

Narratives as a Means of Countering the Radical Right; Looking into the Trojan T-shirt Project

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Summary

The radical right, which constitutes a multifaceted and complex entity with roots in the history of Europe, has once again attracted the attention of several states due to its increasing influence on their social and political life. The potential consequences of this tendency have called for immediate and effective response that could derive either from the side of governments, local communities or independent organizations. In line with the latter, the main purpose of this paper is to look into the activities of EXIT-Germany, a non-governmental organization operating since 2000, and more specifically to present in detail the multiple benefits of a particular action, entitled ‘The Trojan T-shirt Project.’ The campaign, that took place in 2011 at a rock festival in Gera, Germany organized by the right-wing extremist party National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), predominantly aimed to increase the awareness and popularity of the organization within the adherents of the German radical right scene. Moreover, the theoretical pillars of this study involve an analysis of the related concepts of narrative and counter-narrative, as they can contribute to a better and clearer understanding of the messages that the campaign communicated to its audiences.

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1. Introduction

The radical right, expressed either through its violent or non-violent forms, appears to be gaining heightened attention in Europe due to its involvement in the social and political life of the continent. Indicatively, this tendency can be noticed, first, in its unprecedented success during the European elections in May 2014. Following a post-election analysis of the British think tank 'Counterpoint' (2014) on the radical right parties assembling the new political scene, one can infer that they are likely to pose obstacles to the normal functioning of the European Parliament; radical right parties, the characteristics of which substantially vary, do not intend to pave the way for constructive and healthy dialogues with aim of devising necessary compromises, but rather disrupt and impede the institution's internal processes. A second realization lies in the frequent attacks occurring at the local level in several states. For instance, we have witnessed marches against Roma in Hungary as well as racially motivated strikes targeting immigrants in Greece and Germany. Besides, Cecilia Malmström, EU Home Affairs Commissioner, declared that violent right-wing extremism currently ranks as the biggest threat to the European Union ("Extreme right "biggest threat to EU,"" 2014).

The radical right constitutes a heterogeneous entity and subsequently cannot be easily framed in a single, unequivocal definition. It spans from organized political parties to (loose) social movements and lone actors with distinguishable or overlapping traits, ideological roots and either violent or non-violent practices (Goodwin, Ramalingam, & Briggs, 2012). The picture even further perplexes taking into consideration that it has exhibited unique abilities over the years to evolve and adapt to a constantly converging world predominantly driven by technological improvements (e.g. advent of new information era, shift in communication patterns), economic changes (e.g. unemployment rates, relative deprivation) and sociopolitical transformations (e.g. immigration flows, cultural anxieties and disappointment with mainstream politics). Given its indefinite nature and continuing presence in Europe (Mudde, 1995), the aforementioned indicate that the challenge the

variant forms of the radical right may pose to modern societies is not negligible, albeit it should not be overestimated either, and in consequence should not be treated as a sporadic phenomenon.

Europe as a whole and each state independently need to step up drawing policies that would curb and minimize the influence coming from the radical right. Not only governments, but actors such as intelligence agencies, independent organizations or local communities could also play a decisive role in achieving this goal. Thus, the purpose of the current paper is to investigate the activities of EXIT-Germany, a non-governmental organization operating since 2000 with expertise in right-wing extremist disengagement and deradicalization programs, and to assess the impact of its actions on the radical right scene in Germany. More specifically, it will look into the Trojan t-shirt project, the goal of which was to increase the awareness and popularity (or familiarity) of the organization in this polarized scene; the Trojan t-shirt project stood out as a novel and creative campaign of EXIT-Germany making the headlines in major news media around the world as well as becoming a topic of discussion among radical right forums.

The campaign took place in 2011 at a rock festival in Gera, East Germany organized by the radical right party National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). EXIT-Germany in collaboration with Grabarz and Partner, an advertisement agency located in Hamburg, manufactured and distributed to the festival attendees 250 t-shirts with skull and crossbones symbols reading the slogan 'Hardcore Rebels - National and Free.' However, it was only after washing them that the recipients realized that the initial stamps disappeared, acting as a Trojan, and their place was taken over by the ensuing message: 'if your t-shirt can do it, so can you - we can help you to get free of right-wing extremism. EXIT-Germany.' Bernd Wagner, co-founder of EXIT-Germany, stressed that the campaign carried a simple, but powerful and concise message that the influence of the radical right "is limited, even within their own circle" (Wagner, 2011, para. 5). The Trojan t-shirt initiative, which presented itself as a strict political statement, penetrated the boundaries of the movement providing an alternative story (i.e. there is way out of the radical right premises and once needed, help

can be immediately provided) of the same experience (i.e. being at a music festival with comrades) to the participants.

Therefore, the Trojan t-shirt project raised an important question: how are stories or better stated narratives, as we will see in the next sections, linked with the processes people construct reality and respond? Concomitant with that is the work of Rydgren (2005) who proposes an informative model including factors that may contribute to the emergence (or not) of like-minded radical right parties and movements in Western Europe and explains why some have succeeded while others not. The author argues that along with sufficient political opportunities, caused to name a few by levels of political trust, politicization of new issues or economic insecurities, the innovation, diffusion and acquisition of dominant master frames, meaning interpretive mechanisms which help individuals make sense of their surrounding situation, are also significant factors. Hence, this paper deals with language formations and modifications adopted by the radical right so that its views can sound attractive and resonate with larger audiences.

