

Know your
own story

Let Empathy Drive Your Dialogue

A Toolkit to Dismantle Far Right Arguments

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1. Preface

IN THIS TOOLKIT we present some strategies on how to confront and dismantle Far Right ideas and arguments in political debate at all political levels, including our private lives. The toolkit is an introduction to a training concept with the purpose of strengthening the abilities and strategies of all who wish for a society where Far Right ideas lack influence.

The concept is a work-in-progress developed by Expo's research team, in close collaboration with scholars of behavioral science and psychology and in cooperation with FES formats for political analysis and education in several European countries.

It has been tested in practice with a Nordic social democratic youth organisation and the FES parliamentary network "European Strategies Against the Far Right", consisting of parliamentarians and party strategists from ten European countries and Canada. The strategies presented here are a toolkit and a work-in-progress and should be developed further in different ways combined with lectures, workshops, and other forms of case-based training sessions and role play.

We are looking forward to your feedback and suggestions!

2. Executive summary

KNOW YOUR OWN STORY

You need to be clear and consistent about the kind of the society you want, and how we are going to get there rather than repeating the Far Right narratives that you oppose.

STOP AND ASSESS

Remember that different situations demand different strategies. We therefore stress the importance of reflecting upon who else is present before deciding how to act in each situation. Where are you? Who is the person expressing the Far Right argument? Is an audience listening? What is your goal in the specific situation?

DON'T FORGET THE AUDIENCE

Don't forget the audience. Sometimes, we put too much effort in trying to convince the person who shouts the loudest. Often, we have more to gain by appearing calm in front of a potential audience, presenting our own narrative rather than getting stuck in, and arguing against, the Far Right interpretation of our society.

SOLIDARITY WITH THOSE WHO ARE PERSONALLY AFFECTED

We must not forget how the arguments that we encounter might affect other people around us, and should always bear in mind that people might be personally affected without us knowing (because of their sexual identity, religion, ethnicity, etc.).

ASK QUESTIONS

Often, questions can be a more effective response than arguing against Far Right arguments. Questions give us some time to think about how to continue the dialogue and force the person in front of us to take responsibility for what was just said.

AVOID RESPONDING TO FEELINGS WITH FACTS

When we respond to a person's feelings of fear or anger with fact-based arguments, we risk coming across as ignorant. By asking questions about the underlying causes of the person's feelings, we can shift the dialogue to one about values and visions instead. This way, we will have a greater chance of getting through to people with our own narrative.

AVOID CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION

Our way of understanding news and events has been influenced by conspiracy theories and disinformation of late. Confronting these phenomena partly constitutes a separate category. In our training, we explain the mechanisms behind them and present different approaches to confronting them.

3. Introduction

FOR DECADES, Far Right parties and organisations have mobilised and gained political influence across Europe. Their ideas are reflected in the public debate as well as in our daily lives and aim at polarising our societies. The ideological core of their politics causes division, exclusion and increased inequalities.

If these ideas remain unchallenged, they become normalised and shift the common narrative and the way we see one another. In the long run, they create a “new normal”. The prevalence of Far Right ideas does not just threaten the well-being of individuals who are affected. By undermining the key principles of a democracy, such as the fundamental worth and dignity of every person and respect for human rights, they pose a threat to the democratic legitimacy and affect the whole of society. We have already seen examples of significant democratic rollbacks, ranging from cutting the rights of migrants and LGBTIQ+ people up to challenging the rule of law in several European countries where Far Right parties influence politics. The need to turn the tide is urgent.

But how do we turn the tide?

4. The narratives of the Far Right – identifying the recurring patterns

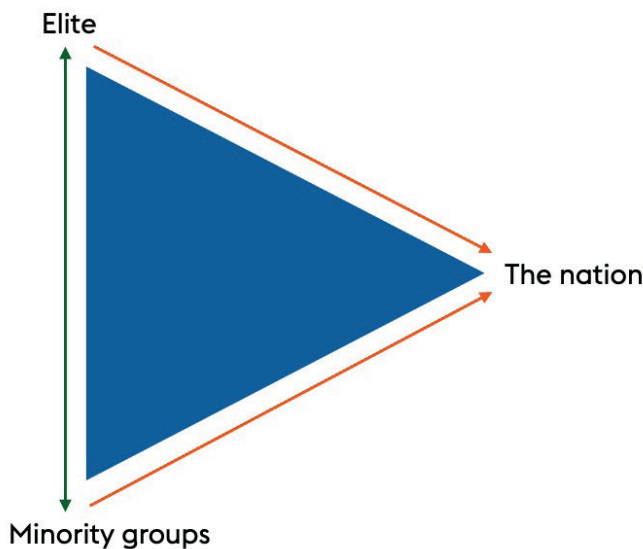
FIRST WE HAVE TO recognise that the Far Right has a very effective way of describing our society. They offer a perspective on current challenges as well as a vision of the kind of society they want. The narrative is soaked in nostalgia for the past, apocalyptic descriptions of the future and oversimplified solutions to the current challenges of our societies.

