

Combating the Rise in Far Right Extremism in Young people

GERAINT RHYS WHITTAKER *

The outcome of the European elections in May demanded a new way of thinking about the purpose and role of the European Union and its institutions. Eurosceptics have never been so vocal and well supported as they are today which has re-invigorated fresh questions over whether its general existence has an expiry date. One concerning outcome which is linked to this anti-European rhetoric has been the rise of far-right parties. Although in Britain the British National Party (BNP) lost their only MEP and leader of the party Nick Griffin, across Europe the far-right has made significant gains. From France's Front National who have long been a party with a very stern anti-immigration rhetoric, to the Freedom Party in the Netherlands whose leader Geert Wilders regularly criticises Islam and Muslims, and to Hungary's Jobbik Party whose military uniforms and anti-Jewish stance has been compared on countless occasions to the Nazi's, all have made electoral progress which cannot be ignored. Equally, other significant parties such as the Golden Dawn Party in Greece, the Danish People's Party, and the Austrian Freedom Party all now confirm that the far-right is a very visible and increasingly powerful presence within European participatory politics.

Although many of these parties have become astute in using rhetoric which is far more acceptable and palatable, all share certain racist undertones which highlight a fundamental political mobilization against people from minority religions, races and beliefs. Because of this, they are parties which must be given considerable attention over the next few years as they have the ability to destabilise the security and relative peace of much of mainland Europe. However, before we can understand how these parties are able to develop further, we must first unpick how at the grassroots levels such intolerant attitudes and ideas can develop and manifest themselves amongst people in their everyday lives. After all, it is everyday people who are mobilised to support such parties, and understanding how racism and intolerance is expressed at this level can give a clearer picture as to why this rise has been significant. Discussing such things however can only take us so far and practical solutions must always be sought to further our knowledge on such issues. This article will briefly discuss one such project (The Think Project) which is not only seeking to understand how these racist attitudes begin and develop, but is actively trying to prevent them by combatting such

beliefs in young adults before they have the chance to manifest into further support for far-right ideologies and causes.

The Think Project

The Think Project is an initiative created by the Ethnic Youth Support Team (EYST) which is a non-profit beneficiary-led and managed ethnic minority youth organization based in Swansea, South Wales in the United Kingdom. EYST was set up in 2005 by a group of ethnic minority young people to fill a gap in provision for young Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people aged 11-25 by providing a targeted, culturally sensitive and holistic support service to meet their needs. EYST has since gone from strength to strength, and now employs a team of 15 staff, and thanks to funding from a wide range of funders is able to deliver a range of services from education, employment & health to personal and community safety. The Think Project emerged from the increasing impact that racism and far-right extremism appeared to be having on Swansea's ethnic minority population. The project was initiated after many of their 500 clients had reported experiencing a visible increase in far-right attitudes expressed toward them including racist incidents such as women having their hijabs removed in the street and people being racially abused. It was noted that many of the perpetrators of such incidents were instigated by young people. The Think Project therefore developed as a targeted intervention project, offering disengaged young people in Swansea the opportunity to take part in a program of workshops giving them the facts about race, religion, and migration, and using these classes to challenge racism and to refute myths and stereotypes. The project's main aims are to: 1) Build mutual understanding and respect by providing tailored targeted workshops to directly challenge and deconstruct racist views 2) Promote acceptance and integration by using experienced local trainers from BAME youth backgrounds to deliver the workshops and give the issues a human face; and 3) Build community resilience to problems and tensions by targeting the most disenfranchised young people within a community and enabling them to have a positive influence on their own peers, families, and communities.

The project seeks to ensure that the young people taking part that complete the program would have increased their knowledge of the facts about race, religion, and migration, developed their understanding and empathy for different racial, religious, and migrant groups, and increased their resilience to racist and far-right ideology, while increasing the confidence of the individuals. The workshops aim to provoke and inspire young people to think through these difficult issues and to think for themselves. The workshop sessions are based around core content mixed with open debate and practical tasks covering a number of issues including (1) understanding identity diversity and culture, reasons behind identity choices, and the makeup of communities and what makes communities different; (2) asylum seekers and challenging the myths about benefits and jobs; (3)

historical issues and how the media deals with migration issues; (4) understanding extremism and the different types of extremism, including Islamic and far-right; and (5) a visit to EYST and a session with other ethnic youth workers.

All the young people who take part in the course need additional support to remain in education and have been excluded from mainstream education. Initially, when many of the young people begin the projects their attitudes are quite common. Almost all can define racism but not extremism, and most feel that there are too many people from different racial or religious groups living in their communities. For those young people who agreed with the statement 'There are too many people from different racial or religious backgrounds living in my community' ,primary reasons for their answers were focused on there being "too many" people from other backgrounds, with those groups of people "taking all our jobs." Most cannot present much evidence to back these claims but what must be remembered is that such negative views about race and religion are, of course, not a stand-alone phenomenon and they are affected by external influences such as family, peers, communities and the media. Many of these attitudes are therefore deeply entrenched and so to get at the heart of such problems the Think Project takes an innovative approach.

One of the key strengths is the delivery mode of the program, in particular having the presence of a worker from an ethnic background to deliver it. Having the program delivered by an engaging youth-friendly worker from a Muslim background with whom the young people could form a bond, ask questions, and have these answered -fundamentally and experientially challenges and goes against the negative stereotypes and myths about BAME/Muslims pedalled by far-right groups. However, it may be equally important for the second program deliverer to be a white (and also 'youth-friendly') person. This 'double act' in itself promotes a message and example of diversity in action which underpins the content of the lessons delivered. The partnership of workshop delivery between a white-Welsh and a BAME youth worker enabled the young people to engage with someone from a different background, particularly a Muslim background, provide first-hand and authentic answers to questions and show that people from different ethnic groups can work together and talk to one another. For some of the young people, this was the first time they had been in direct contact with someone who was a Muslim.

Another innovation of the project is the emphasis on keeping an open-forum which was is also essential to its delivery. The young people are given the freedom to ask anything they want and to and to share their views but, being an open forum, this also gave the opportunity for those views to be challenged.

Following the completion of the programs, all the young people felt they had learned something from the course, and all felt they had a better understanding of different cultures and religions, asylum seekers, and extremism. Nearly all revealed that before the course, they had

thought that extremism was about Muslims and that most Muslims were terrorists. The Think Project was their first experience of learning about different cultures and religions that they could meaningfully remember. Nonetheless, for some young people, the negative views of other races, religions, and asylum seekers remained. The project did have a positive effect on the thinking of some of the young people who felt their understanding had changed and felt strongly that they were “okay” with having views that may be different to some of their friends. Any change in viewpoint is likely to evolve once a young person is away from the project and back among their own community and peers. However, it is clear that exposure to learning about culture and religion can have nothing but a positive influence. These influences may be small but can be seen as significant steps.

As Europe is faced with the varying problems associated with the rise of the far-right, I have briefly discussed the response of one grassroots project that has begun to attempt to prevent such problems. By no means is the project perfect, and every day the staff and working group are learning how better to deal with the issues that arise. The Think Project however has been successful in securing funding to extend the project until 2015 to all over Wales.

More reading: you can visit <http://eyst.org.uk/> and Read: Cifuentes, R., Whittaker, G.R & Lake, L. (2013) ‘The Think Project: An Approach to Addressing Racism and Far-Right Extremism in Swansea, South Wales’, *Democracy and Security*, 9:3, 304-325

** PhD student, School of Welsh,
Cardiff University*