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‘It is about building trust, and that takes a long time’

Patrik Hermansson on why people vote for the right and how giving a sense of hope and direction could counter this development

Why do you think we are experiencing a time in which there is increased support for right and extreme right groups in the Western world?

That's a hard question. I think it is important to highlight the societal conditions that we live in now. It's a time of crisis in lots of ways; the pandemic, global warming and now a war in Europe, all combined with lots of different interests in the world going in different directions. There is a strong sense of insecurity, and the far right is good at giving people a sense of control and an explanation for why all these different things are happening. It is, of course, much easier to say that there is one single cause behind all this, rather than seeing the complex, sometimes random, causes and connections between different factors and to say ‘it was these bad guys’ — and that's what the far right is doing.

A second factor is the feeling of stagnation and the lack of progress that many people experience. Living standards and public safety has not improved much in recent years, or at least people don't perceive it that way. Many are very insecure about the future and don't see the uphill prosperity that was present for the past 30 years, in the time of our parents. It varies by country, but this sense that ‘things are happening, we're moving forward, life is getting better, we're starting to go on holidays to other countries’, is gone. Now it's more a sentiment of ‘my kids probably can't get all the things that I could get’.

And then the last factor, which is a bit depressing, is that the trend towards the right is a reaction to actual progress that *has* happened; social change, increased visibility of LGBTQI+ people, successes when it comes to feminism and an increased focus on global warming. We're not done yet but there has been progress. And that,

unfortunately, makes some people feel left out. I do not want to blame anybody like some do when they end up placing the blame on the left, which is too 'woke'. I very much disagree with that because progress is where we need to go. But people have reactions to this progress. Some people feel that when other people get rights and more attention and possibilities in the workplace, that's something that they take from someone else, from them maybe.

As you have said, in the Western world, depending on which social strata you're in, the current storm of crises we find ourselves in and the resulting economic consequences have deepened already existing hardships for people. The left has traditionally focused on offering a solution to these struggles and yet, it is the right that is filling this role. How did they manage to portray themselves as the ones that are going to solve these issues?

I think when it comes to the far right, their strategy is always to invert the impression they exert on others as if it was something that was happening to them. In that logic, there is no racism except for racism against white people, for example. And they are successful because they exploit the failure from the left to move forward. Unions in Europe are not exactly getting any stronger. Economic differences are increasing in many European countries — so something has not really worked here, even in social democratic countries like in Scandinavia. Life has just not kept improving. It gets easier then to argue that the left does not stand for improvements but actually only cares about environmentalism, 'wokeism', identity politics and other symbolic abstract things rather than material stuff. And the right is successful in this: they've strategically framed the left as being alienated from the average person by focusing on these things.

How would it be possible to counter this?

This is very difficult because it's a question of anger due to worsening living conditions. When you are feeling insecure and angry, it feels good to push others down, to have an outlet for that anger and prove to yourself and others that you are not at the bottom, that you are somewhere in the middle or possibly coming to the top. But that anger comes from a disappointment with the lack of prospects for the future. So, that's what the left has to focus on. It's about countering that feeling and giving a sense of hope and direction.

In the media and amongst some left-wing politicians, people who vote for the right are villainised. This creates the image that, as a right-wing voter, one's grievances are not heard by the other side. How would it be possible to change this narrative which is driven by emotion?

If we acknowledge that life is not great, at the moment, for the average person, and create the prospects that it's going to be better in the future, it becomes much easier to deal with one's hardship than if the narrative were reversed. I think there's a difference between inequality and poor living standards and material conditions in a sort of uphill progress. When it's progress that is down, a sense of desperation kicks in and the wish to counter by doing the opposite of what we've done for 20 years – and that's voting for the far right.

But what can we do? A central element is about understanding the drivers of the far right. It's about trying to understand so that we can do effective campaigning and effective education in schools, for example. We have an education team that goes to schools to teach both kids and teachers. When it comes to campaigning, we do a lot around elections and creating a pro-voter election campaign in the UK or voter registration campaigns. When people are engaged in their local communities or in politics overall, they start to regain the sense of having a bit of control over their life and a say in how things are going.

Obviously, this is hard in practice. It takes a lot of work, and the changes you see will not happen from one day to the other. It's not a Hollywood-movie-sort-of-solution where everybody just ends up super happy and hugs in the end. But if you can affect some people and give them a little bit of hope, that's a win. Especially when we start talking about the extreme far right. We try to isolate that out so people don't turn to violence. Because when those ideas start to get normalised, then we have a really big problem.

You talked a lot about giving a feeling that we're heading somewhere and giving hope. How do you try to create such an outlook?

It's very much about people transgressing their identity, taking the perspectives of the white working-class person or Muslim working-class person and trying to focus on a certain city to find an identity or a sense of commonality with the people around you. It doesn't replace the old identity, but it adds an extra feeling of local patriotism. It's essentially about bringing groups together and organising events where people come from different parts of cities, towns or villages that do not otherwise interact with one another. But this is hard and it takes a long time. People are mad at each other.

What would you say the left would have to concentrate on now to combat the rise of the right in the upcoming 2024 European Parliamentary elections?

There is always this haste and urgency when it comes to combatting

the right. Obviously, it's urgent, but the heart of the matter is that it is about building trust — and that takes a long time. The urgency which drives politics creates a worrisome questioning, because if we put it in the way that the right might win and we would end up with an 'organisational capture', which basically means the far right runs all of our institutions, I think, this is a bit of a leap. It depends on where you are in the EU, but I don't really see it. What is worse is that this urgent crisis mode opens the way for populist and bad politics. This is when you get Social Democrats saying we should stop immigration and focus on our own workers and more policing. The results are campaigns that are conceived in quite simplistic terms — we should think more in the long term. Unfortunately, politics also thinks in its political cycle of elections, this is a part of the problem.

Do you see differences between the age groups on who is more likely or who votes more right or extreme right?

Young people vote much less overall. I think that's true for many countries. There are exceptions, obviously. We see quite strong tendencies for acceptance of very extreme far-right ideas from young people and more conservative ideas overall. But also, a growing group of young people that are on the radical left side. It's very polarising. Young people are very far to the sides and most of them aren't motivated to vote. That's really depressing.

But then, on a positive note, there are lots of very young people who have progressive views. Actually, when we do polls, we have the finding that more people have progressive views around feminism, obstetric rights and migration today than they did 50 years ago – in the UK at least. It is actually moving in the right direction. And I think those things people forget about easily, but one shouldn't — most people are progressive.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



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