The paper is consequently structured as follows: the first part goes over the definition of the radical right in order to sketch out its theoretical basis and discusses the difficulties of reaching unanimous agreement on the dimensions of the concept; next, it presents tendencies and incidents that have transpired in the Federal Republic of Germany so that the reader can familiarize himself with the situation in the country. The third part elucidates the related concepts of narrative and counter-narrative, since they are important in comprehending the analysis of the Trojan t-shirt campaign, and presents their potential impact on people's way of thinking. The Trojan t-shirt project is finally examined in full describing how the idea was conceived, prepared and translated into action and looks at the benefits that the campaign brought about.

2. Definition of the radical right

The radical right is a multifaceted and complex concept and as a result there is no consensus on its definition; there are even discrepancies on its appellation, since the terms extreme right, radical right, populism (Widfeldt, 2000) or far-right have often been used

interchangeably in literature. The radical right involves a variety of actors, goals, historical backgrounds, ideologies, constructs of enemies, organizational structures and supporters' base (Wilson & Hainsworth, 2012); concerning the latter, for example, research has revealed that numerous social and/or psychological factors may mobilize individuals to enter and participate in violent radical right groups ranging, among others, from ideological connection and a sense of community and protection to thrill-seeking reasons (Bjørge as cited in Goodwin et al., 2012).

Moreover, the association of the radical right with the dire consequences of the Second World War further blocked its adequate understanding. Instead of primarily being a research topic in political sciences that could offer an (less subjective) account of its elements, it "also became a label ... that was used to discredit groups, ideas or persons" (Van Der Walk & Wagenaar, 2010, p. 18) assigning emotionally laden content to its study. Thus, the agents of the radical right, in effort to develop a coping mechanism to survive, were forced to build a moderate image in many cases and hold altered ideas in the following years after the war that did not necessarily reflect their core ideology (Van Der Walk & Wagenaar, 2010). In fact, this tactic obscured (and still often does) the scrutiny of the radical right and blurred the lines between its actual and hidden aspirations.

Despite these drawbacks mentioned in the above paragraphs, there have been attempts by scholars to come up with distinct categories of the radical right (e.g. Mudde, 1995; Ignazi, 1992; Taggart, 1995). However, one needs to bear in mind that the boundaries of these classifications are fluid and likely to change over time depending on the future decisions and actions of radical right groups as a result of their revisioning strategies. Due to space limitations, the present paper analyzes the wide-ranging conceptualization proposed by Michael Minkenberg, as it is considered to be representative provided that the author has a long-term experience with this phenomenon in Germany, and is based on the combined outcome of two criteria, namely ideological direction and organizational structure. Accordingly, the former criterion yields four versions:

- 1) Extremist right: an autocratic-fascist right usually involving racism or ethnocentrism and inspired by right-wing dictatorships of the interwar period. 2)

Ethno-centrist right: a racist or ethno-centrist, but non-fascist right, usually employing 'ethno-pluralist' arguments for the incompatibility of cultures and ethnicities while denying the existence of a 'natural hierarchy.' 3) Populist right: a populist-authoritarian right, organized around a strong and charismatic leader with an authoritarian structure and a diffuse nationalist or xenophobic ideology. 4) Religious fundamentalist right: a religious-fundamentalist right, in which nationalism or xenophobia merges with religious rigidity, resulting in the defense of a religiously-framed conception of national 'purity' (Minkenberg, 2013, pp. 12-13).

While the second criterion identifies:

Party/campaign organization: groups that try to win public office organizing themselves through political parties and electoral campaigns. 2) Social movement organization: groups that do not nominate candidates for public office, but rather try to mobilize support through larger social movements with which they identify and which offer interpretative frames for particular problems. 3) Sub-cultural milieu: smaller groups and socio-cultural milieus, which operate relatively independently from parties and larger social movements, do not exhibit formal organizational structures, and may exhibit higher propensities toward violence (Minkenberg, 2013, p. 13).

An additional category, that could enhance the scope of the second criterion, is 'individual lone wolves' (Goodwin et al., 2012) as seemed to be the case of the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik in 2011². The need to create an extra category for lone wolves stems from the fact that individuals who come to the decision to deploy violence act in isolation and can pose, under certain conditions, security challenges to authorities, as they tend to operate out of organized networks and their need of sharing information is absent (Bates, 2012). On the other hand, a distinguishing characteristic that applies to the variant forms of the radical right is a persistent feeling of group identification; a common trait in human relationships which results in a dichotomous vision of the world and refers to the sorting of

² However, there remains ambiguity whether or not he was member of a terrorist group when he proceeded to violence.

individuals into 'us vs. them' categories (Moskalenko, McCauley & Rozin as cited in Nijboer, 2012) corresponding to the demarcated principles of each group (Caiani & della Porta, 2010). The partisans of the radical right stand against beliefs that disrupt their meaning assumptions and perceptions of a homogeneous society; ethnic, religious or linguistic diversity and immigration are concepts that may fail to keep up with their values and beliefs. In addition, emphasis should be placed, at this point, on the concept of the so-called new radical right. As pointed out already, the radical right has adopted a moderate, democratic stance in its rhetoric (and admittedly not all of its variants, albeit this tendency has been recorded as a general trend and factor of success) so that it can avoid isolation and exclusion from societal processes. Particularly, this framing shift associates with the successful communication strategy espoused by the French Front National, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1980's, which deviated from expressing hard to assimilate views and spread to Europe thereafter (Ivaldi, 2012) and mostly to Western countries. Minkenberg (2013) elaborates on the latter claiming that Eastern Europe should be approached and studied under a regime change prism, since in countries, where volatile political transitions have occurred, there is fertile ground for the adherents of the radical right to hold more extreme positions.

