



Countering Oppositional Political
Extremism through Attuned
Dialogue: Track, Attune, Limit

OppAttune Media, Machines & Mobilisation Blog



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OppAttune Media, Machines & Mobilisation Blog

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Introduction

The “Media, Machines and Mobilisation Blog” documents field work at major events and everyday contestations offline as well as contemporary extremist narratives online across the sites of analysis (Austria/Vienna, Bulgaria/Sofia and Sweden/Malmö). This is where we as researchers shared stories and photos of material artefacts towards a preliminary analysis. More concretely, the aim of this blog was to deliver a public-facing output, designed to share real-time, granular insights from WP 4’s ongoing digital ethnography and offline fieldwork towards reports on emerging extremist narratives across Europe (D4.1) and on translocal articulations of extremism in three countries (D4.2). It aimed at delivering easily accessible reflections and preliminary findings on the interplay between online and offline articulations of extremist narratives to policymakers and the general public. It also serves as a digital gallery, including lots of pictures of what we found in Malmö, Sofia and Vienna at rallies and in the urban landscape in general (banners, stickers and graffiti).

This blog gave us the opportunity to create a platform that offers transparency when it comes to the scientific process on a sensitive issue like everyday extremism. This is a tangible social concern and sharing parts of the research process openly with the public helps demystifying it. Furthermore, the blog can be seen as an educational resource informing people on how social science works and what we did in terms of practical research methods. Last but not least, it helped us to maintain self-reflection and to reach a clear reasoning. In that way, the blog showcasing our scientific journey is more than a communication tool. As an integral part of the research itself it hopefully also strengthens the impact.

Basically, there are three types of blog entries in this series: (1) Showcasing and discussing the conceptual work in WP 4 (blog 1), (2) Reflections from field work (blogs 2 – 14) and (3) Reports about dissemination activities (presentations at conferences, the last two blog entries).

Most blog entries focus on how everyday extremism appears, circulates, and becomes normalized in the urban and online environments of Vienna, Malmö, and Sofia. These three cities turned out to be a promising choice due to their contrasting demographics, political cultures, and historical trajectories, allowing for a nuanced comparison of how local contexts shape everyday expressions of tension, identity, and ideological polarization. Vienna represents a highly structured Central European capital with strong civic institutions, high social trust, and a long tradition of political order. It offers insight into how ideological tensions manifest in a city with well-maintained public spaces and extensive social services. Malmö, with its diverse population and history of public debate around integration and safety, provides a useful lens for examining how narratives about identity, cohesion, and fear circulate both physically and online. Sofia, as a rapidly evolving post-socialist capital, adds a distinct perspective shaped by post-transition politics, economic disparities, and highly active online political discourse. Together, the three cities offer variation across Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe, enabling comparison without assuming uniformity.

Across all cities, observations included non-illicit and illicit graffiti, stickers, notices, street art, overheard conversations, neighbourhood signage, and the overall spatial distribution of symbolic or identity-focused expressions. Researchers documented context and placement rather than reproducing any extremist symbols directly. Each city was analysed separately and then compared across the following shared dimensions: visibility of everyday tensions and symbolic expression; normalization of exclusionary rhetoric; spatial and digital clustering; community or institutional responses; and broader impacts on belonging and everyday life.

The blog is available at: <https://oppattune.eu/media-machines-mobilisation/>.

Researching extremism in everyday public spaces – Report from WP4’s co-working days in Malmö

On September 25-27, the Austrian and Swedish members of work package 4 *Media, Machines, Mobilisations* met up in Malmö for three intensive days of discussions and workshopping. We made progress on the conceptual framework undergirding the work ahead and prepared for our first deliverable. And (most) importantly, we had time to get to know each other, eat Austrian chocolate and visit a few of the best local culinary hotspots. Malmö offered late summer sunrays, allowing for short strolls around the city centre to clear our heads, and a traditional Scandinavian-style visit to the sauna.



From left to right: Tina Askanius, Ursula Reeger, Miriam Haselbacher and Jullietta Stoencheva

We kicked off the first day with three detailed presentations of the country-cases that constitute the empirical starting point for the work conducted in the WP – Sweden, Austria and Bulgaria. The presentations gave us insights into the historical backdrop and recent political developments in each national context. This was an opportunity to get a first glimpse into the kind of extreme narratives that are currently emerging around emotive hot button issues such as migration, gender and climate change and how extremist beliefs and ideas are increasingly intercepting with people’s everyday life across Europe. Already, we were able to identify interesting similarities and differences across the three regions.

Day two was dedicated to outlining the research design and translating it into an action plan for the deliverables we have ahead of us. We decided to pursue a stepwise approach to conceptualising **everyday extremism** from an interdisciplinary perspective of critical social scientific research. This, to us, entails starting out by exploring the parameters of first ‘the everyday’ and then ‘extremism’ including questions of how to capture these dimensions empirically before proceeding to conceptualise everyday extremism as this is articulated as one of the key concepts of OppAttune. As such, we consider this phase of our project an iterative and open-ended process throughout which we approach everyday extremism from two different perspectives concurrently.

In the first, we critically engage with the idea of extremism from the perspective of media and communication studies and data science by identifying key extremist narratives as they circulate in the digital spaces that people spend time in and engage with as part of their everyday lives online. As part of this work, we take into consideration how extremist ideas are often ‘cloaked’ or guised in irony and ambiguity as they travel back and forth between different spaces and platforms. Over the last few months, the team has identified relevant online spaces that will constitute the basis for the data collection online. These include but are not limited to platforms such as Reddit, TikTok and YouTube and ‘local’ discussion forums such as Flashback Forum and dir.bg.

Extremist ideas are often ‘cloaked’ or guised in irony and ambiguity as they travel back and forth between different spaces and platforms

From the perspective of urban geography and drawing of the principles of ethnographic research, we approach ‘the everyday’ as it unfolds in the lived and local environments of citizens in cities across Europe asking how extremist narratives make their way into urban spaces e.g., via stickers, banners, graffiti, tags or other visual ephemera and influence everyday life there. This two-pronged approach focusing on how narratives traverse online/offline contexts allows us to make connections between online and locality-based realities ‘on the ground’ in Malmö, Sofia and Vienna.

Our deliverables, we agreed, should contribute empirically and theoretically to different aspects of this research puzzle. The first deliverable – a visualisation report of emerging extremist narratives across Europe due in December 2023 – is an exciting, innovative starting point for our research journey. In this report, we focus on the online dimension with the goal of identifying and mapping contemporary extremist narratives from a regional perspective, covering northern (Sweden), central (Austria) and eastern Europe (Bulgaria). The Visualisation Report is based on secondary data from government agencies, civil society organisations and other independent non-profit research actors as well as a systematic literature review offering a synthesis of existing knowledge in this area and on these country contexts specifically. Based on these insights, we will map the key topics and actors around which extremist narratives are currently circulating across Europe. Empirically, we will present preliminary insights from the study of online discussions on the topic of migration in each of the countries based on the first data collection and topic modelling performed by WP4 members from the Jozef Stefan Institute (JSI) in Slovenia.

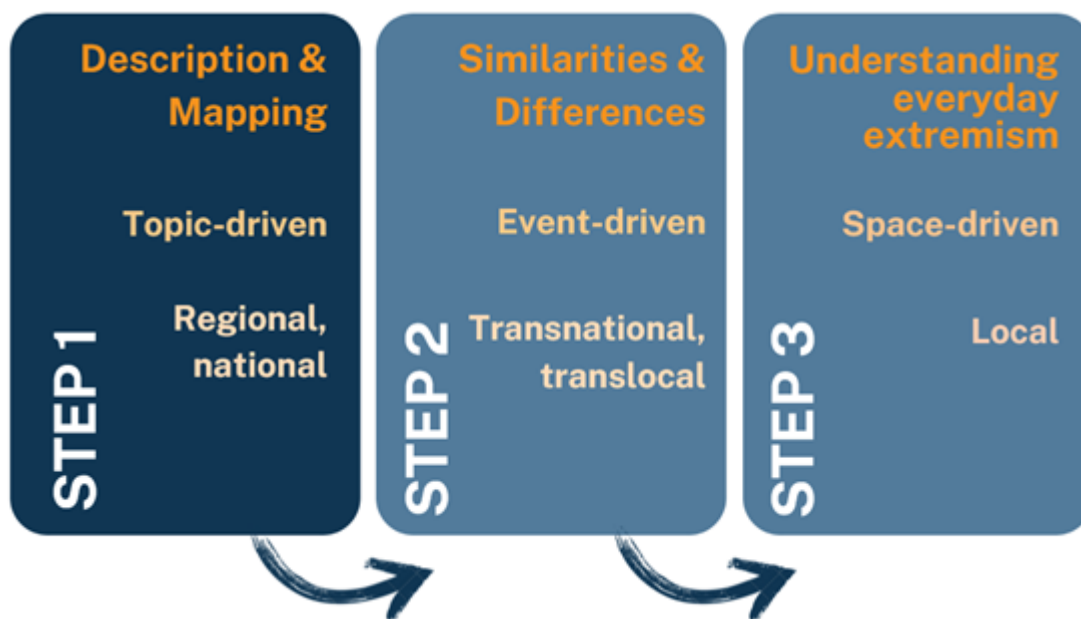
In summary, each report in the *Media, Machines, Mobilisations* – Work Package will focus on a different aspect of our main research question and add another piece to the puzzle of our take on everyday extremism. The first report is *topic-driven* in that it focuses on extremist narratives around contentious topics as they circulate online in specific national contexts. The second report is *event-driven* and has a distinct translocal perspective focusing on narratives emerging around the 2024 European Parliament elections across countries and across on- and offline spaces. The third deliverable focuses on everyday negotiations and meaning-making processes around contentious issues within urban environments and explores everyday extremism from the vantage point of specific *spaces and localities* across Europe. We intend to continue discussing how this structuring principle of topic-, event- and space-driven approaches might inform the various studies and organise the work ahead of us.

