall. Aside from a few exceptions when large-scale counter-protests were mobilized, PEGIDA events usually gather larger numbers of demonstrators and often take place at exposed spots in the city center. Yet, importantly, the musical counter-protests are able to momentarily disrupt PEGIDA's protests and political momentum, alongside sending a powerful public opposition against Islamophobic hatred in Germany.

Implications: Music & the Radical Right

The discussion of examples presented in this section demonstrates that music has become a relevant factor in the processes of mainstreaming radical right ideology in

European politics. Whereas the radical right was associated with the political extremes during the second half of the twentieth century, the use of popular music is yet another indication that it has arguably reached the political center from 2010 onwards.

A crucial mainstreaming strategy is the use of popular music that was originally rooted in cultures which have been ideologically rejected or treated as unequal or inferior. On the other hand, the empirical cases also expose how left-wing actors draw on music as a strategy to counter the mainstreaming of radical right ideology. In turn, this reveals that popular music is used as a tool (a) in spreading liberal political content and (b) for the purpose of counter-mobilization strategies. Overall, actors from across the political spectrum appear to perceive and mobilize music as an increasingly important element of popular culture to further their own political agenda. This trend is likely to continue in the coming years ahead in contemporary European politics.

SUMMARY

This snapshot report from the CARR PRU demonstrates that 2020 experienced widespread volatility and declining levels of trust in mainstream governments across Europe as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report highlights two key areas that have shaped both the academic literature and discourse of radical right parties and politicians, alongside counter-movements that seek to ameliorate the threat posed by radical right organizations in contemporary European politics. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound political and economic effects in Europe, with declining levels of trust for ‘mainstream’ parties and varying levels of support for radical right parties in Europe.

It is conceivable that the ‘end’ of the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to a resurgence in electoral support for the radical right. Other populist parties, such as the populist radical left, may also flourish electorally in the coming future with the impending economic aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a more volatile political landscape across Europe might foster opportunities for ‘new’ entrant parties building upon pre-existing fragmentation within European politics and renewed party competition.

The influential role of popular music in the PRU 2020 report demonstrates that it is not only the radical right in Europe that exploits music for their own political and electoral gains. A variety of left-wing political actors also use music as a tool to highlight the threat posed by the contemporary radical right, and even in some cases, music has served as an important counter-narrative strategy overall in providing an outlet for counter-mobilization strategies, as witnessed in countries such as Germany.

Whilst this report focuses on two main areas that have played an important role in politics this year relating to the contemporary radical right in Europe, there are important new areas of research that scholars are currently pursuing. Recent academic research by fellows at CARR related to the radical right and their strategies on issues such as (a) environmentalism by both [Bašša Lubarda](#) and [Bernhard Forchtner](#), alongside (b) the role of sports and nationalist discourse by [Michael Cole](#), further highlights how the radical right in Europe has begun to focus on “new” issue areas that transcend ‘traditional’ areas of immigration and Euroscepticism, which are the ideological bedrock of modern radical right parties.

The contributors to the CARR PRU annual Year in Review report argue that these new emerging research areas are important for researchers to focus on in 2021 and

beyond. This will enable researchers to focus on the evolution of radical right parties and the ‘mainstreaming’ effect of radical right discourse in contemporary global politics.