Therefore, the new radical right has stopped short of defending biological racism (i.e. superiority of races) and has focused its rhetoric on cultural racism (i.e. ethno-pluralist doctrine). This new type of racism concerns about the effects of cultural intermingling and places the immigration issue at the top of the political agenda asserting that ethnicities should be kept apart, otherwise the nation runs the risk of losing its pure identity (Mudde as cited in Widfeldt, 2000). An extra axis underscores the populist nature of the radical right thinking which is integrated in an anti-political-establishment discourse (Ignazi, 1992). The new radical right tries to operate within the limits of constitutional democracy, is hostile to elites and established political parties and finds no differences among them (Rydgren, 2005). Their rhetoric aims to attract, among others, vulnerable and disillusioned people who feel uneasy to settle well in a globalized, fast paced and post-industrial landscape and think of mainstream political powers as unable to sort out their anxieties; be it, for instance, lack of

job and educational prospects, worries on multicultural nations or social cohesion. Globalization appears to have affected individuals' life and the ways they locate themselves in society (Guibernau, 2010).

3. The situation in the Federal Republic of Germany

As expected from the previous analysis, the radical right scene in Germany is also diverse and does not leave enough room for simple explanations. The re-unification process of Germany, started with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, adds another conceptualization constraint and again renders this case under a regime change prism. Minkenberg (2005) explicates that East and West Germany exhibit differences in respect to trust in institutions, ideological underpinnings, party and movement types and transformation of social and economic systems. Hence, the radical right does not unfold itself similarly in these two territories and those differences should be taken into account in order to make proper inferences (Grimm, 2012). In West Germany, as in Western Europe, the radical right has made efforts to disconnect from anti-democratic frames, whilst in East Germany, as in Eastern Europe, the more extreme forms have prevailed (Minkenberg, 2005).

In general, political parties leaning on the radical right have failed to gain national Parliamentary presence in Germany. At the municipal and region level this picture moderately changes, since they have managed to pull voters' support and elect candidates; however, their success is considered to be limited (Schellenberg, 2013). Another point is that the failure in elections does not necessarily imply that the radical right is not competent enough to channel its (perceived) salient issues into the rhetoric and actions of mainstream parties. For example, Ronald Koch, member of the Christian Democrats party and state premier of Hesse in 2007, expressed views, disguised in anti-immigrant sentiments, when he commented, in a pre-election interview, on the relationship between criminal activities and ethnic groups using precisely the next sequence of words: "we have spent too long showing a strange sociological understanding for groups that consciously commit violence as ethnic minorities" as cited in the work of Ellinas (2010, p. 2). Consequently, it seems that the radical right is often able to wield indirect influence on mainstream discourse and policy outcomes

through the politicization of issues resulting in a situation which is likely to induce a climate of intolerance and division within societies.

Regarding the presence of the radical right in the European political scene, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) have recently entered the EU Parliament³ managing to gather 1% and 7.1% of the vote respectively ("European Parliament: Results," 2014), while in 1989 another radical right party, namely Die Republikaner (REP), had secured seats (7.1%) (Lochocki, 2014). It is important to note, at this point, that the AfD is a new party founded in February 2013 and one should be cautious before reaching a final conclusion about its profile. Hence, there is no intention, here, of equating AfD with the more extreme manifestations of the radical right in Germany; despite that, although it is euro-skeptic in nature, at least for the time being, and has introduced itself as anti-elite and anti-establishment party, the AfD has also attracted criticism for taking a stance against immigrants and homosexuals⁴ (Lewandowsky, 2014). On the other hand, the NPD has been filed by the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (n.d.) (i.e. the domestic intelligence service of Germany) as the basic and more concerning bearer of right-wing extremism; it embraces nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic theories advocating the National Socialist ideology and the need of inducing ethnic homogeneity.

Aside from parties competing in the political arena, the country is confronted by interconnected movement and sub-culture manifestations of the radical right related mostly to Nazism and ultra-nationalism. Their operations range, among others, from militant activities to the production of clothing or music material and the use of web-based communications; in brief, these movements, which are responsible for a sustained spree of violent incidents in Germany, have passed through different structures, such as battle groups and autonomous comradeships and still evolve mainly due to the repressive measures imposed by the state (Schellenberg, 2013). Along with these movements, terrorist groups are also part of this mixed radical right matrix. In 2011, for instance, authorities accidentally discovered the National Socialist Underground (NSU), a terrorist group which

³ The 5% electoral threshold was abolished in Germany for the 2014 European elections making it possible for the NPD to find itself with a foothold in the European Parliament sending one representative.

⁴ This is the reason why this political party is also documented in this paper.

engaged in violent behaviors executing “at least ten targeted assassinations, two bomb attacks and over a dozen bank robberies” (Köhler, 2012, p.4) and flew under the radar of authorities for over 12 years. Investigations have revealed then that right-wing extremism does not consist of isolated individuals, but rather from a far-reaching and complex network of supporters (Köhler, 2012).

