

The appeal of far-right politics

June 19 2020, by Alina Birkel



Far-right activists often organise events such as hikes, festivals or summer camps in order to create a sense of community among their members. Credit:

[Pexels/Maël Balland](#)

Why do "ordinary" citizens join far-right organisations? Agnieszka Pasieka explores how far-right groups offer social services, organise festivals and shape their own narrative to attract new members. In her FWF-project, she accompanies activists to investigate their practices and philosophies.

For anthropologists, it is often challenging to get in touch with research participants and win their trust. In the case of far-right activists, it turned out to be especially difficult, says Agnieszka Pasieka. "Far-right activists have had bad experiences with people who pretended to join their organisations but then gathered material and left. In my case, they first suspected that I was a journalist who was just pretending to be a researcher."

Pasieka works at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna and received funding for her project from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) in the frame of the Elise Richter-Programme. In her research, she explores a question that is more pressing than ever: How can the rise of the far right be explained? The goal of her project is to investigate not only the activists' ways of acting but also the appeal that these groups have on "ordinary" people. Furthermore, the project aims to develop critical methods and theory that can be used to study this and kindred phenomena.

In order to establish first contacts, Pasieka went to a festival organised by a group of Italian activists. "It was clear that the festival was organized by a far-right group, it was openly advertised—one could buy a ticket and attend. So, that's what I did." There, she got to know activists from several countries and openly discussed with them her research project. "I told them that I don't agree with them but I kept emphasising that my aim was to try to engage with and understand their views," she concludes. In the months to come, she followed their activities, talked to them, conducted interviews and participated in a variety of their undertakings.

A Social Movement?

In the [public discourse](#), far-right groups are mostly associated with anti-refugee demonstrations and street protests. But the groups Pasieka

studies also engage in activities that they are not commonly associated with. These activities range from socialising events such as hiking in the mountains and organising festivals to establishing social assistance models for citizens in need—toys for kids or food, for example, as well as support from lawyers and social workers. Far-right groups are engaged in many of these activities also during the current emergency situation provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting themselves as the people who step in where the state is absent.

In the public discourse, far-right activists are often portrayed as "driven by hate." However, in order to attract new members and build their communities, they adopt a different kind of narrative: "They use the notions of friendship, hope, a better future. But of course this relates to their own community and the people they consider legitimate inhabitants of their countries," Pasieka says.



"What they do is really quite diverse: Conferences and cultural events, the

promotion of books that are written by authors who support their right-wing cause; and activism such as advocating for animal rights or helping the poor," Pasieka explains. Credit: [Matheus Bertelli / Pexels](#)

Transnational Nationalists

One of the aspects Pasieka looks at is how far-right groups are transnationally connected. Being a "transnational nationalist" is not necessarily a contradiction and it is not a new phenomenon, as fascist groups in the 1920s and 1930s were networking transnationally, too.

"At the end of the day, there is nothing surprising about this networking. These groups cherish their national identity but they also live in the 21st century and they realise that the world is globalised. They use these connections productively to learn from people in other countries—to observe what others do and implement the same tactics and practices," Pasieka explains.

Understanding Different Perspectives

In Italy and Poland, Pasieka got to know members of the far-right organisations on a personal level, which, she says, was challenging at times: "Negotiating access to the field and gaining trust as an anthropologist is really an ongoing process. Ethnographic research is full of 'ups' and 'downs.'" It happened to me to say something my research participants got upset about and put my further research into question," she says.

However, this problem is more inherent to [ethnographic research](#), generally, than it is inherent to studying far-right activism in particular. While far-right groups do have some specific characteristics, Pasieka is

highly critical of marginalising them and treating them as an "especially troublesome" category of research participants: "We really should not make something very specific of this topic, something very exceptional. This aura of exceptionality is not helpful for understanding it."

However difficult it might be to empathise with someone who shares fundamentally different values, taking all parties seriously and understanding their motivation is key in a time in which a refusal to engage with other people's views has become a feature of political as well as academic debates. Therefore, Pasieka emphasizes that studying far-right groups is not about "liking" or "disliking," but about understanding what other people think and do.

Provided by University of Vienna

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