Mapping extremist narratives: Insights from Sweden, Austria and Bulgaria

Miriam Haselbacher, Jullietta Stoencheva, Tina Askanus and Ursula Reeger

The first report of WP4 *Media, Machines, Mobilisations* delves into the **historical and political contexts of three case countries – Austria, Bulgaria, and Sweden**, to map the range of extremist narratives circulating across Europe today. Through a comprehensive review of previous research and secondary data sources, the report [available in the Autumn] synthesizes existing knowledge on contemporary forms of extremist narratives, pursuing two key objectives. First, it maps **what kind of narratives are on offer** across Europe today, and second, it identifies **where across the digital mainstream** these are currently in circulation. In addition, it presents early insights from a study of online discussions on the topic of migration on the international and multi-language discussion forum Reddit, in the subreddits r/Austria, r/Sweden and r/Bulgaria. It reveals the widespread circulation of anti-democratic and extremist narratives around this contentious topic across all subreddits, but also identifies nuanced variations that reflect the unique circumstances and challenges faced by each country.

In doing so, the report presents the results of the first of three empirical steps informing Work Package 4.



Research design of WP4: Objectives, foci and level of analysis

This first step of our work is topic-driven in that it focuses on extremist narratives emerging around contentious topics as they circulate online in specific national contexts.

The report identifies four key topics as central to the proliferation of extremist narratives across the three countries and European regions. **First, extremist narratives continue to predominantly emerge around the topic of migration and anti-migration discourse specifically.** Contemporary anti-immigration narratives, which continuously take on new forms and tap into shifting conspiratorial narratives and various degrees of falsehoods, resonate with well-known tropes in nativist political campaigning suggesting that European societies are crumbling under the weight of multiculturalism, and that immigrant communities, especially Muslims, are “invading” Europe and “polluting”

white/ethnically homogeneous populations. Although they share a core ideology, the narratives, arguments and discursive tropes differ slightly across the three countries, reflecting their distinct historical and political contexts. In Sweden and Austria, anti-immigration narratives orbit around perceived threats posed by Muslim populations, with tenets rooted in xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy. Conversely, as a country of emigration, with more citizens leaving than migrants arriving, Bulgaria's anti-immigration narratives are shaped by the country's transit status and economic anxieties stemming from emigration trends.

Second, the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to a host of anti-establishment narratives, some of which veered towards illiberal, anti-democratic and violent ideas. These narratives peddle widely circulated conspiracy theories suggesting that a malevolent global elite exploited or orchestrated the pandemic to dismantle European societies, infringe upon civil liberties and harm populations through the vaccination programs. Anti-establishment narratives sparked during the pandemic continue to circulate and take on new forms in online spaces today.

In addition, in all three countries, **climate change and gender emerged as key topics around which political extremism tends to gravitate in Europe today.** These topics are intertwined and connected to specific narratives and conspiracy theories revolving around the delineation of in- and outgroups, enemy constructs and the establishment of hierarchies. Hence, extremist narratives tend to draw on several of these topics simultaneously inviting feelings of discontent and grievances against an imagined corrupt or "woke" elite. This narrative pattern was particularly prominent during the Covid-19 health crisis but can also be observed in the context of the deepening climate crises, and in the context of discussions around ongoing wars and armed conflicts such as those unfolding in Ukraine and Palestine.

Each of these topics has become a source of societal polarization and given rise to conspiracy theories in their own right. But when looking at these together, a complex landscape of intersecting narratives that tap into multiple topics and divisive debates simultaneously emerge. This convergence of narratives reflects societal divisions and ideological clashes, while forging new enemy images by the delineating sharp fault lines. Take climate change, for example. It's a subject marked by stark contrasts. On one side, there's passionate activism pushing for urgent action, while on the other, climate justice movements are increasingly dismissed as extreme or radical. Some actors, on the far right in particular, even deny the very existence of climate change, and spread disinformation about climate change science, further contributing to polarization. Further, we've seen narratives of climate change denialism and misogyny converge in far-right campaigns against Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement in ways that reflect the intersections of anti-science sentiment, reactionary politics, and gender-based discrimination.

In general, debates related to gender issues have intensified in all three countries, and these oftentimes intersect with anti-immigration discourse and far-right ideology. These debates over "gender ideology" and "wokeness", often propelled by conservative actors, have given rise to anti-feminist, transphobic and at times misogynist and male-supremacist narratives adding layers to the societal divide on issues related to gender and gender roles.

When it comes to identifying *where* extremist narratives occur, the report identifies **a wide range of online spaces** ranging from mainstream social media platforms to more fringe and country-specific sites operating at the margins of the digital mainstream. These span alternative news sites, websites and blogs to fringe video sharing platforms such as *Rumble*, *BitChute*, *Odysee* or *Discord*, as well as local online spaces like *Flashback Forum*, *Familjeliv* and *SwebbTube* in Sweden or *Spodeli*, *Kaldata*, *Dir.bg* and *BG-Mamma* in Bulgaria. This highlights the interconnected nature of our global media ecology in which extremist narratives **tend to flow fairly seamlessly between mainstream and fringe platforms and between international, national and local contexts.** Finally, the report highlights a concerning trend in today's landscape of online extremism. Narratives produced by extremist groups

tend to hide their ideologies and violent intentions behind layers of coded language, humor, irony and euphemisms. This disguise makes it difficult to detect and speak out against these harmful narratives. As a result, extremist narratives can spread widely and seep into everyday conversations online. This penetration blurs the lines between acceptable public discourse and extremism and risks accelerating the process of mainstreaming extreme ideas and violence.

In the next steps of our work, we delve further into how the dynamics and patterns identified in this initial mapping manifest more concretely within the contexts of the three European countries that serve as focal points for our empirical investigations.

The politicization of urban spaces in Malmö: Reflections on Eurovision as backdrop to the EP elections

Tina Askanius, Malmö, 15 April 2024

As soon as I step out of the train, I'm greeted by colorful banners and posters that say "United by music". When walking through town to the university, police helicopters and drones circle in the air. On the dock outside of campus a group of heavily armed police officers are having ice cream in the sun. I'm struck by the weird contrast and by how unfamiliar it is to see police in this part of the city, let alone armed police. I take a walk to the so called Eurovision Village, or as it's actually called, Folkets Park – *the park of the people*. Some roads around the park are closed off and now serve as what seems like an interim police headquarters closed off to the general public. I've never seen so much police in Malmö before, or so many police officers with automatic weapons in one place.



Pro-Palestinian protest banner mimicking the lyrics of 'Only Teardrops' by Emmelie de Forest, winner of the 2013 Eurovision also held in Malmö

Amidst all of the police, security and surveillance the *United by Music* signs But they are competing for space and attention alongside another even more ubiquitous sign and message – Palestinian solidarity protests contesting Israel's participation in the contest. Palestinian flags hang from windows everywhere. They pop up as stickers on lamp posts, as graffiti on the walls, on posters and flyers spread across the city. People of all ages wear the keffiyeh, or pins with the Palestinian flag on their jackets. Demonstrations against Israel's participation in the competition are being organized all over the city – more than 20,000 people will participate in the demonstrations this weekend, I'm told. The event organizers continue to claim it's not a political event and that politics should be left out of it. They play this phrase on repeat as if it would make it more true. But it feels as if Malmö has never been this politicized.

Political symbols have been banned inside the arena, including, or perhaps in particular, the Palestinian flag. But Eurovision itself seems as one big political symbol imposed on the city with its big neon messages of unity and European community. It's a vision for Europe, a vision for unity and tolerance – a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, not least. How is that not political? Visions and values we will be voting for in just a few weeks with the EP elections.

Everywhere I look there are calls for people to celebrate diversity, come together and take care of each other. You can take selfies in glittering frames, the streets are decorated in pink and rainbow flags, and you can attend free concerts and cultural events all week. The contrast of the message, the frivolous pink aesthetic with the heavily politized, polarized, and policed city space is hard not to notice. The people I talk to feel besieged in their own city. *United by Music* rings untrue and hollow somehow. The city seems divided by music right now."