Looking, more specifically now, at the violent incidents, one can realize the repercussions that the extremist right has left behind; affected communities have lived in fear, a great number of victims have been injured and traumatized (Weilnböck, 2012), whilst an estimated number of 184 people have been killed since 1990 (EXIT-Germany, 2014). Cutting through the 2014 report of the Federal Ministry of the Interior with regard to latest trends and facts, the politically motivated right-wing crimes amounted to 16,557 in 2013, slightly dropped by 3.4% compared to the previous year, of which 11,639 (2012: 12,219) were propaganda offences (e.g. the use of anti-constitutional symbols (Schellenberg, 2013)) and 1,727 referred to incitement to hatred (2012: 1,733). In addition, 801 cases involved violence (in 2012 the total number was 802); a worrisome figure, though, pinpoints the increase of violent crimes deriving from xenophobia (473 up from 393 in 2012) as they grew the last three years reaching their peak after 2006 (484); in evidence of that, three in four homicides attempts had a xenophobic background. Lastly, 146 actual or alleged left-wing extremists (2012: 189) and 52 other political opponents (2012: 66) were also targeted by the end of 2013.

4. The concepts of narrative and counter-narrative⁵

a. The concept of narrative

The analysis turns its attention now to the concept of narrative⁶ which has lately gained increased popularity in counter-extremism studies. It has been recognized that radical right proponents, besides their heinous violent acts materializing in the real world, may exert influence on public audiences via the use of compelling messages and well-designed products. Doing so, they are likely to attain optimum results and strengthen their position; besides, it is the evolution of communication media (i.e. user-friendly websites and platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) that has opened vast opportunities and has created niches allowing them to instantly spread their messages so that they can interact with individuals and justify actions, make their ideas more appealing and manipulate perceptions and eventually garner support (Briggs & Feve, 2013). Thus, one comes to think that articulated narratives, generally seen as carriers and products of meaning construction, do count on how people identify themselves in a complex environment, since “even simple changes in wording can make information more acceptable” (S. Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012, p. 120).

A narrative, in the words of Corman (as cited in Schmid, 2014, p. 3), “is a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form.” A narrative is subsequently a collection of stories (composed of forms, themes and archetypes) with similar characteristics that “creates a unified whole ... greater than the sum of its parts” and extends from master narratives (entrenched in wider social and cultural contexts enduring over time) to local narratives

⁵ This part discusses the concept of narrative and counter-narrative solely from a theoretical perspective so that the reader to better comprehend, later in the text, the implications of the Trojan t-shirt project; it does not show how the German radical right is currently making use of narratives, as this section will be added in a second, longer version of this paper along with interviews from dropouts who were influenced by the campaign.

⁶ Although narrative and framing analysis are conceptually closely connected, literature also identifies differences between the two terms. For further information see, for example, Polletta, 1998, pp. 140-142, since a detailed analysis of these theories would go beyond the scope of the present paper.

(which ground master narratives in particular times and places) and personal narratives (the life stories of individuals which enable them to locate their role in society) (Corman, 2011, p. 37). Take for example patriotic narratives, which via interconnected stories, aim to bring out virtues and emotions structuring and lining up a nation's perspective toward the same direction (Soueif, 2006, talking about the American narrative). In other words, stories are viewed as pieces of a complicated puzzle that, when put together, construct meaning and contribute to the struggle over understanding reality.

Having said this, the concept of narrative in human communications may lend itself to a more abstract conceptualization, meaning that narratives, in a broader sense, do not need to follow exact story forms and patterns when recounted; rather, they should be approached as a conceptual frame, or as an interpretive mechanism with purpose to organize experiences in a meaningful way and bring order in life (Fisher as cited in Schneider & Caswell, 2003). Thus, narratives are both a device to portray ourselves in words and deeds and make sense of our surrounding conditions. Apart from that, it is the temporal dimension of narratives that also needs to be considered as it links past to present experiences (or components of an ongoing story) along with forging projections of future expectations (Polletta, 1998). As Lawler has stated "this occurs through a process of emplotment through which apparently unrelated events become episodes of a coherent plot" (as cited in Archetti, 2013, p. 2).

Archetti (2013) further delineates an insightful model of how the concept of narrative transpires placing particular emphasis on the influence of overlapping social relationships. The main pillar of her idea is that narratives take place in a social world and are simultaneously individual and collective products, since events are lived and told not only by individual actors, but also by those who have directly or indirectly witnessed the same experience. For the author, social relationships determine "who we are, (that) shapes what we know, including the interpretation of incoming information, and this, in turn, shapes our behaviour (action) " meaning our identity, knowledge and action respectively (Archetti, 2013, pp. 4-5). All incoming information from our relationships along with these elements is

plots of a bigger story that compose our individual narrative, or our perceived position in the social world.

Individuals who get familiar with other narratives through communications performed in direct or indirect relationships, or even in form of symbols and imagined communities where they identify with groups despite the fact that there is no contact involved in between, filter and translate stimuli from environment according to their perceived position, to how they locate occurrences within their life space. The exchange of information is a never-ending process enabling them, at given moments, to constantly revise their identity, knowledge and action. Therefore, in cases where individuals decide to affiliate with a group, this is achieved due to the reconstruction of their personal narrative that comes to collide with (and not replaced by) collective narratives (Archetti, 2013), or collective action frames, which in turn “are not merely aggregations of individual attitudes and perceptions but also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning” (Gamson as cited in Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). As a result, it is reasonable to infer that social relationships have a fundamental role on our positioning in social space.