The narrative of the Far Right contains conspiratorial descriptions of a society being run by an illegitimate elite, which stays in power thanks to a complicity with minority groups.

In this conspiratorial narrative the elite allows minority groups i.e. migrants, foreigners, LGBTIQ+ people, to take advantage of the social welfare system. In return, they claim that the minority groups offer continuous support and votes. This phenomenon is expressed in different ways in different European countries. For example, we have seen how the Far Right spreads images of politicians taking selfies with refugees. Or Far Right propaganda channels that visit election campaign events where they film and photograph people they describe as immigrants that the established democratic parties use as “voting cattle”.

The party that suffers in this false narrative is the “ordinary people” or “the nation”, which is always described as a homogeneous group that shares the same interests and feelings, and which has been forgotten and betrayed by the elite.

This narrative is obviously effective in creating fear and anger, and winning votes. The narrative also offers “solutions” to people’s feelings. Unfortunately, a clear counter-narrative to this populist view is often lacking.



Have you encountered the narrative illustrated by the triangle in discussions or debates? What was your response?

Awareness of the repetitive Far Right narrative helps us prepare strategies of how to respond.

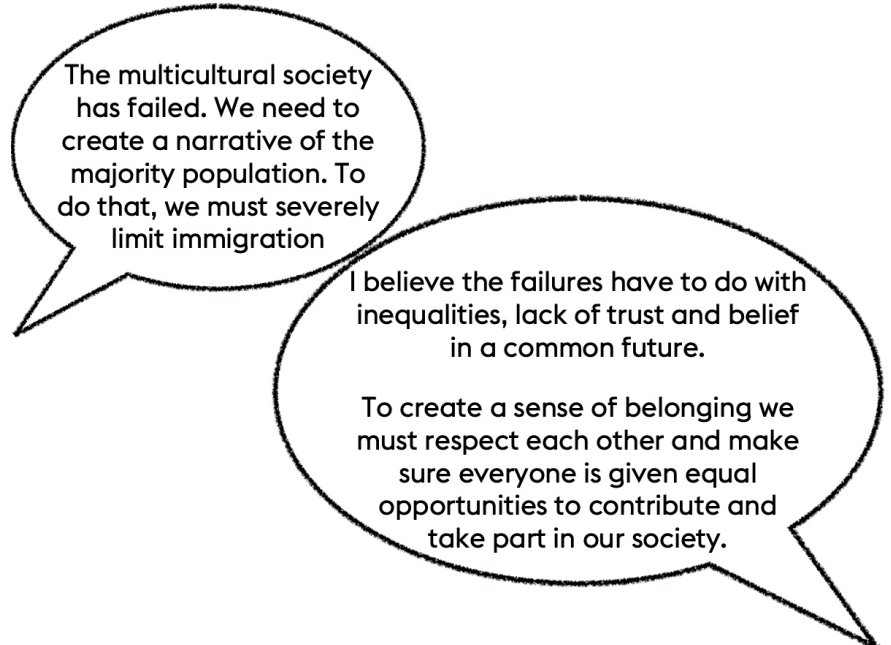
5. How to respond to the Far Right narratives

One point of departure in defining our narrative is reflecting upon the following questions:

1. What are the unifying elements of our society? What is it that brings us together and creates a sense of belonging?
2. Where are the conflict lines? What are the main threats and challenges in our community?
3. What is our vision? What do we need to get there?

A possible social democratic response:

1. As a social democrat, the unifying elements of our society have to do with solidarity, equality and freedom. In contrast to the Far Right, who define the nation through ethnicity, religion or an exclusive interpretation of culture.
2. While the Far Right draw their conflict lines between the “nation” and “minority groups”, a social democrat sees conflict lines where inequalities, discrimination and class division appear.
3. The vision of a social democrat is a society where people have a responsibility for one another, where a strong welfare state is built together to make sure no one is left behind.



