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From Britain to Ukraine, the far right is thriving on shared emotion

Крайні праві в Україні підсилюються від Британії на хвилі загальних емоцій

Після декількох років кровопролиття у більшості західних засобів масової інформації накопичилася втома від України. Але якщо пильніше придивитися до конфлікту між Києвом і Москвою, то можна помітити одну цікаву особливість. Вона полягає в тому, що по обидва боки воюють крайні праві сили, а цінності у цих сил багато в чому однакові. Українські і російські ультраправі готові вбивати один одного через такі проблеми, як спадщина Другої світової війни, і хто в ній є справжнім героєм.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/05/britain-ukraine-far-right-neo-nazis>

Pride event in Kiev, 2016. Photograph: Yuriy Kirnichny/AFP/Getty Images

While reports of Britons being recruited by Ukrainian neo-Nazis to fight in a war against Russia appear to be somewhat exaggerated – two men hardly constitutes some sort of far-right stampede to the eastern edge of Europe – this is a good time to remember that hate is on the upswing, and to think of it as a localised phenomenon is to miss the bigger picture.

Consider the war that Russia is waging. After years of bloodshed, Ukraine fatigue has firmly settled in across much of the western media. Yet if we were paying closer attention to the conflict between Kiev and Moscow, we would notice an interesting element to the conflict – that the far right is involved on both sides, and that the values of these two groups pitted against each other are similar in many respects.

Members of the Ukrainian and the Russian far right are willing to riddle each other with very many bullet holes over such issues as the legacy of the second world war, and who the real heroes were. Ask them about abortion, however, or feminism, or migration, or antisemitism, or LGBT rights, or human rights in general,

or, for that matter, government transparency and accountability, and suddenly these mortal enemies will seem more like good buddies who had a little tiff over history and national identity but will happily join forces to oppress whoever gets in their way, should the current conflict come to an end.

As the editors of the anarchist publication Nihilist.li have argued, “the differences between the Kremlin and Ukrainian fascists are tactical – not strategic ... Both Russian and Ukrainian far-right groups have the same values and the same political ideal – crony capitalism.”

What binds members of far-right groups can be exploited for good

The greater lesson here is this: the resurgent far-right ideology tends to transcend borders as surely as the practical concerns of far-right groups – and their high-placed supporters – do. This is where the real threat lies, particularly as memories of the second world war begin to erode (it no longer has such an emotional pull on younger generations). More than anything, a holistic approach to far-right hatred in Europe – and, for that matter, the United States – is needed. Ukraine’s problems with the far right are Britain’s problems, are Bulgaria’s problems, are Austria’s problems, and even, ultimately, Russia’s problems. (No matter how much Putin coddles and coopts the far right abroad, the truth is, he is never going to be extreme enough for his own extremists.)

In looking for solutions, we should consider the predicament the US now finds itself in – with a blatantly racist president who will reward any far-right group for as long as it sings his praises. Much has been made of Donald Trump’s supporters’ desire to support this president at any cost. Reporters from elite publications are regularly parachuted into towns and districts that represent Trump’s “base” in order to file bewildered, slightly apocalyptic reports on how there are millions of Americans out there who do not care that the man they elected thinks there are “both sides” to a conflict involving murderous far-right violence.

Even as we continue to combat fake news, it has become glaringly obvious that facts alone won’t reach these racists and cheerleaders for racism – because

support for Trump comes from a place that's wholly different to the place where we compile and analyse facts. As George Lakoff has argued, conservatives' hierarchical moral worldview influences support to a great degree – this translates into support for the virulent racism of the current administration.

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Far-right advances across nations embolden the far right in other nations. This trend is likely to continue – and this is why a couple of Britons travelling to Ukraine to fight alongside neo-Nazis is something to take notice of.

The causes of our current predicament can be debated – certainly a great number of economic and social factors are at play – but what matters is the simple realisation that what binds members of far-right groups can be exploited for good. Shared humanity, the idea of belonging to a common cause – these are the tools we have at our disposal if we wish to adequately address the rising tide of hate.

Tracking hate, analysing it, understanding the damage it can and does inflict on communities is important – but it will not be enough in the days to come. Active resistance will be needed, and a crucial component of resistance is teaching people to connect with one another in meaningful ways, to establish horizontal ties that engage them not just intellectually and ideologically, but also emotionally.

To bring this back to Lakoff, what matters right now is not so much what far-right hate groups think, but what their members feel and believe. If we lose sight of that, the far-right threat will only grow and metastasise. As human beings, we have been at this crossroads before. The question is whether or not we're willing to try something different this time around.

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