To supplement the analysis on this concept, Fisher (1984), who developed the narrative paradigm, asserts that the human species should be called Homo Narrans, instead of Homo Sapiens, eloquently illustrating that storytelling is ingrained in our very nature. He deviates from (seen as an attempt to complete) the rational paradigm because it is anchored in the notion that people are basically rational beings, that knowledge is an amalgam of facts and logical argumentation and that the world is comprised of puzzles that rational analysis can clear them up; in the radical right case, this would imply, for example, that extremist messaging could merely be tackled on the basis of rationality and logical reasoning. However, what does rationality mean? It seems that this question can elevate to an open-ended discussion perceived in different terms by different people. For example, Fish (1997) suggests that there cannot be drawn distinctions between rational and irrational beliefs, even when talking about hate speech (it could also be expanded to include other derogatory verbal expressions) where the majority of people are likely to take stand against them; in such a situation divergent and opposing rationalities are present.

To be clear, the answer to the previous question is provided with the idea of narrative rationality which describes an alternative way of evaluating life events and is rooted in cultural and social specifications occupying an area in our thinking that except logical arguments and hard evidence facts associates with values, desires, emotions and aesthetic considerations (Campbell as cited in Corman, 2011; Schneider & Caswell, 2003). Elaborating on the latter it is interesting to see that even minor and superficial changes in presentation styles, such as better contrast of colors or even the accent of a teller, can make a statement or story to be more acceptable and ring true having an effect on our judgment skills (S. Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Narrative rationality can then be seen as an alternate way of decomposing and recreating our thoughts, decision making and disposition toward everyday experiences and events.

b. The concept of counter-narrative

The precedent analysis leads to a plausible query: how will this trend of radical right narratives come to halt or minimize? Authorities in several states are now cognizant of the fact that they should actively engage in the battle of ideas and win or in a more realistic manner partly address, through communications, toxic messages and actions being dissipated online and offline. To serve this purpose, counter-narrative (or messaging) initiatives have been employed involving a wide range of actors and approaches. In general, the counter-narrative domain unfolds in three core categories referring first to government strategic communications, second to alternative narratives and third to counter-narratives as suggested by Briggs and Fève (2013). The distinction among these categories is hardly definite and as a result they are likely to concur. Here, we endeavor to examine each one of these categories:

1. Government strategic communications: This category contains a sole actor, the government, and predominantly concerns its responsibility to communicate plans, policies or internal procedures as effectively as possible. Besides, transparency is seen as factor that increases the levels of trust and promotes accountability about what the government is doing. As such, it will be in a better position to overthrow arguments that misinform and mislead. In order to articulately spread its message the government has also the role to

coordinate the operations of its departments and build relationships with key partners. In general, it is the task of governments to overcome bureaucratic constraints and improve their services so that they can timely respond to radical right messaging, raise awareness of potential threats coming from the radical right, supply their communication staff with necessary tools and skills and proactively act to the challenges (and in few cases they may need to explicitly counter messages that target them) (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

2. Alternative narratives: Communication campaigns belonging to this category are instrumented by governments and civil society agents mainly targeting sympathizers who have not developed into full-fledged followers. The main goal of these messages is to project a positive story which places emphasis on the values that should cut through communities, such as democracy, freedom, rule of law, equality and respect for human rights. Alternative narratives do not intend to counter radical right messaging in a straightforward way, as in the case of counter-narratives, rather offer a vision for the future, an indication that a meaningful change is feasible (Schmid, 2014). In this case, due to credibility issues, the effectiveness of governments' initiatives may be limited and alternatively they should focus on enhancing and backing community-based efforts to produce positive stories, on using alternative messages in public discourse conveyed by politicians and public statements and on guaranteeing that their actions keep up with the content of messages so that they do not contradict (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

3. Counter-narratives: Counter-narratives constitute structured messages directed at deconstructing, challenging and making impotent the arguments or activities of the radical right. Their targeted audiences extend from sympathizers to fully radicalized individuals and therefore communication tactics should conform to the peculiarities of each situation. Governments are again less involved in this process due mainly to distrust and fear of backlash and the participation of credible sources is advanced, such as the voice of former members or victims who have suffered an attack. Counter-narratives are sketched in a way that pinpoint and undermine the inconsistencies or fallacies of radical right proponents' ideology, highlight the disastrous repercussions of their actions in modern societies and their ineffectiveness in terms of achieving desired results as well as compromise the credibility of

radical right communicators. Additionally, they often aim to plant the seeds of doubt expecting that distancing individuals from virulent beliefs cannot be visible in the near future, as this is a process that requires time and effort (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

Consequently, counter-narratives which function as a tool against the propensity of the radical right to divide society should be accompanied by particular features that will help them strike a chord with larger audiences, gain power and render them more acceptable. In regard to that, Fisher (1987) examines narrative coherence and narrative fidelity; on the one hand, coherence determines whether or not a story is structurally articulated, makes sense and is compelling looking, for instance, at the consistency of events and the reliability of characters and actions in the plot in a way that they avoid internal confusion, while on the other hand fidelity examines whether stories are compatible and familiar with the values, beliefs and experiences of an audience, or alternatively whether they seem true. In addition to these features, S. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) suggest that information retrieved from credible sources and messengers with expertise are likely to increase the acceptance of a message, while an additional factor involves the effect of perceived social consensus (seen as proof of veracity, since if many believe in something, it should be true) which reinforces reliance on a piece of information.