Activists protesting the Eurovision Song Contest at Malmö Central Station

When the party is over and all the glitter and decorations are taken down, and Eurovision Village will once again go back to being Folkets Park, the city will return to normal. In a few weeks the posters for the EP elections will be on every lamp post around the city but this year they will most likely be accompanied by 'Stop the genocide', 'Genocide Song contest', and 'Boycott Israel' posters. The elections are bound to take place against the backdrop of all the frictions and contentious politics surrounding Eurovision. As I head back home later that afternoon.

Impressions from (everyday) EU-election campaigning in Vienna

Miriam Haselbacher and Ursula Reeger, Vienna, 18 May 2024

For our first in-depth exploration of everyday campaigning for the EU elections on the streets of Vienna, we chose a Saturday morning in mid-May, hoping that we would encounter several political parties handing out leaflets and campaign material. We meet at Reumannplatz in Favoriten, the 10th district of Vienna. It is an area with a high share of immigrants and a large weekly market nearby, which is very busy on Saturdays. Already in the metro, we are sitting vis-à-vis a young man wearing a T-Shirt and a bag from the liberal party NEOS. He gets off the same stop as we do and joins a group of NEOS supporters that has gathered at the park at Reumannplatz. They are all covered in pink (the colour of the party), and wave EU-flags. We approach them to chat and the district spokeswoman of the party, who is among them, tells us that the leading candidate of the party will soon arrive in person. She expresses concerns about the ongoing politicization of this part of Favoriten, and admits that it is a difficult area to campaign for a pro-EU party.



*Destroyed election poster of the FPÖ, with stickers saying “Nobody likes Nazis” or F*ck Nazis”, as well as in handwriting “My Reichs-Chancellor”, a reference to the Nazi regime*

We continue walking along the shopping street towards the market, which is already crowded and in full swing. Everywhere on the way, we see election posters, many of them smeared on, destroyed or at least partially demolished (see Foto 1). The whole area is plastered with stickers and small graffiti and is a witness to political disputes that unfold along the left vs right, immigration, inflation, gentrification, and security. Some slogans also touch upon the right to the city and the appropriation of the neighbourhood with slogans like “We’re taking back our Favoriten” or “No Nazi meeting point in our neighbourhood” but we also encounter stickers and posters in other languages.



SPÖ Women Favoriten asking “What do we want from the EU”? Answers include i. a. “Protection from violence” (Schutz vor Gewalt), “More women in directorates” (Mehr Frauen in Aufsichtsräten) or “Something completely different” (Ganz etwas anderes)

Next to the market, there is a small booth of the Social Democratic Party SPÖ, where a member from the National Council is handing out coffee, tea and leaflets. The organization of the SPÖ Women of the Favoriten has put a flipchart with various questions on the floor, where people who are passing by are asked to put down what is important to them (see Foto 2). We stay and listen to the conversations; a woman is sharing her concern about the raising living costs, another person says that he is disappointed about the Social Democrats, and a third person states that the party is not supporting disabled persons. After a few minutes, the police drive by to check if the stall has a permit but move on soon.



Helmut Brandstätter, the lead candidate of the liberal party NEOS, on his way through the busy market

We continue on and turn our attention to the bustling market while searching for the leading candidate of the NEOS. Finally, we see Helmut Brandstätter, the top candidate of NEOS for the EU-election, in the middle of a narrow and very crowded market road. He is covered in a large EU-flag that he keeps wrapped around him. Around him, the market is bustling—it's crowded and lively, with vendors loudly advertising their goods. Helmut Brandstätter is very tall, making him easy to spot in the crowd, especially with the flag draped around him. Yet, few people seem to pay attention to him. A large portion of the people in this district have migrant backgrounds, and a significant number of the vendors and buyers present are likely not to be eligible to vote in the EU elections, making the appearance of a person wrapped in an EU flag slightly bizarre.

The transnational ties of the European far-right: Alternative for Sweden and Revival

Jullietta Stoencheva, May 25, 2024

As the EU elections draw closer, far-right parties across Europe are seeking to strengthen their influence through international collaborations. A striking example is the partnership between Sweden's Alternative for Sweden (AfS) and Bulgaria's Revival. This alliance offers a telling glimpse into the growing transnational ties among far-right and EU-skeptic movements, with their shared visions for Europe firmly rooted in nationalism and opposition to the EU's central authority.



The signing of the Sofia Declaration

In early May, AfS leader Gustav Kasselstrand arrived in Bulgaria for a weeklong visit upon an invitation from Revival's leader, Kostadin Kostadinov. The visit was centered around an international conference in Sofia organized by Kostadinov, titled *"The New Leaders of Europe"*, where representatives from nine European far-right parties convened. The event culminated in the signing of what Kostadinov proudly called *The Sofia Declaration*, a document outlining shared goals: preserving national borders, protecting state sovereignty, and pushing for a renegotiation of the EU's political powers.

Kasselstrand's Bulgarian tour extended beyond the conference. Together with Stanislav Stoyanov, Revival's top EU election candidate, Kasselstrand embarked on a road trip to the Bulgarian-Turkish border – a location frequently highlighted in anti-immigration narratives. The trip included a stop in a Roma neighborhood in the town of Sliven, described as a "ghetto" by Kasselstrand in a vlog shared with his YouTube followers. In the video, Kasselstrand portrayed the neighborhood as emblematic of Europe's supposed immigration and integration failures, a message that resonates with AfS's supporters back in Sweden.

Following the visit, the partnership between AfS and Revival has become increasingly visible online. The parties engage in mutual promotion, amplifying each other's content through social media. Recently, Stoyanov recorded a video urging Swedes to "Vote for Alternative for Sweden on June 9th!" – a message Kasselstrand eagerly reshared. Revival's official election video was also featured on Kasselstrand's YouTube channel, accompanied by his commentary of support to their "sister party in Bulgaria." Moments of camaraderie abounded: when Kasselstrand burned an EU flag at an AfS rally and shared the video on YouTube, Kostadinov applauded him with the comment "Well done, Gustav!", to which Kasselstrand responded with Swedish and Bulgarian flag emojis. Similarly, under an AfS campaign video, Kostadinov left a supportive message: "Greetings from Bulgaria! I wish victory to Alternative for Sweden!"

The influence of the AfS-Revival alliance extends beyond their respective followers – narratives co-crafted by the two parties are beginning to permeate mainstream discourse. At today's AfS rally in Malmö, Kasselstrand referenced his visit to Bulgaria, invoking the Sofia Declaration as a symbol of burgeoning far-right solidarity. He specifically highlighted his visit to Sliven's Roma neighborhood,

attributing the area's challenges to the Roma population in an echo of far-right rhetoric in both Sweden and Bulgaria.



On the left: post by an AfS politician on X with the caption “Sweden 2015 – 2024”. On the right: the same two photos and caption merged in a single image on Bulgarian social media

The AfS-Revival collaboration's effects also surface in subtler ways, such as social media memes. On May 13, a member of AfS tweeted a provocative post featuring two contrasting images: one of herself in traditional Swedish attire, and another of a group of Muslim women in hijabs, captioned “Sweden 2015-2024.” Within days, the same images appeared in Bulgarian social media as a collage with a translated caption, gaining traction among anti-immigration groups. While Revival's official channels have not yet shared the meme, its spread in Bulgarian social media reveals a troubling pattern: far-right parties do not only operate within their national borders but also forge transnational alliances to amplify their reach and influence. In this case, the relationship extends beyond symbolic gestures, materializing in shared rhetoric, coordinated online efforts, and even the spread of memes that cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. As the EU elections approach, the implications of such collaborations grow ever more concerning, illustrating how these movements capitalize on shared grievances to weave a pan-European far-right network.

The Swedish Democrats rally in Helsingborg

Jullietta Stoencheva, Helsingborg, May 28, 2024

The Sweden Democrats (SD), Sweden's largest far-right party, is not stopping by Malmö on their 'EU election tour' this year. But they are rallying in the nearby city of Helsingborg, I hear, so I decide to catch a train and attend. I brace myself to listen and observe attentively once I arrive, but my observations begin already on the bus to Malmö's central station. In the seat in front of me, four teenage boys, by the look of it of immigrant origin, are discussing the upcoming elections. "I hope Charlie Weimers wins," one of them says. Charlie Weimers is SD's top candidate for the European Parliament. "Why, so they send your father back?!", another one questions in disbelief. The first boy replies calmly: "My father has a Swedish citizenship." A few teasing remarks later, their conversation drifts in another direction.



Party flags and pyrotechnics as SD leader Jimmie Åkesson enters the stage.

A bit later, on the train, three passengers in their early sixties sit across the aisle from me. At one point, their conversation turns to politics. One woman remarks: "I'm not going to vote. I've voted for the Green Party for 16 years, but now politicians have become too strange." It strikes me how disillusionment with politics seems to cut across demographics.

