

The radical right threat to cities and communities

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In recent months, serious newspapers in many different countries have drawn attention to the rise of the far-right in Europe. More than a few political commentators fear that recent developments could amount to a game-changing surge in support for nationalist, Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant, culturally intolerant political parties.

Three political events, that took place in September, lend weight to these claims.

In Sweden, the general election saw a rise in support for the radical-right Swedish Democrats to the point where, by a fine margin, a right-wing bloc was able to unseat the Swedish Social Democratic Party and their partners.

In Italy, a centre-right coalition, led by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, a radical-right party with neo-fascist roots, won an absolute majority of seats in the Italian Parliament.

Meanwhile, in the UK, Boris Johnson, the right-wing, and now disgraced, former Prime Minister, was forced to resign in early July. However, this did not result in a move in British politics towards the political centre.

Rather, in September, following a bizarre leadership contest in which only the 170,000 members of the UK Conservative Party could participate, Tory members elected Liz Truss, an uncompromising and dogmatic right-wing ideologue to take over as leader of the country.

Reflecting the fact that her policy agenda was entirely misguided, Ms Truss crashed the British economy and was, on 22 October 2022, forced to resign as Prime Minister having been in office for only 44 days. She was replaced by Rishi Sunak, another right-wing, Conservative politician, who is now imposing devastating cuts on public services.

In this contribution to EURA conversations, I explore two questions: 1) Are the political commentators right about this 'recent' surge in support for the far right? And 2) What, are the implications for cities and communities in European countries?

Is the rise in right wing thinking a recent development?

Colleagues in Eastern Europe will point out that right-wing figures exercising national leadership is not a new phenomenon. For example, in Hungary, Victor Orban, leader of the Fidesz, has been in power since 2010, and has been worryingly effective in taking control of the national media and suppressing democratic opposition voices. In Poland, Andrzej Duda, another right-wing politician, and a member of the Law and Justice Party, was elected in 2015.

Taking an even longer view we can see that the shift to the radical right has, in truth, been unfolding over a forty-year period. Right-wing think-tanks, funded by ‘dark money’, meaning funding provided by undisclosed benefactors, have had great success in promoting neoliberal views (Jones 2014). The central belief in this right-wing ideology is that the tax burden on the wealthy should be lowered because, when coupled with deregulation of, for example, land use planning laws and environmental standards, these tax cuts will stimulate economic growth. Social objectives are achieved, so the argument goes, because the benefits of this growth will automatically ‘trickle down’ to the less well off.

There is no evidence to support this false claim. As explained by Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, and other respected economists, there is no such thing as a ‘free market’. Elected governments are always key players in shaping market behaviour, and governments need to act decisively to ensure that markets behave in a way that brings about desirable social, economic, and environmental outcomes (Stiglitz 2019).

What are the implications of radical right policies for cities?

The threat to cities and communities is substantial. While the radical right operates in different ways in different countries, and political struggles vary in different contexts, seven worrying values tend to feature in right-wing thinking and practice:

- 1) Prize the individual over the collective;
- 2) Favour private wealth over community wellbeing;
- 3) Pay little or no regard to social justice, and helping the least well off in society;
- 4) Take steps to denigrate, or ‘other’, non-white people, immigrants, gay people, trans people and other minorities;
- 5) Disregard or downplay the current climate and ecological emergencies
- 6) Act to weaken local, regional, and central government democratic institutions, and
- 7) Erode the rights of citizens to demonstrate and protest in public spaces.

Clearly these values, if given free rein, will lead to increasingly authoritarian and unequal societies. People and organisations holding these views must be opposed if we are to defend the values of freedom, justice, and democracy.

Allow me to close by highlighting three developments that can, perhaps, offer some hope and encouragement at this difficult time. They suggest that, in various ways, misguided neoliberal ideas and policies can be, and are being, resisted.

First, we can note that, as documented in many contributions to this EURA Conversation series, the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a strong communitarian impulse in people to protect one another. We have seen, amidst all the suffering, a wonderful upsurge in human kindness. A growing number of citizens now recognise that wellbeing isn’t individual but social. There is also a much better understanding of the fact that a healthy community isn’t just about people, it includes air, water, soil, plants, and other animals.

Second, cities across the world are leading the way in developing progressive policies and solutions to modern societal challenges. As I document in my recent book, *Cities and*

communities beyond COVID19, civic leaders in many cities are co-creating initiatives that are entirely progressive in intent – they emphasise caring for people, caring for communities and caring for the planet (Hambleton 2020).

Third, international city-to-city networking is on the rise. In a small way EURL members, and urban scholars more broadly, can play a role in spreading understanding about how to lead, plan and govern localities in ways that are inclusive and aim to advance social, economic, and environmental justice. They can do this through their teaching, their publications and, of course, through activism in their local communities.

References

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