Though counter-narratives can curb the influence of the radical right to some extent, they should not be deemed as panacea for permanent solutions. Reworking and reassessing measures (commenced either by governments or societal agencies) needs to be a continuous task along with the execution of smart (counter-narrative) campaigns that deviate from traditional, often ineffective, approaches. The Trojan T-shirt campaign which shook up the German society in 2011 constituted a novel way of dealing with the radical right and is now presented.

5. The Trojan t-shirt project⁷

The Trojan t-shirt project is the work of EXIT-Germany, a non-governmental organization which operates since the summer of 2000 dealing with deradicalization and disengagement

⁷ Information is drawn from discussions with employees of EXIT-Germany.

programs. Founded by Bernd Wagner, former criminal police officer and criminologist, and Ingo Hasselbach, former neo-Nazi leader, the organization helps radical right adherents, especially those who have walked down the extremist path and have espoused the ideology of National Socialism, escape the movement⁸, dismantle ideology and reintegrate into society. Up to this time, over 500 dropouts have accepted to receive assistance, 3% of which have slipped back to the scene (EXIT-Germany, 2014). The approach followed by EXIT-Germany is called case management method and is a three-stage process going through the steps 1. making the decision, 2. leaving the scene and 3. fostering re-socialization; it has been previously applied to gangs and criminal organizations scrutinizing the 'journey' of individuals "from entry, politicization, to reasons for exit" (Wouters, 2012, p. 22). The success of the whole process is mainly determined by the personal motivation and commitment of dropouts to alter their life course and lasts for two to three years approximately.

Along with its groundwork on counseling and guiding dropouts out of movements, EXIT-Germany designs and initiates parallel campaigns that aim to boost its presence among radical right circles. Doing so, it attempts to transition from a passive to active position, as one needs to consider that the 'clients' of EXIT-Germany are not coerced to ask for help, but rather are volunteers who decide themselves to take the first leap. It seems, therefore, that the influence of EXIT-Germany in the first stage (i.e. making the decision) of the case management method can merely be indirect, compared to the rest which involve assiduous and systematic discussions with experienced practitioners, and this is the reason why pioneering campaigns are a requisite condition for strengthening its 'brand' creating and spreading doubts (or reasons for exit).

The Trojan t-shirt project turned out to be a remarkable event in the political and social sphere of the country given its success and immediate diffusion, as we will see below;

⁸ In this section the words movement, group and party are used interchangeably to denote, in general, the participation of people in associations organized around a common purpose. Doing so, aim of the author is to facilitate reading flow; otherwise, the organizational structure distinctions of the radical right, as explained on p. 5, should constantly be included within the text. This clarification is necessary in order for the reader to avoid making comparisons with the concepts of the second section.

nevertheless, EXIT-Germany had also implemented similar advertising campaigns over the past years. More precisely, the latter were materialized in Trojan podcasts, flyers and postcards, handed out at radical right demonstrations and gatherings, bearing a hidden message that was not visible in the first place. Provided that the supporters or sympathizers of the radical right are quite likely to be prejudiced and skeptic against stories that fail to abide by their current beliefs and worldview in general, the rationale and subsequent actions of EXIT-Germany were to trick them with like-minded front page information which concealed the true message under the surface.

The same logic patterns were followed for the Trojan t-shirt project which took place at the ninth edition of a radical right rock festival (Rock for Germany), in the town of Gera, East Germany on August 6th 2011 organized by the extremist National Democratic Party of

Germany (NPD) in Thuringia (the party amounted 5,500 members in 2013 compared to 6,000 in 2012 as an annual report of the Federal Ministry of the Interior records (2014). EXIT-Germany in collaboration



with Grabarz and Partner, an advertisement agency located in Hamburg, fabricated and distributed for free 250 t-shirts with skull and crossbones stamps which read the following slogan: 'Hardcore Rebels - National and Free.' The recipients were surprised to find out, after they washed the t-shirts once, that another message showed up: 'if your t-shirt can do it, so can you - we can help you to get free of right-wing extremism. EXIT-Germany.'

EXIT-Germany and its partner worked on this demanding project roughly for one year. There were initial thoughts to carry out their plan on February 13th 2011 in Dresden during the commemoration day of the 1945 city's bombing by the Allied forces. However, it was deemed to be risky and could undermine security for those participating in the ceremony. It is important to note here that the destruction of Dresden is both a stark reminder of the atrocities that took place in the Second World War and a symbol of reconciliation and critical

examination of the past. People have the chance to convene and reflect on their experiences vying for a war free, tolerant future. On the other hand, right-wing extremists offer a revisionist interpretation to the bombing of Dresden holding marches each year since the 1990's in an attempt to manipulate for their own good the memorial services; they build arguments on a different narrative indicting the Allied forces for barbarity and crimes against the Germans and paying tribute to the National Socialism regime of this era. Hence, due to the fact that the atmosphere would be emotionally charged and the chance of violent incidents between the Nazis and anti-Nazis would be heightened, EXIT-Germany and its partner decided to pause and defer the campaign a few months until August, where it was finally implemented at the Rock for Germany festival.