Your world view: a convincing story

TO COMBAT Far Right ideas, we need to know what ideas and values we stand for before we can communicate them effectively and convincingly. We need to be more explicit about the kind of society that we want, and how we are going to get there. Just being “anti” is not enough. We need to ground our communication in our own values and develop convincing storytelling out of them, including emotions and actions.

As we have seen, the Far Right is efficient in setting the agenda while supposedly explaining the challenges faced by our societies. Their strategies also offer concrete ways forward. We have seen several examples of how the Far Right sets the agenda by inventing or overemphasizing threats to our society based on lies and generalisations. These stories spread across European countries independently of the real circumstances in the countries. An example is the debate about Trans Rights and Drag Queen Story Hour. The people who feel attracted to the Far Right narrative need to be offered an alternative so they don't feel compelled to act on their fear and anger in a way that strengthens populism. We need to be able to tell the story of our society from a social democratic perspective, to define answers to people's questions and set our own agenda.

By defining our narrative and formulating clear answers, we can simply respond to Far Right ideas by presenting our own values and visions for society.

Assess the situation

THERE IS NO universal answer on how to respond to Far Right ideas and arguments. They appear in different situations that affect our room for action.

However, there are several factors to bear in mind and reflect upon, to be better prepared in the various situations we are confronted with.

• WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

Sometimes we are faced with Far Right ideas and arguments from people who seem completely closed. Who have consumed conspiratorial and populist ideas for a long time and now seem to look upon the world from a completely different perspective. When meeting closed people our only option might be to sow doubt by offering other ways of thinking. Sometimes, the only thing to do here is to end the conversation.

We might also encounter more ambivalent people who express anxiety about a changing society and are partly seeking answers in the Far Right narrative. In this case, we must be particularly clear about offering an alternative. A narrative that provides answers to questions over what kind of society we want and how to get there.

• WHO ELSE IS THERE?

It is important to remember that there might be ambivalent people in a possible audience, or at the same dinner table where the Far Right ideas and arguments are brought up. They need to hear another narrative. A narrative that offers answers to the same questions that are raised. If they are left with nothing but counterarguments and no alternative vision or explanation, they risk moving from ambivalent to closed.

You might also have open, democratically-minded people around you. Who share your views of the world but lack the capacity or courage to express them. By presenting a clear narrative, you will both strengthen and support them in their struggle — and inspire them to raise their voices next time.

When other people are around, there is always a risk that the Far Right ideas and arguments hit on a more personal level. Due to religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other factors that we are not aware of. Always bear this in mind when you have an audience.

	CLOSED	AMBIVALENT	OPEN	MINORITY GROUPS
PROACTIVE	Build trust	Build trust	Strengthen	Protect and show solidarity
REACTIVE	Sow doubt/ end conversation	Offer alternatives	Support	

• **WHERE ARE YOU?**

The surroundings matter and need to be reflected upon. In our daily lives, we might be afraid to cause an awkward situation or damage our social relations. Out in public, we might feel vulnerable in another way. The bystander effect might give us an excuse not to act. If there is a bigger crowd, we tend to rely on others to act, a phenomenon important to reflect upon. What person would you like to be in those situations? How can you prepare yourself to act in accordance with your values in the different contexts where Far Right ideas appear?

• **WHAT IS YOUR GOAL IN THE SPECIFIC SITUATION?**

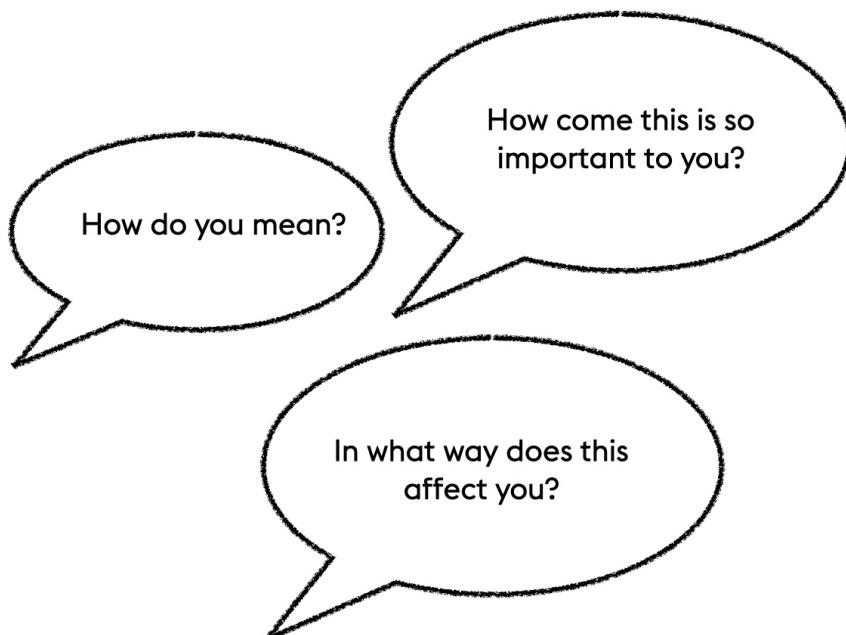
Sometimes we tend to think that the goal in every situation is to make someone change their mindset. When you meet a closed person, maybe that is simply impossible. Your goal here might just be to sow a seed of doubt.