When I arrive to Helsingborg's main square, the SD rally is already in preparation. The party has set up a large stage, complete with pyrotechnics, light effects, and music. Swedish schlagers alternate with SD's own politically-themed songs, creating an atmosphere both festive and unsettling. SD-branded flags are being handed out to the crowd, though not everyone welcomes them. While I politely decline the one offered to me, I see some attendees taking the flags only to tear them apart in protest.

When SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson takes the stage, I stand at the back of the crowd as supporters usher forward, cheering and waving flags. About 100 meters behind me, a pro-Palestine demonstration is underway. The tension is palpable even before Åkesson starts speaking. He kicks off

his speech by displaying videos of presumed immigrants committing acts of destruction, accompanied by the slogan “My Europe builds walls.” The imagery and rhetoric seem designed to stir emotions, and they do. Soon, the pro-Palestine demonstrators begin moving closer and chanting louder, in an effort to disrupt Åkesson’s speech. As they gradually intercept the crowd, I suddenly find myself caught between the two groups, which are growing increasingly confrontational. At this point, Åkesson declares he will not continue speaking until the police silences the counter-protesters. The police complies, pushing the demonstrators back, but the tension lingers. One silent protester stands out in the crowd: a woman wearing a Pride-flag-colored outfit walks back and forth, carrying a large handmade bag with the words “Don’t deport my friend” embroidered on it. Unlike the vocal demonstrators, she is not moved by the police, her quiet presence speaking volumes. As the rally progresses, Åkesson introduces a local European Parliament candidate. He does so with a jab: “She... I think it’s a she anyway, you can’t be too sure these days...” The crowd erupts in laughter.

Toward the end of the rally, I accidentally overhear two elderly women as their conversation veers into deeply disturbing territory. Gesturing toward the protesters, one says, “Someone should take a weapon and shoot them all. They’re people who don’t know anything. They come here, get food, money, clothes, housing, and then stand here screaming like this. If only we could throw a bomb among them...” The other woman murmurs, visibly uncomfortable, as the first one continues her rant. “I want the old, traditional Sweden,” she goes on to say. “Small shops, markets, and nice people on the streets. Not these...” She finishes her tirade with a racial slur, the spite in her words creating a heavy silence between them. I find myself ready to leave.

As the train carries me back to Malmö that evening, I can’t help but feel the weight of the day – a potent mix of politics, prejudice, and the growing urgency of the coming elections.

Politicising Children's Day: Campaigns and controversies in Sofia

Jullietta Stoencheva, Sofia June 1, 2024

In Bulgaria, June 1st is traditionally known as Children's Day – a day filled with family activities. This year, it falls on a Saturday. The early summer sun is blazing as I head downtown, knowing the city center would be crowded – and not just because of the Children's Day festivities. Bulgaria is just 9 days away from looming 2-in-1 elections amidst a prolonged political crisis. It is the sixth time in two years that Bulgarians go to the ballots, but with both a national government and EU Parliament representatives to be elected, this time there's more on the line. The public sentiment is a mixture of voter fatigue, disenchantment, and worry for the country's future.



Sword's party-branded van

Passing through busy boulevards covered in election billboards and posters, I spot two politically branded vans. The first one to catch my attention prominently displays the logo and ballot number of the largest far-right player in the country, Revival, along with their leader's image. Shortly after, a van branded with the newly formed "Morality, Unity, Honour" (in Bulgarian abbreviated *MEЧ*, which translates to "Sword") drives by, blasting the party's program through a loudspeaker.

My day begins with an attempt to track down a Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) campaign event announced online, only to find no trace of them at the designated location. Instead, I stumble upon representatives of the center-right coalition "We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB) handing out reusable bags filled with campaign materials. These bags become a common sight as I wander through the city.

Next, I visit one of Sofia's largest parks, where Children's Day activities are in full swing. However, even this family-friendly space is not spared from political campaigning. Political parties have decorated their booths with party-branded balloons in large quantities, which they hand out to the children. Of course, the real purpose is to attract the parents. The blazing heat offers another opportunity for creatively doing so – PP-DB serve refreshing cold lemonade, while conservative-populist GERB hand out party caps to anyone in need of protecting their face from the sun. A humorous moment unfolds when a GERB representative stretches a cap to a young family walking just ahead of me. The father accepts it, and as they pass, I hear his wife scold him: "Why did you take this? You hate this party." His response is pragmatic: "I'm not going to wear it, of course, but my grandma may need one to wear in

the village.” BSP’s balloons, unlike most others, are unbranded, but sporting the party’s signature red colour. Even smaller parties have seized the opportunity to engage the public, walking around the park and handing out flyers.



GERB’s election booth – campaign materials in the foreground, a stage with dancing minions in the background

In the city center, campaigning is even more elaborate. Being Children’s Day, parties have tailored their outreach to families. GERB’s booth resembles a mini-festival with music, dancing minions, table tennis, and a lounge area with party-branded refreshments for parents and children, such as candy and water bottles. Meanwhile, PP-DB has rebranded the space in front of the National Theatre as “Square 14” (their ballot number), complete with a basketball court, sun beds, a book exchange shelf, and a board game area. As I walk by, one of their candidates, the Bulgarian Women’s Chess Champion, is hosting a chess tournament. The atmosphere is strikingly different from what I’m used to seeing in Sweden – party representatives eagerly step outside their booths to distribute materials, chat with passersby, and invite them into their festivities.

Yet, amidst this energy, cynicism lingers. I overhear two women on a bench discussing their voting intentions. “I’m either not going to vote or will vote blank,” one says. “Whoever comes into power steals from our country or does something else criminal. I don’t want to be complicit in their crimes.” Their disillusionment stands in stark contrast to the bustling campaigning around.



Edelweiss' book fair stand

The city center is not just a hub for political activity today – it's also hosting a book fair. Among the vendors is "Edelweiss," a publishing house linked to the neo-Nazi Bulgarian National Union. Sharing a booth with a seller of children's books, their offerings include a Bulgarian translation of *Mein Kampf*, works by Holocaust denier David Irving, and memoirs of figures associated with fascism. The seller is a young man wearing a t-shirt with a crossed-out hammer and sickle alongside the text "Decommunization" – a motif I recognize from stickers I've seen scattered around the city. This sight is a poignant reminder of the presence of extremism alongside Bulgaria's democratic processes.

The final rally of the FPÖ at Viktor-Adler-Markt

Miriam Haselbacher and Ursula Reeger, Vienna 7 June 2024

On June 7, we return to Viktor-Adler-Markt in Favoriten and it offers a quite different picture compared to our first visit. On this day, the right-wing FPÖ is holding its closing event for the EU-election campaign here, as the venue is their preferred space for such large rallies (see Foto 1). Just as pointed out in the previous blog post, the area where it takes place, the 10th district in Vienna, Favoriten, is a symbolically charged urban area. It is an old working-class district with a very high share of migrants that is frequently politicized in public discourse, being framed as inherently dangerous and insecure.



Foto 1: Announcement of the election campaign event at Viktor-Adler-Markt, displayed all across the city. Herbert Kickl is the party lead, Harald Vilimsky the FPÖ's candidate for the EU election. The slogan reads "Free, safe, neutral" (Frei, sicher, neutral). At the bottom, they offer a tailor free of charge who will be present at the event and offer her services, claiming that she will only work on clean clothes



Foto 2: The stage next to Viktor-Adler-Markt

The FPÖ has set up a stage across the shopping street Favoritenstraße next to Viktor-Adler-Markt (see Foto 2). There is loud music from a band that is meant to create a good atmosphere in the run-up to the appearance of major party officials. Many of those present in the crowd appear to be “usual suspects”, loyal party supporters of the FPÖ, people from different walks of life. The area in front of the stage is cordoned off by barriers and access is guarded by security staff. Around the venue, there is lots of police and private securities.



Foto 3: Counter-demonstration with slogans like “No Nazi meeting point in our neighbourhood” (Kein Nazitreff in unserem Grätzl)

We position ourselves outside the inner circle in front of the stage and stand next to a market booth with a good overview of the scenery. Next to us is a group of social workers who is also watching, next to party sympathizers and people who are passing by. Roughly 200 metres away from the stage, a small left-wing counter-demonstration has positioned itself (see Foto 3). During the event, some young people from the demonstration come closer and stand just outside the closed off area holding

up small signs saying i. a. “Nazis out”. They are yelled at and security guards try to make them move but the police let’s them stay.

Starting off the event, Herbert Kickl brings “good news for all patriots who care about their nation and bad news for the political system that wants to continue to rule against the people”. His speech repeatedly refers to the “blue family” and the “family Austria”, thus conveying a sense of belonging to his party supporters and that he will take care of their concerns as “People’s Chancellor” (a term i.a. used by National Socialists referring to Adolf Hitler).

Harald Vilimsky, FPÖ’s top candidate for the EU election, kicks off his speech by explaining that he grew up in Favoriten. Getting more and more territorial, he refers to Favoriten at that time as “still our district”, making negative claims about immigration he promises to “reclaim this district step by step”. He is also happy that there is a left-wing counter-demonstration in the background, which (from his perspective) will aid the party’s campaign. In addition, he sends his regards to “the German lying press” (Lügenpresse), namely the ZDF (public television in Germany), which has also found its way to Favoriten proving the “manipulative interests of public media”. His central claims include “getting back our Austria” and “getting back our democracy”.

