

Analysis: To understand Canada's new right, look to Europe

In the aftermath of the fire that almost destroyed Notre Dame, Ezra Levant saw a profit.

The founder of *Rebel Media* took immediately to Twitter to suggest the fire, caused by an accident, was an act of intentional arson and that his outlet — had to investigate.

It could be dismissed as another bad faith take from a media outlet long known as the mouthpiece of Canada's alt-right. But it signals a deeper link between the Canadian and European far-right that experts say Canada can no longer ignore.

"If you know there are a couple thousand people who share your views in five other countries, you're not going to feel alone." said Candyce Kelshall, president of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies - Vancouver.

Kelshall is one of several security experts who believes the modern far-right — which incorporates white supremacists, neo nazism, anti-feminism and a range of other hateful movements — straddles borders.

"When we refer to these groups, we don't see them as terrorist groups, gangs or violent thugs." says Kelshall. "We see identity, and that identity is not bound by national borders. That's what makes it so powerful."

Canada and Europe have both seen a surge in far-right sentiment in the form of populist politics, violent attacks by lone actors and physical mobilizations of far-right groups.

Often, the actors are also the same. Dr. Barbara Perry is the director of the Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Last year, she estimated there are over 100 hate groups active in Canada — many of whom have roots in Europe.

And thanks to demographic similarities — large white populations, a declining middle class and common languages — the rise of membership has been swift.

Canadian groups now include the Soldiers of Odin (SOO), who originated in Finland; the Hammerskins, who started in Sweden; ID Canada, a splinter organization of the French alt-right group Generation Identity and Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) a German far-right organization that recently staged a rally in Toronto.

There are other more personal connections: Lauren Southern, a former *Rebel* personality, toured Europe to produce a documentary stoking fear about Muslim

immigration in Canada. Odinist groups like SOO draw extensively upon European folklore and imagery in their outfits and ceremonies. And Ricardo Duchesne, a controversial professor at the University of New Brunswick who believes Muslim immigration will lead to a “genocide” of European Canadians, has become a champion of a new European identitarian movement in Canada.

Perry believes the success of these groups in Canada — thousands of kilometres away from the countries which, in theory, they were founded to protect — is because the internet has changed what it means to belong to a hate group.

“It gives them a place to express and connect with others on the basis of white European chauvinism that serves to then empower and embolden them as part of common cause that is global rather than simply local.” wrote Perry in a recent article.

Evan Balgord, Executive Director of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, is the says the internet has accelerated the rise of foreign groups in Canada, calling it a “force multiplier.” He says Canadian and European government should coordinate on a policy to restrict hate speech, similar to Germany’s NetzDG regulation.

“If there are real financial penalties, the largest social media companies will act differently to avoid those penalties.” said Balgord. “They will get a lot better at deleting hate speech if we get better at enforcing these laws.”

But Kelshall doubts countries would collaborate on such a plan. And even if they do, she worries the ties between the Canadian and European far-right are simply too deep to divide.

“The borders are irrelevant.” she said. “We haven’t quite understood that in our policy making”

“These Canadian hate groups are not lone actors. They consider themselves part of a vanguard — a much larger army with its base in Europe.”