If there is an audience listening, your goal should be to offer the audience an alternative way of thinking. Your response is often meant for the audience rather than the person expressing the idea or argument.

Sometimes, a goal as good as any is to end the conversation. To draw a line of decency and show solidarity with those subjected to the violation, regardless of whether they are in the same room or not.

Responding with a question

MANY TIMES WHEN we are confronted with Far Right arguments and ideas we are not prepared. We might be approached by a stranger on the bus, at a dinner with family and friends, in a meeting at work, but also in a door-to-door visit during an election campaign or during a press interview. Often, the arguments are full of statistics and false facts that are difficult to respond to spontaneously. Or they might be based on offensive generalisations. In these situations, questions can be an effective way forward.



Ask questions to make sure you understood what the person said.

This way you gain time and get an overview of your options.

It shows that you care and are curious.

Transferring the dialogue to your own narrative

QUESTIONS CAN ALSO be an effective way to make sure we are talking about the same thing. By asking questions, we can transfer the dialogue to meet each other on a level where we have a chance of getting through with our own narrative.

One common mistake is to confront a person's fear or anger with fact-based arguments. Or to talk about an abstract vision to a person who expresses anxiety about a society that they no longer recognise. Or getting lost in discussions about facts and statistics that might be challenging to navigate when we are unprepared.

The strategy of transferring the dialogue through questions needs deeper explanation and practical training. But the model below, with examples of dialogues, gives you an idea of how it can be deployed.

By using the questions in the column to the right we can make the person we are communicating with reflect upon possible solutions to the problem expressed. As soon as we reach a level where we can talk about vision or values, we have a greater chance of successfully explaining our own vision and values. Rather than arguing against a person's personal experiences and feelings, or getting lost in misleading facts and statistics.

Transfer the dialogue by using questions, until we reach a point where we talk about values and visions. Then we can respond with our own narrative.

	Level of the dialogue	Idea to confront	Your response	Questions to ask
1	Surrounding	My neighbourhood is unsafe	→	What does that do to you?
2	Behaviour	I don't go out anymore	→	How do you know it's so dangerous that you can't go out?
3	Knowledge	Immigrants are criminals	→	What needs to be done?
4	Values Vision	All crime should lead to deportation	→ I believe in a society where crimes are not judged based on the person's origin, but on the character of the crime.	→ How would you like it to be?
5		I want a safe society	→ That's what I want too, but in order to get there we need to...	

Confronting conspiracy theories and disinformation

CONFRONTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES and disinformation is particularly challenging. In our training sessions, we are inspired by the Theory of Debunking, published by the scholars Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook (2020).

It is important to understand the mechanisms behind conspiracy theories and disinformation if we want to recognise them and build strategies to combat them. Explaining the logic behind a conspiracy theory can be a tool in itself to help people recognise them and not act upon them.

As in our previously described strategies to confront Far Right ideas, we need to reflect upon the person we're talking to, the situation we are in and the possible audience. Techniques such as ridiculing a conspiracy theory or aggressively deconstructing it have shown to be effective to general audiences but have been shown to have the opposite effect on other groups who have already begun to consume alternative facts.

In our training, we highlight different types of approaches in different kinds of situations when falsifying conspiracy theories.

THE FACTS — Focus on what we actually know from reliable sources. Place emphasis on the truth rather than reproducing false arguments. And try to make the facts as clear and understandable as possible.

THE SOURCE — Focus on reducing the credibility of the source presented. Show who is behind it and in what way it lacks credibility.