On election day, FPÖ wins in a tight race with 25.4%, followed by the conservative ÖVP (24.5%) and the social-democratic SPÖ (23.2%).

Everyday Extremism in Sweden: How Online Narratives Normalise Radical Views

By OppAttune PhD candidate Jullietta Stoencheva and Professor Biljana Mileva Boshkoska

In the digital age, online platforms have become the new battlegrounds for public discourse. One such platform, Flashback Forum, has emerged as a significant space for discussions about migration in Sweden. In a new study, OppAttune PhD candidate Jullietta Stoencheva and Professor Biljana Mileva Boshkoska shed light on how extremist narratives become woven into everyday discussions about migration on this popular anonymous forum.

Using a unique mixed-methods approach that combines computational topic modelling and qualitative narrative analysis, the researchers identified key topics and extremist narratives within these discussions. Interestingly, the study highlights that the discussions often revolved around broader societal issues rather than migration itself. Topics included employment, education, healthcare, and Swedish identity, focusing on how immigration disrupts these elements of everyday life in Sweden. Two topics stood out for their overtly extremist language: “Biological racial differences” and “Animals,” where immigrants were dehumanized and portrayed as genetically inferior.

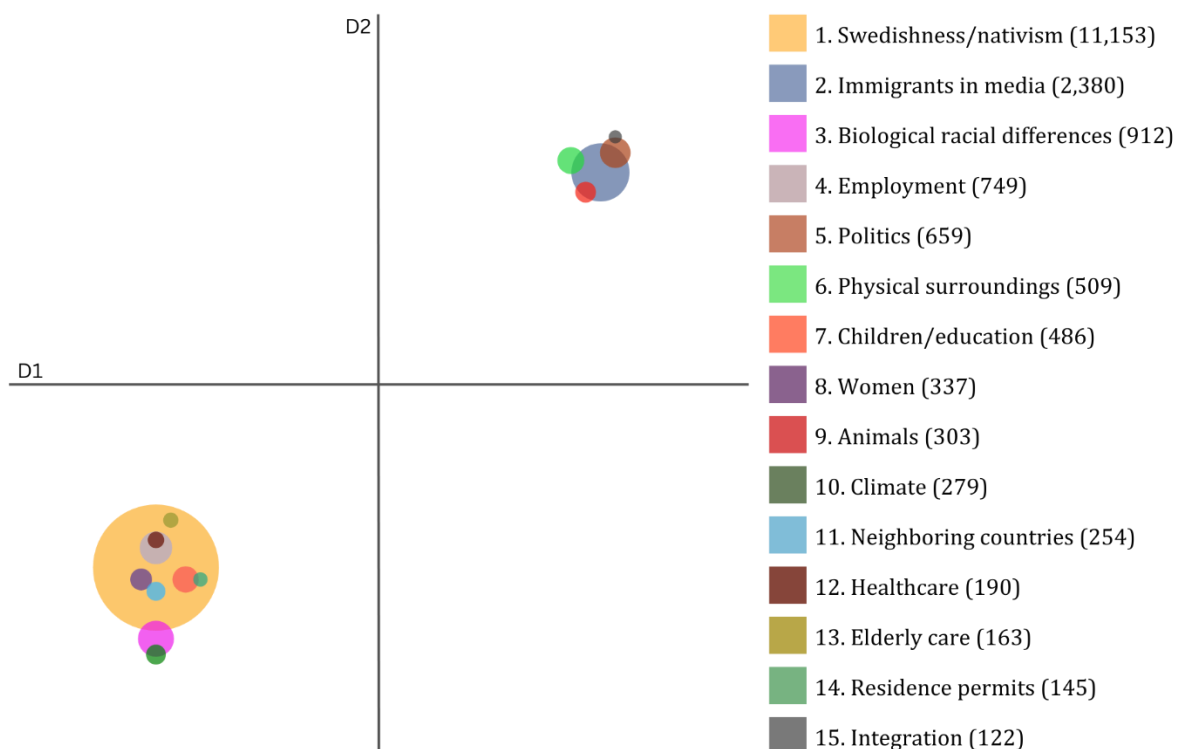


Figure 1. Intertopic distance map. The numbers next to the scale items indicate the number of posts corresponding to each category

How extremist narratives take shape

Importantly, the study reveals a pattern for constructing extremist narratives: they build in part on group identity constructions, where the perceived in-group suggests a violent or hostile solution to a societal crisis or threat, the root cause of which they frame to be out-groups. This process mirrors a core feature of populism, dividing society in positively framed in-groups and negatively framed out-groups. The alleged ‘crisis’ suggests that out-groups cause the suffering of the in-group both through

their inherent traits (how they are), and through their actions (what they do). Constructed in such a way, these crisis narratives legitimise the proposal of extreme counteractions.

Four types of crisis narratives were identified in the analysed material:

- **Crises of impurity:** Immigrants were framed as ‘contaminating’ Swedish society, both ideologically and racially. This narrative also targeted ‘leftists’ and Swedish women as traitors or ‘contaminated in-groups.’
- **Conspiracy narratives:** Discussions suggested a hidden agenda by elites to replace the Swedish population with immigrants.
- **Dystopian narratives:** Immigration was projected to lead to societal collapse, with immigrants blamed for the destruction of Sweden’s welfare system, physical surroundings, and values.
- **Existential threat:** Immigrants were portrayed as a direct threat to the survival of the Swedish population.

While it is important to understand these narratives, it is equally vital to recognise strategies for counteracting them. Awareness of how these narratives function enables a more critical approach to online discussions and media consumption. Encouraging digital literacy, fostering critical thinking, and promoting inclusive narratives can all help push back against this type of extremist messaging.

How everyday extremism thrives online

The prevalence of these narratives in ordinary conversations and interactions on a mainstream public forum, we propose, aligns with a larger trend towards an increasing presence and normalization of extremist messages and symbols in people’s daily lives, both online and offline – a phenomenon described as *everyday extremism*. This process occurs through four key mechanisms:

- **Mainstreaming:** Extremist ideas spread from fringe environments into popular, **non-political**
- **Normalisation:** The process through which previously extreme ideas become acceptable and uncontroversial.
- **Mundane Integration:** Extremist narratives blend into discussions about everyday concerns, making them appear rational or common-sense.
- **Cultural Penetration:** Extremist messages infiltrate entertainment, online humour, and popular culture, embedding these ideas into daily life.

In sum, the study shows how mundane concerns around immigration on Flashback mix with overtly extremist discourse and conspiracy beliefs, explicating Flashback as a site of everyday extremism. These findings ultimately highlight the significance of online spaces like Flashback as both a reflection of and a catalyst for broader social and ideological shifts. The presence of extremist narratives in discussions about mundane societal issues on Flashback underscore the need for vigilance and proactive engagement with online discussions as important indicators of societal trends. Recognizing how these ideas spread – and learning how to challenge them – equips us to better counteract misinformation and promote more balanced democratic dialogue. As a society, we play a vital role in addressing and mitigating the spread of these harmful narratives. By fostering digital resilience and critical dialogue, we can work towards a more informed and cohesive social fabric.

The full publication can be found here: [\(PDF\) Extremist narratives in the digital mainstream: Exploring online discussions about migration in Sweden](#)

Discrepant urban landscapes: Malmö as exception?

Fieldwork reflections from Malmö, Tina Askanius, 29 May 2025

Today's walk through Möllevången (Möllan) in Malmö reminded me once again of the striking sensory and ideological contrast between this neighbourhood and many other parts of Sweden. Every step through this part of town offers visual affirmation of Malmö's status as a "progressive hub": stickers proclaiming "Refugees Welcome," "Antifascist Zone," rainbow flags, Trump and Putin mockery and Mayday protest messages of social justice alliances appear on nearly every surface from lamp posts, traffic signs, mail boxes, and electricity cabinets. Some are recent, bold in colour and message. Others, like the faded Refugees Welcome stickers from 2015 and 2016, have been weathered by time, rain and wind, half-torn and almost illegible, yet still present. Their endurance suggests to me that the idea of refugee solidarity remain fairly uncontested in this space.



Image 1: Remnants of a 'Refugees welcome' sticker from the 2015 solidarity protests, Malmö on 9 May 2025

These remnants, or 'political residues', are testament not only to past moments of mobilisation, but to a kind of symbolic occupation of public space by social justice-oriented movements. Their presence is layered, both as historical trace and as persistent declaration of solidarity and multiculturalism in this city.

What is especially noticeable is that these stickers, despite exposure to the elements and the widespread backlash against the solidarity movements in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe, have not been removed. In all cities, one expects an ongoing battle of stickers, a visual contest of placing and replacing, message and counter-message, but in Möllan, right-wing slogans and insignia seem to be largely absent, or at the very least decisively outnumbered and contested.