EXIT-Germany contacted festival organizers via email (at info@rockfürdeutschland) pretending to be sympathizers of the movement who wanted to donate a few t-shirts as a gesture of showing their resistance and supporting the work that was being done. Even though communication encountered difficulties in the



beginning, since there was no response, after repeated attempts the employees of EXIT-Germany were finally able to deliver the package five days before the opening of the festival. The next challenge they faced was t-shirts to be handed out to the participants without raising any suspicion about the message they concealed. However, a partner of EXIT-Germany, who was in Gera at that time, dissolved these fears after a while reassuring that the first goal had been achieved. Moreover, it would be an omission, at this point, to not mention an important caveat concerning the counter-narrative spectrum that discerning and targeting different groups while putting a campaign into practice is often not easy; this yields that dealing with backfire and unintended effects could be possible, as well (Briggs & Fève, 2013). In this particular case, EXIT-Germany expected that the t-shirts would be worn by people who could range from simple supporters to violent extremists.

The next day, on August 7th 2011, the first comments about the double function of the t-shirts were made in German right-wing extremist online discussion forums and on the facebook fan page of the Rock for Germany festival. The message was: 'warning, copycats at work! Last night t-shirts with a hidden message from the state-sponsored programme Exit were handed out at the Rock for Germany festival. This message is only visible after the first wash. Exit wasted several thousand Euros of taxpayers' money on this trick' (Wagner, 2011, para. 4). The intention was not only to provoke caution, but also disseminate lies (while the truth is that the campaign was fully financed by private donors) and build on a narrative that the government is diverting tax money from real problems and people in need investing them in projects that are not of high value for citizens. Commentators reacted in a vehement manner revealing their lack of respect for the work of EXIT-Germany, while others gave credits to the organization admitting that it was a smart effort. Due to the intense discussions that were developed online, the administrators of the fan page on facebook decided to shut it down, few hours later, in an attempt to confine the influence of the campaign; it was proved though that they could not entirely stop its spreading as in other forums references to the Trojan t-shirt project increased.

In parallel, EXIT-Germany prepared a press statement and sent it to the Mut Gegen Rechte Gewalt (i.e. Courage against Right Violence) website with aim of informing public audience about their recent action. However, after *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a major newspaper in Germany, picked up and published the story, the office of the organization was bombarded by calls and requests for further details from other news media. Likewise, the campaign transcended the borders of the country and triggered the interest of foreign news media instantly being broadcast around the world. This was an unexpected turn of events for EXIT-Germany and resulted in more than 30 million gross contacts on facebook, while the web pages of *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported on the project gathered 1.2 million views. At the same time, there was extensive prime time television coverage and more than 300 newspapers writing articles worldwide. It is impressive to see that the value of television, print and online coverage, in Germany alone, was equal to approximately €500,000 (half a million).

Looking now at the gist of the Trojan t-shirt project, EXIT-Germany designed and implemented the campaign with aim of making its work known to the radical right scene anticipating, without doubt, that it would be possible to have greater impact on youths who might not have been firmly settled in the extremist ideology of NPD. It was additionally expected that those immersed deeper in the ideals of the movement when they decide to leave, at a later point of time, may remember the organization and ask for help. Except that, drawing from the theoretical presentation of the counter-narrative concept, one can assert that the Trojan t-shirt campaign was both an alternative narrative (more accurately this occurred in a subliminal manner as it will be shown) and counter-narrative combining deeds (i.e. distribution of t-shirts at a music festival) and words (i.e. printed messages on t-shirts communicated online and offline). In addition, although the message was designed in a way to primarily target the supporters of the radical right, in fact it also reached two other audiences, meaning government and citizens (and this was admittedly happened due to the success that the campaign scored in the aftermath of festival).

To go into more depth and be clear regarding the abovementioned remarks, the campaign belongs to the counter-narrative category because it directly intruded the closed boundaries of the movement showing that the influence of the radical right is limited, even within its own circle. The latter gains salience if one takes into consideration the fact that the radical right, in general, has the tendency to use extreme narratives for its internal communications in contrast to its external communications, which appear moderate and law-abiding; doing so, there is no need to disguise its true beliefs and as a result can unrestrictedly (e.g. without fear of repression by state or contempt by outsiders) solidify the ideological causes of the group. For example, this is often happening with NPD in Germany (Schellenberg, 2013) or Casa Pound in Italy (Castelli Gattinara & Froio, 2014). Therefore, in this case, the Trojan t-shirt project broke the inaccessible internal link between NPD and its followers mocking and ridiculing the legitimacy or power of the party communicators, while at the same time it managed to disclose their weakness and inefficiency to maintain control over their own people.

On the other hand, the Trojan t-shirt project is also part of the alternative narrative category because it proposed an alternative way of life that could convince radical right adherents to disentangle from the movement at large. By planting the seeds of doubt, EXIT-Germany achieved to offer hope and an unwritten, subliminal promise manifesting that help can immediately be provided, once needed. Another important element of the campaign refers to the assiduous and calculated vocabulary which was included in the message; instead of criticizing individuals for their choices and cursing them with expressions such as Nazis, pigs, racist, idiots etcetera or urging them in an authoritative and subjective (as we saw before when talked about the various aspects of rationality) manner to follow a life worth living (i.e. methods which are likely to backlash because “people generally do not like to be told what to think and how to act” (S. Lewandowsky et al., 2012, p.116)), it presented an alternate perspective of reality based on an analogy between the message of the t-shirts and their ideological orientation proving that the work of Exit-Germany is not hostile towards people (but rather to the undemocratic values their ideology carries) and does not intend to ‘banish’ them from society (i.e. contrary to the what anti-Nazi protesters often communicate in/through their messages).