THE LOGIC — Highlight the frequent logical gaps found in conspiracy theories and myths. Conspiracy theories tend to enlarge peripheral details of an event, details that are often contradictory. If possible, try to highlight the contradictions and logical fallacies.

AVOID REPRODUCTION — By giving the conspiracy theory itself as little space as possible, we can reduce the risks of reproducing it (backfire effect). Especially if we have an ambivalent audience.

6. In conclusion

IN THIS TOOLKIT, we have presented different approaches to confronting Far Right ideas and arguments. We have stressed the importance of clarifying our own narrative, to be able to offer alternatives rather than getting lost in counterarguments and letting the Far Right set the agenda.

We have highlighted the need to assess the situation and reflect upon the different options we have, based on the person we are talking to, the situation we are in and the potential audience.

We have also shown different ways of working with questions, both to gain some time to orient ourselves, and to shift the conversation to a level where we can reach people with our own ideas.

Cases to reflect upon

PLEASE TAKE SOME time and reflect upon the cases below. Based on what you have just read in this toolkit, how would you handle the different situations?

The concerned woman on the tram

You are on the tram on your way to work. A woman approaches, she recognises you from a political debate and asks if you have a minute. She says that she is concerned about the “immigrant gangs” in her neighbourhood. She is afraid to let her children stay out late due to the increased risk of assault and robbery. She says that she voted for the Social Democrats for decades, but she is not so sure anymore, she doesn’t recognise her society and believes that “something drastic needs to be done”.

The angry man in the audience

You just participated in a political debate on gender rights. By the end of the debate, a man in the audience raises his hand. He is clearly upset and says that he believes Drag Queen Story Hour should be forbidden. “We just can’t accept having men, dressed as women, practice their sexual indoctrination on children.”

The family dinner

You are celebrating a relative's birthday. You are gathered around the table, when your aunt tells you that she would never accept her daughter marrying someone from the Middle East. She argues that “their set of values is a threat to the modern, Western way of life”.

How would you assess the situation?

What strategy and arguments would you use in confronting the idea/argument?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the strategy you chose?

How do you think the strategy is perceived by the recipient?

How do you think the strategy is perceived by the audience?

How do you feel in the given situation?

7. Suggestions for further practical training

IN THIS TOOLKIT our aim is to present an overview of the strategies and tools we present in our lectures and practical training sessions. The concept is a work-in-progress and can be used in different ways, depending on prior knowledge and challenges among the participants.

- **LECTURES ON TRENDS AND TENDENCIES IN THE FAR RIGHT MILIEU**

The Expo Foundation have monitored the Far Right milieu since 1995. In our lectures, we raise awareness of current trends and how they relate to history. We raise awareness about the most influential actors and tendencies, and the methods used to gain traction for their anti-democratic ideas. We also offer advice and strategies on how politicians, civil society actors and private individuals can prepare themselves to counter Far Right ideas and arguments.

- **PUBLICATIONS, EXPERT- AND PARLIAMENTARIAN NETWORKS**

Strengthening democracy is one of the pillars of FES work and the foundation publishes extensively on several aspects of the topic. A Regional Office focuses on Democracy of the Future. Besides studies, exchange between experts is an important aspect of the work to counter the Far Right.

FES Nordic Countries have published policy advice on political strategies countering the Far Right since 2018. Together with our extensive expert- and political networks we continue to offer analysis as well as practical tools for the debate.

- **CASE-BASED WORKSHOPS AND DISCUSSIONS**

By formulating cases based on the participants' experiences of meeting people with Far Right views, we reflect upon our ability to act in different situations. In the discussions we identify the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches and the effect they might have on the person we're meeting as well as on a potential audience.

- **ROLE PLAY**

Another effective way in training is trying out strategies and tools in role play sessions where we alter the roles in meetings with closed or ambivalent counterparts in different arenas, where we get to reflect upon how the message might be perceived by an audience. Role play helps us understand our counterpart's possible thoughts and actions. Through role play we also learn about our own strengths and areas of development.

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About Expo

Expo Foundation is an anti-racist organisation based in Sweden, working towards a vision of a society where racist ideas lack influence.

Since 1995, the foundation has worked for an open, democratic society by counteracting racist organisations and ideas. The work consists of monitoring, journalistic investigation and education aiming to raise people's awareness and ability to challenge racist ideas, myths and conspiracy theories.

About Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany and aims to strengthen social democracy world-wide with its over 100 offices.

The FES Nordics office encourages political dialogue between the five Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway – and Germany.