Image 2: Anti-pride/gender sticker from neo-Nazi group NRM, Årsta 13 May

The contrast becomes even sharper when I later go online to review the documentation gathered by neo-Nazi activists tracking what they themselves refer to as “baseline activism”; that is, the steady presence of far-right materials posted across towns and rural areas where extremist groups maintain influence. From Tomelilla in the south to Karlstad and Stockholm, there has been a consistent spread of far-right propaganda throughout all of May. Flyers urging people to “wake up,” “rise up,” and “join the resistance” have been handed out in a number of locations. Stickers and flyers include messages preparing Swedes for the immanent race war and inviting them to join what they describe as “the battle” which “requires more than words”. Blood and soil and white pride rhetoric has appeared on the walls of public schools, libraries, council buildings, lamp posts and shop windows. These so-called sticker campaigns are meticulously documented and archived online for the images to be shared and recirculated on social media by far-right activists.



Image 3: Neo-Nazi sticker, Norrköping 15 May

The dissonance between the street-level experience of Malmö and the pictures wider national picture is striking. In Möllan, one moves through a landscape where progressive values are openly on display. It stands in stark contrast to the exclusionary, conspiratorial and openly hostile messages one might encounter in the built environment elsewhere in Sweden. What emerges is not simply a geographic

divide, but a deeper political and affective rift that is communicated through the micro-territories of stickered and tagged surfaces. This contradictorily landscape prompts important questions about who gets to leave their mark on the city, in a very literal sense, and how? Which violent ideas and extremist messages are permitted to linger unchallenged, and where in the country? And how do these localised visual cultures reflect and shape broader national tensions? How does this semiotic tug-of-war over the urban space play out in different locations across Europe? These are all questions that we, in WP4, will explore in our forthcoming deliverable presenting insights from our ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Vienna, Athens and Malmö.



Image 4: “Proud white youth”, Karlstad, 17 May

May Day in Malmö

Reflections from Jullietta Stoencheva, May 1st 2025

It is unusually sunny for this time of year – the first true day of spring, if you will. This fact alone, combined with a bank holiday, already tells anyone familiar with Swedish social rules that the city centre would be crowded. And it is – but with a special festive vibe to it. Malmö's Gustav Adolf square is alive with the sound of drums, the colour of red flags, and the feeling of anticipation hanging in the air. It is May 1st, International Workers' Day, and in true Swedish social-democratic tradition, thousands have taken to the streets. Like every year, the workers' parade goes from the Gustav Adolf square to Folkets Park ("The people's park"), where a speech takes place. This year, the speech is given by the Social Democrats' party leader and former Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson.

Around 2,000 people have gathered at the square, from elderly Swedes in wheelchairs to teenagers draped in Pride flags, families with young children holding red balloons, and workers representing various trade unions. "The class war is a feminist war", "Peace for Palestine", "Education is society's self-defence", "Save the planet, not the corporations", some of the posters read. The diversity is striking – in age, ethnicity, affiliation – and emblematic of Malmö's political left.



Image 1: Flag bearers at the May Day parade

As the orchestra plays traditional marches, a line of flag bearers stands poised: the Swedish flag, the Social Democrats' red banner, and, notably, a NATO flag — its presence for the second consecutive year a subtle but symbolic shift in the party's identity. When Andersson arrives, together with local party representatives, she is met with cheers and applause. She gestures "Forward", and the parade begins to move.



Image 2: May Day parade.

As we walk, people cheer us on from cafés, wave at us from their balconies. This kind of ambient support says something about how ingrained May Day remains in the Swedish political calendar. Seeing this level of unity, it's almost hard to believe that the Social Democrats currently represent the opposition in the Swedish parliament. Despite them remaining Sweden's largest party for over a century, the right-wing bloc claimed more votes at the 2022 election, famously lifting the *cordon sanitaire* on the Swedish Democrats – the country's far-right party and currently the second-largest party in parliament.

But if there are any right-wing sympathisers on the streets today, they don't make themselves known. I am only briefly reminded of any contestation when we arrive at Folkets Park and I see a small group of counter-protesters. Their banners, among which "Socialists to prison", "What if you wake up too late?", and "Fight against socialist destruction", are largely ignored. Instead, people eagerly approach the stage to wait for Andersson.



Image 3. The crowd at Folkets Park waiting for Magdalena Andersson's speech. Counter-protesters' banners in the middle.

She appears within minutes, opening her speech with a new policy proposal: the introduction of a pension increase for those who have worked more than 40 years, and a possibility to reduce working

hours in the last years prior to retirement without a pension cut. This announcement is met with loud ovations, especially from the many elderly attendees.

Yet the event doesn't go completely without disruption. Early in the speech, two people suddenly run to the stage, attempting to climb up on it. They are quickly taken by police before I can read their banners, but I hear other attendees say they were climate activists. A few moments later, as Andersson brings up the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, tensions in the crowd rise. Chants and shouts from pro-Palestinian protesters dissatisfied with Sweden's stance on the conflict eventually get louder than Andersson's voice, and she goes silent. After a brief pause, she urges the crowd to let her speak. "How can Netanyahu and his ministers even sleep at night?" she says, adding: "This war is a stain on the history of humanity." She expresses critique of the current Swedish government's silence, and urges for a stronger Swedish voice in international politics.



Image 4. Magdalena Andersson on stage at Folkets Park on May 1st.

Despite these tensions, the overall mood remains upbeat. Andersson finishes her speech, applause follows. Other speakers take the stage, one by one, and the crowd slowly starts to disperse. I stay behind thinking of the subtle frictions within the Swedish left that were on display today, and how May Day accommodates (or doesn't) new political urgencies. Yet, it was striking how the heterogeneity of struggles – pensions for the elderly, labor protections from the unions, queer visibility, anti-racism, climate anxiety, and solidarity with Palestine, among others – coexisted, not always harmoniously, but with an unspoken agreement that this was *their* day to share space. Magdalena Andersson was up against the difficult task of holding this plurality together, and the variety of reactions from the crowd showed that there are some groups and movements that do not feel fully represented by the institutional left.

Even so, the atmosphere was hopeful. It felt like Malmö's left still knows how to come together – in critique, and in celebration. I leave, feeling like May Day endures as a living and vibrant practice.

Reflections from Sofia Pride and the Family Parade

Jullietta Stoencheva, 14 June 2025, Sofia

On June 14th, Bulgaria hosted its 18th annual *Sofia Pride*, now dubbed “the largest human rights march in Bulgaria.” This year, the Pride slogan was “*We are people, not propaganda*,” a direct reference to a recent Bulgarian law banning so-called “LGBTQ+ propaganda” in schools. Only 800 meters away, a counter-event named *The Family Parade* took place, supported for the first time by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and sending a different message: that the heterosexual nuclear family is “the vital cell of society.”



Rules for attending Sofia Pride/The Family Parade, announced on their Facebook pages.

I’d been following the preparations for both events avidly online for the last two weeks. Both claimed they expected about 10,000 people, but neither generated much public attention in the weeks leading up. The public attention was focused on the European Commission’s recent announcement that Bulgaria will adopt the Euro as its official currency in 2026. Social media and public space were overwhelmingly dominated by the topic, and several large protests against the adoption of the Euro had already taken place in Sofia in the 10 days prior. Nevertheless, both Sofia Pride and the Family Parade consistently promoted their respective events, inviting people to attend. On the day before the event, the Sofia Pride page posted a list of prohibited items: weapons, explosive materials, alcohol, bottles, and pets without a leash. “*Do not respond to provocations — be part of the change*,” the post additionally stated. The Family Parade’s rules for their attendees were quite different: no flags or banners but the Bulgarian flag would be allowed. Instead, pre-approved placards would be handed out, “to preserve the spirit and unity of [their] message”.

I went to the Sofia city centre early, curious to see how these two ideological stages would be built — in infrastructure and in atmosphere. I got off the tube at the Sofia University station, which is only metres away from the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the Family Parade’s site. The square in front of the cathedral was already busy, as many were out enjoying the Saturday sun. The stage was still being

constructed, but the street market was already open. Stalls sold religious icons, Orthodox literature, engraved woodwork, and caps and t-shirts branded with the Family Parade's logo.



Stalls at the Family Parade's street market.

The short walk from there to the Knyaz Alexander I Square, the gathering point for Sofia Pride, was nothing short of strange. Every single lamppost, every trash bin I passed by was newly adorned with anti-LGBTQ+ stickers. Most simply represented a rainbow flag crossed out, but others exhibited more violent iconography: a white stick figure with the Odal rune symbol on its head kicking a rainbow-colored figure bearing a Soviet hammer and sickle as a head, accompanied by the text: *"Gay parade? Not in my city!"* (which in Bulgarian rhymes). I was struck by the heavy packing of violent symbols in this image. The Odal rune, in Scandinavian mythology referring to heritage and homeland, is famously appropriated by neo-Nazis and white supremacists. The hammer and sickle clearly imply a link between LGBTQ+ people and communism, a historically laden ideology in the Bulgarian context. The visual essence of the picture was clear: one exercising violence over the other.