Nevertheless, it has been broadly recognized that distancing from the radical right scene is, most of the time, hard to accomplish. It means that one has to lose his habitual abilities to make sense of the world and to leave behind a part of his identity that was aligned or better stated co-existed, up to the point he makes the decision, with the collective identity; as Gamson has stressed “participation in social movements frequently involves enlargement of personal identity for participation and offers fulfillment and realization of the self” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 631). This observation explains why a small percentage of EXIT-Germany’s ‘clients’ have relapsed into their prior lifestyle, while it should further be a reminder for authorities that the potential threat emanating from the radical right requires a high level of vigilance.

Moreover, to continue from this point the discussion on the audiences that the Trojan t-shirt project managed to reach, government and citizens also received a message. They both became aware of the fact that dealing with the radical right necessitates the generation and

adoption of progressive politics and *modi operandi*, since “we can no longer just rely on the far-left and political rituals to curb far-right culture. We need new ideas and political determination to stand up to extremists and enemies of democracy” (Wagner, 2011, para. 8). As a consequence of this initiative, it is evident now that even when faced with ostensibly insurmountable barriers or challenging goals, these kind of campaigns are able to indicate ways (or parts of a new narrative that depart from traditional and old-fashioned thinking) so that they help us open up alternative routes and convey clear messages to selected targets. It goes without saying that these actions are doomed to fail if they do not combine the knowledge, experience and concerted efforts of all the involved actors, i.e. government and societal agents, in order for the latter to stand united against the several facets of the radical right.

Generally, the Trojan t-shirt project, apart from stirring up a genuine interest of society around the radical right issue and being the most shared story in social networks and second most popular topic in media during 2011 in Germany, succeeded in persuading potential dropouts to, at least, contact EXIT-Germany; it is stunning to see that the number of those who wanted to try to get out of the scene tripled after the campaign. However, to be realistic it would not be a surprise if part of these contacts did not reflect the true will of radical right followers to escape the movement, rather used by them as a medium to find out what EXIT-Germany is actually doing. In addition, another positive effect of the campaign is that the total amount of private donations was increased by 334% (2011 compared with 2010).

Eventually, over the past three years the Trojan t-shirt project has established itself as a point of reference for guiding parallel awareness raising initiatives. For instance, the federal government has published and handed out books that contain information about the campaign to students aiming to sensitize them and make them communicants of an open discourse on the disastrous radical right ideology and methods. A second example of this trend involves the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany, a popular museum of contemporary history located in Bonn, which has included in its permanent exhibition a stand displaying the Trojan t-shirts and explaining why the country needs to lead

a dynamic effort against the radical right. As a final point of this paper, it should be mentioned that EXIT-Germany has not only been acknowledged for its work at large by institutions, such as the German government and the European Commission/European Social Fund, but has also gained several national and international awards for the Trojan t-shirt campaign in particular of which stand out the next three:

- the Wettbewerb SozialKampagne Award in 2013 (national award in social campaigns),
- the Politik Award in 2012 (national award in political communication), and
- the Silver Cannes Lions Award in 2012 (international award in brand advertising).

6. Conclusion

The present paper introduced the Trojan t-shirt project which was organized and implemented by EXIT-Germany in collaboration with Grabarz and Partner, an advertisement agency in Hamburg. The campaign combined deeds and words and instigated fierce discussions in Germany making the headlines in the global news media landscape as well as catching the attention (either in a positive or negative manner) of radical right supporters in social media and online forums. The theoretical pillar of this paper was structured around the concept of narrative and went through an analysis of its powerful role, in terms of influencing people to make sense of themselves and their position in social space. Doing so, it revealed the reasons why narratives should be seen as salient tools against the virulent messages and actions coming from the radical right.

Provided that the latter constitutes a multi-faceted and heterogeneous phenomenon, one infers that the only constant we should take for granted is our continuous effort to come up with innovative and smart campaigns with intent to effectively meet the persistent or new challenges the radical right may pose. Therefore, based on this notion, EXIT-Germany prepared another campaign in 2013 which was materialized again at the Rock for Germany festival; however, this time instead of manufacturing and distributing Trojan t-shirts the employees of EXIT-Germany hung a poster on the exterior facade of a building, which was close to the festival, reading the slogan: 'sorry guys, this year we have no t-shirts, but always an alternative. EXIT-Germany.'

Having said this, despite the fact that narratives, countering directly or indirectly toxic messages, are able to have a decisive impact on the beliefs and actions of radical right followers, it would be overoptimistic to expect that their use alone could reduce the demand for such content. Along with them, it is necessary for states to build multilevel approaches that include, among others, awareness raising programs in educational systems, community coaching courses aiming to inform key stakeholders about the true dimensions of the radical right and to enhance societal bonds, systematic recording of victims in order for communities to grasp the full picture of the problem and even the imposition of repressive measures (Ramalingam, 2012) when is deemed inevitable.

Finally, one should also bear in mind that the radical right does not remain at a standstill, as in the case of NPD where those in charge have now started to check all packages received from donors so that they can avoid a repetition of the Trojan campaign; the radical right adapts to transforming conditions and responds correspondingly. Indicative of that is how the hashtag racism on twitter was exploited by radical right defenders in Germany to advance their own views propagating that there exists racism against the Germans due to the fact that immigrants receive, among others, social and economic benefits. Hence, authorities need to be cautious when designing policy plans, as they may backfire leading to undesired results. In this respect, the Trojan t-shirt campaign could guide future operations, since it has showed that slick products accompanied by concise messages can make a difference.

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