Images 6, 7 & 8. Anti-Pride stickers in the Knyaz Alexander I Square area.

As I got closer to the square, I was met with metal barriers, police cars, and a large group of police officers standing by. I overheard one of them saying she believed it would be a calm event, and the sceptical reactions from some of her colleagues. I slipped through a gap in the metal fence, which was still being put up, and ended up in another street market area where stalls were being stocked with rainbow-coloured items. T-shirts, stickers, tote bags, water bottles were being put on display, fridges

were being filled with beverages, soundchecks were in progress on stage. But as I was checking out the area, a police officer asked me to leave — no explanation given. I complied.



Barriers and police presence around the Knyaz Alexander I Square.



“Reviving family values” concert stage in front of the National Palace of Culture.

There was still plenty of time until any events would officially start, so I headed to the National Palace of Culture, where the far-right party Revival would hold their own counter-event — a concert titled “Reviving Family Values.” I found out about this event almost by accident — despite its symbolic timing during the Pride parade, it was surprisingly under-publicized, barely mentioned on the party’s otherwise very active social media feeds which were currently heavily dominated by anti-Euro discourse. Still, the stage was professionally set up, adorned with large banners depicting a pictogram of a man, a woman, and two children in the party’s signature green color. I went to the party’s Instagram page to see if they had announced an agenda for this event, which I would have to miss in order to attend the parade, but they hadn’t posted anything about it yet. However, among their many Instagram stories from that day centered around the Euro adoption, there was a re-share of the Family Parade’s poster.

When I returned to the Pride site in the afternoon, the barriers were fully closed. Entry was controlled, and each person wishing to enter was searched. “For your protection,” said the security guard as he dug through my handbag. But once inside, the atmosphere was cheerful. Two trucks covered in balloons were standing ready for the parade. Next to the large open bar, free condoms were handed out. Across them, there was a makeup station, where an artist holding a colourful palette was offering visitors a complimentary makeover. Pro-Pride stickers had already replaced the anti-LGBTQ+ ones I saw earlier — the territory had been retaken, if only temporarily.



Security searches attendees before letting them enter the Knyaz Alexander I Square. Anti-Pride flags at the Knyaz Alexander I Square torn down, pro-Pride sticker put up in their place. T-shirt mocking anti-LGBTQ+ Hungarian president Victor Orban on sale at the Sofia Pride street market.



The Pride truck parked and ready for the parade.

At the opening ceremony, diplomats from several countries offered words of support. “Being LGBTQ+ is not an ideology, it’s an identity,” declared MEP Marc Angel, and the crowd cheered. And with that, the parade began. I joined the march, intending to be an observer and determined to avoid all cameras. But suddenly, a microphone was in my face as a reporter was asking why I supported the parade and what Bulgaria needed in order to become more tolerant. Caught off guard, I hesitated — then spoke. It felt like a minor act of bravery. As I was watching myself on the news that evening, I found myself wishing I had said more.



Views from the Sofia Pride parade.



Me being interviewed by a news reporter at the Sofia Pride parade.

While the Pride Parade wound its way back to its starting point for an evening concert, I returned to Alexander Nevsky Cathedral to witness the opening of the *Family Parade*. Unlike Pride's secured perimeter and mandatory bag checks, this event was open. The difference between the two was noticeable in colour, too: where Pride boasted with bright colours, the Family Parade began under the heavy formality of black robes. An Orthodox church choir, dressed head to toe in black, had lined up alongside several priests on the stage. Police presence lingered on the edges.



View of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and Square during the opening of the Family Parade. A Family Parade flag that was being handed out to attendees.

The event's start time slipped past 18:00 as sound checks continued in front of an assembling crowd. I found a seat under a tree, hoping to keep some distance, but the space's insistence on participation found me anyway — an organizer approached and handed me a small flag bearing the Family Parade's emblem. After choral hymns and a prayer for the family, various speakers took the stage. Among the attendees was Radostin Vasilev, leader of the nationalist Sword party.

Yet what struck me most wasn't just the black-and-white contrast to Pride's colours, or the careful blend of religion and nationalism. It was the reminder that, here too, I could not remain invisible. Sitting quietly under the tree, I spotted an old friend from middle school — now an outspoken conservative and "tradwife" activist. I shifted position, hoping to fade into the background. But within minutes, she appeared just metres away again. I couldn't be sure she saw me, but in that moment I felt how impossible it was to be a non-participant observer of my *home field*. Across both events that day — the Pride Parade and the Family Parade — my plans to remain an anonymous witness were quietly undone. In spaces where people perform who belongs and who doesn't, my mere presence made me visible, and made my observation inescapably participatory.

How to deal with anti-Semitic legacies and historically burdened places in public urban spaces? The case of the Lueger monument in Vienna

Reflections by Miriam Haselbacher

During the ethnographic fieldwork, our office, located in the heart of Vienna's First District, typically served as the starting point. And one need not go far to be confronted with the question of how to deal with the city's historical legacies in public space. Debates over the appropriate handling of the past unfold all around our office space, the question of hegemonic symbols and anti-Semitically burdened legacies on the one hand, and navigating inherited historical and normative pathways on the other. This blog post explores takes the immediate surroundings of our office as a starting point to explore how such histories are negotiated, obscured, or made visible—and what this reveals about the politics of memory in the contemporary city.



Impressions from the Academy of Sciences, own illustration

Our office is situated on Bäckerstraße, just a few steps away from the main building of the Austrian Academy of Sciences at Ignaz-Seipel-Platz. It is one of the older parts of the city. In the Medieval times, a market place emerged here and many well-preserved Renaissance and baroque buildings still stand today. From the mid-17th century onward, this site served as the centre of academic life in the city. Yet even here, the first layer of symbolic contestation becomes visible: the square, originally named University Square [Universitätsplatz] in the 18th century, was renamed Ignaz-Seipel-Platz in 1949, after one of the leading politicians of the Christian Social Party, the predecessor of today's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), who served as chancellor twice in the interwar period. In 2013, the square was flagged as "requiring further discussion" by a commission of historians tasked with reviewing all street names in Vienna, due to concerns about the legacy associated with Seipel's name and his role in the establishment of an authoritarian government and the support and militarization of fascist groups.

However, very little in the public space recalls this history, only those familiar with the historical background would recognize its significance. A small plaque notes that the square was once called *Universitätsplatz*, but beyond that, traces of the earlier name and its meanings are absent. In contrast, the most visibly contested site near our office is *Karl Lueger Platz*.

Lueger was mayor of Vienna from 1897 – 1910 and one of Austria's most controversial politicians. During his tenure, he oversaw major infrastructure projects that modernized the city and fostered urban development. He also founded the Christian Socialist Party, the predecessor of today's ÖVP,

making him a significant figure in the party's history. At the same time, Lueger's political career was inseparable from his anti-Semitic views and demagogic rhetoric. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler referred to Lueger as the "greatest German mayor of all time," and his populist style continues to influence right-wing populist discourses to this day.



The Karl Lueger Monument, own illustration

The monument of Karl Lueger, which is prominently placed at the centre of the square, was vandalized in 2020, when it was daubed with paint and disgrace [*Schande*] was sprayed on several places at the monument. As a reaction, the city of Vienna erected a construction fence to remove the graffiti before the Vienna elections in October. In the following, a group of artists started an intervention to raise awareness for failed attempts of the past to transform and redesign the monument and to prevent the removal of the graffiti. The actionist vigil of disgrace [*Schandwache*] by the artist collective' was disturbed by members of the right-wing extremist group Identitarian Movement. The monument had been a place for right-wing extremist gatherings in the past years, a fact that has further added to the polarization of the place. In the following, city officials assured they would not remove the graffiti until a solution was found and removed the construction fence. Today, the future of the monument remains unclear and Lueger's statue has continued to reside with the graffiti in place, being a living monument and landmark on the negotiation of burdened urban legacies, we walk by on a daily basis.



Contextualization of the Lueger Monument

Burdened legacies in public space thus touch upon a variety of issues, among them the question of who is represented in public space and how, and, vice versa, who is not represented at all? Furthermore, how is history negotiated in public space and what narrations and power relations are inscribed into cultural symbols? While the preservation and contextualisation of such symbols may lead to a reflexive approach towards history, their manipulation can also contribute to the redefinition of place. The already mentioned commission of historians, drafted the text for a plaque that was installed next to the monument in 2016. It gives information on the person and life of Lueger, the history of the monument itself, stating that *“it was commissioned and paid for by the Christian Social Party and erected in 1926. The Social Democratic mayor Karl Seitz accepted the statue in the name of the city of Vienna and called Karl Lueger a »controversial politician«.* It then lists his achievements and states the following regarding his anti-Semitism: *“Populist anti-Semitism and the supremacy of German nationalism became increasingly important features of his political rhetoric over the course of his career. [...] During the conflict between the nationalities in the late Habsburg Monarchy, Karl Lueger reinforced the anti-Semitic and nationalist trends of his time.”*

These spotlights on the case of Lueger illustrate how a struggle on the power of meaning has emerged around Lueger’s achievements as a mayor on the one hand and his political anti-Semitism on the other. The case of Karl Lueger in Vienna shows exemplary how monuments and street names are powerful and contested symbols of hegemonic power relations on the one hand, and serve as cultural symbols that negotiate a city’s history and its identity on the other. Street names or monuments then serve as mediums of colonial, racist or anti-Semitic legacies that inscribe power relations into the urban fabric that are exploited by extremist groups up until today. During the period of our fieldwork, the Identitarian Movement began mobilizing for a demonstration under the slogan “Informing and educating passer-by about Vienna’s asylum and migration policies”, taking the Lueger monument as a starting point. This, once more, highlights that public spaces are not neutral and that the question of how to address historically burdened legacies in public space remains highly contentious. The fall

and demolition of monuments and the changing of street names are opposed by the demand of their contextualisation and reconfiguration and the wish to preserve them or leave them as they are. These claims stretch out on a continuum of demolition to transformation to inactivity and set the margins for contentious struggles over hegemonic symbols in public urban space that – sometimes unknowingly – form part of our everyday environments.

On Public Spaces as Stages: Vienna's first district and the political appropriation of space

Miriam Haselbacher and Ursula Reeger

During our fieldwork, we conducted several walks that included the historic centre of the city of Vienna. Each one of these walks made us aware of the performative nature of public space: how it is shaped by both institutional presence and citizen engagement, and how the boundaries between representation, resistance, and everyday use are continually redrawn. In this context, the city becomes a vivid canvas and a stage that is used to convey political messages and to appropriate spaces. With this reading of public spaces, we follow key scholarship within urban studies that highlights how public spaces function as a contested stage where different actors appropriate urban environments in both every day and extraordinary ways, enacting claims to visibility, belonging, and political voice (Lefebvre, 2016; Harvey, 2008).



Graph 1: Three sites of fieldwork, own illustration

Up until 1850, the area that today constitutes Vienna's First District essentially made up the entire urban territory of the city, which is why it features historic architecture, representative buildings, and narrow medieval streets. Today, the district is heavily visited by tourists and encircled by the grand Ringstraße [Ring road], along which many of the city's most important political and administrative institutions are located. For this blog post, we focus on one section of the Ringstraße, as outlined below, to showcase how three key sites that are located next to other – the University of Vienna, the City Hall and the Parliament – are used as stages for political expression.

We observed the first two events on May 14th in front of the University of Vienna. We knew that, as every Wednesday at noon, members of German-nationalist student fraternities would gather on the university ramp. At the same time, the student union elections [ÖH-Wahlen] were taking place, and many student groups were handing out campaign materials in front of the university. So we settled down shortly before noon, positioning ourselves with a clear view of the university ramp. For a brief moment, it seemed as though nothing was going to happen, until the fraternity members appeared right on time, approaching the ramp from the left side of the university, escorted by three police officers. Around twenty young men, easily identifiable by their traditional caps [Deckel] and attire, were accompanied by an older member [so called Alter Herr], who watched the scene from a slight distance.



Illustration 1: Assembly of the fraternities, own illustration

Not much happens during these gatherings; their purpose is less about activity and more about occupying space, asserting presence, and provoking. While such fraternities usually meet behind closed doors, in private fraternity houses [so called Buden], these weekly appearances represent a deliberate act of spatial appropriation and visibility. Leftist groups and the student union (ÖH) have long attempted to pressure the university to prohibit these gatherings, so far without success. There have also been repeated counter-mobilizations over the years. The whole event was over after five to ten minutes and the fraternities left, seemingly unnoticed.

Afterwards, we moved a little further over to the university's side entrance, which is the main access point for most students. This was also where the campaign stands for the different student groups participating in the ÖH elections were set up. We approached a stand belonging to a leftist faction whose campaign slogan included the call to dismantle (male) fraternities [Männerbünde]. We struck up a conversation and asked whether they had noticed the fraternity gathering earlier, and why there hadn't been any counter-protest, not even shouts or visible signs of resistance. One of the representatives told us that the group had simply been too large, and that the fraternities were effectively protected in this space. She explained that their efforts to oppose the gatherings were primarily channelled through student politics, particularly by pushing for a university-level ban on such events. However, she also acknowledged the difficulty of this demand, pointing out that the university administration has so far been unwilling to act. According to her, one of the reasons is that not all

fraternities are classified as far-right, some are Catholic or considered more moderate, so the rectorate has been reluctant to issue a general ban.



Illustration 2: Impressions from campaigning in front of the University of Vienna, own illustration.

A little further from the university lies Rathausplatz, the expansive square in front of Vienna's City Hall. During our fieldwork, three major events took place there: the May Day celebrations from the Social Democratic Party [SPÖ], the opening of the Vienna Festival [Festwochen], and the Pride Village during Pride Month. Unlike the spaces around the University or the Parliament, where political expression is often bottom-up or contested, Rathausplatz functions largely as a stage curated from above. The City of Vienna, led by the Mayor's office, actively manages this space by granting permission and organizing access for specific events and initiatives. Representation plays a central role in these uses of space, both in terms of how the city presents itself and in the decisions about which causes and communities are granted access to this prominent public stage. The events selected to take place here reflect broader municipal priorities and narratives about Vienna's identity, culture, and values. In this way, Rathausplatz exemplifies how power operates in public space not only through physical occupation but also through control over access and symbolic framing.



Illustration 3: Impressions from Rathausplatz, on the left a picture from the entrance of Pride Village, on the right, a picture from May 1st, own illustration

Finally, adjacent to Rathausplatz is the Austrian Parliament. Although the space in front of the Parliament is much smaller than that in front of the City Hall, the square is still frequently used for

political mobilization. The size of gatherings here varies greatly. While most large demonstrations march along the Ringstraße, passing by the Parliament, smaller groups and initiatives regularly hold actions directly in front of the building, especially on days when the National Council is in session. During our fieldwork, we observed several such events, inter alia on May 1st, when the rally organized by communist groups passed by the parliament and on some other days, where we witnessed pro-Palestinian activists and animal rights activists.



Illustration 4: Impressions from political mobilisations in front of the Austrian Parliament, own illustration

In sum, our walks and field notes show how Vienna's central public spaces serve as diverse and dynamic stages for political expression and social negotiation. These spaces are appropriated in various ways, illustrating how public spaces are never neutral but are continually shaped through ongoing struggles over access, meaning, and presence. Together, they reveal the multiplicity of publics and the contested nature of urban space as a site of memory, identity, and political action, topics we explore in depth within WP4.

Preliminary results from the Oppattune project presented at NordMedia25, 13–15 August 2025

By [OppAttune](#) September 11, 2025

Last week, Jullietta Stoencheva and Tina Askanus of WP4 attended NordMedia, the biennial conference for Media and Communication scholars in the Nordic countries, this time hosted by the University of Southern Denmark in Odense.



Jullietta Stoencheva presented a forthcoming article that explores the changing discursive landscape around gender identities in the Bulgarian social media context, tracing the trajectory of the past decade's gender-related conversations as they have developed into a contentious and highly polarised topic driving everyday extremism in the country.

Tina Askanus presented a paper in the political communication panel *Perspectives on Polarisation*, examining how female alternative 'lifestyle' influencers on Instagram, embodying or performing different variations of the tradwife figure, are driving misogyny and extremist discourse centred on female subordination, natural gender hierarchies, and a return to so-called traditional family values, alongside ideas that question the democratic rights and freedoms of women.

Meeting in Vienna: Visualising Extremist Narratives Across Spaces

By [OppAttune](#) September 16, 2025

From 8–11 September 2025, the OppAttune Work Package 4 (Media, Machines, Mobilisation) team took part in the [10th EUGEO Congress](#) in Vienna, a major gathering of geographers and social scientists. The WP4 team presented results on how European societies are shaped through media, migration, and everyday life.

The conference provided a valuable opportunity for the WP4 researchers to present their latest findings on how extremist narratives move between digital and physical spaces, and how visual artefacts from graffiti and posters to memes and videos form part of the political atmosphere surrounding election periods.

Two presentations connected directly to OppAttune’s work on everyday extremism and attunement in public communication:

Jullietta Stoencheva “Extremist discourse in hybrid public space: Insights from a multi-sited ethnographic study of the 2024 European Parliament Elections”



Miriam Haselbacher and Ursula Reeger “From Graffiti to Memes and Vice Versa: Visual Artefacts Across Digital and Physical Spaces During Election Periods”



Both studies build on OppAttune’s commitment to understanding the relational dynamics of political expression how everyday acts of communication can escalate or limit extremist discourse. As described in the [Visualisation Report of Emerging Extremist Narratives Across Europe \(D4.1\)](#), WP4 situates media artefacts not as isolated messages but as part of wider ecosystems of belonging, opposition and democratic dialogue.

