

# editorial: far-right actors and education: the global circulation of their ideas, agendas, and policies

On Education

The rise of far-right political actors globally may trigger notable changes within education systems, marked by the promotion of authoritarian, nativist, and economically neoliberal agendas. Far-right parties, including those in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Germany, and Turkey, increasingly shape curricula and educational structures, frequently challenging inclusive, egalitarian principles. This issue of *On Education* examines how far-right actors worldwide leverage educational policy to propagate ideological agendas, from enforcing traditional religious values and gender norms to restructuring school systems. Most articles adopt a country-specific focus, exploring the varied and complex ways far-right agendas infiltrate educational domains across Europe, Latin America, and Asia. By analysing these trends, this issue sheds light on the ideological entanglements shaping contemporary education and highlights the implications for democratic values, human rights, and global educational equity.

Keywords: authoritarianism, curriculum politics, editorial, education policy, far-right education, ideological entanglement

The electoral success of far-right party actors has been an increasingly noticeable phenomenon across the globe, demonstrated most recently by elections across Europe, which made clear that the European political landscape has taken a ‘major shift to the right’ (Cunningham et al., 2024). This process has been coupled with the rise of various neoconservative private actors, ranging from foundations to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and think tanks. Undoubtedly, education has not been immune to this shift.

‘Far-right’ is far from a universal or standardised identifier, though social and political science researchers point to a few common leitmotifs of contemporary far-right politics, including the questioning of egalitarian or universalist ideas (Apple, 2006), orientation towards radical conservative, authoritarian and/or nativist principles, alignment with economic pro-market guidelines, and the promotion of traditional religious values (Bobbio, 1996; Mudde, 2007). These leitmotifs are by no means new, nor are they necessarily represented exclusively by far-right-wing actors.

But how are these leitmotifs recontextualised in the educational context? While several scholars have recently addressed this question in the European context (Berg et al., 2023; Giudici, 2021; Giudici et al., 2024; Hussain & Yunus, 2021; Nestore & Robertson, 2022), there are few studies that have examined this change from a comprehensive global perspective. Drawing on a global, transnational, and/or comparative perspective, the aim of the 20th issue of *on\_education* is to delineate the similarities and differences between educational processes associated with the rise of

far-right actors occurring in different regions of the world.

Education can be defined as a social contract, an implicit agreement between members of a society to cooperate for the common benefit, based on both formally legislated and culturally embedded principles (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2). During the 20th century, public education was fundamentally aimed at sustaining national citizenship and development attempts through the compulsory schooling of children and youth (UNESCO, 2021). The question that arises is how do far-right actors interpret this historical aim? Considering the grave risks facing the future of humanity and the planet (UNESCO, 2021), what visions of 'social coexistence' do these actors claim to represent, and what are the pitfalls and dangers to democratic and human rights and values that these visions may lead to?

This issue specifically intends to map and better understand the global dissemination of educational ideas, agendas and policies that are being promoted by far-right actors, including governments, political parties and movements in Europe, Asia and Latin America. The common denominator 'far-right' is used in this issue in the ideological sense to refer to a wide range of political actors who, according to many political science researchers, advocate authoritarian, nativist, antiliberal and/or anti-democratic ideas, often in conjunction with neoliberal visions and/or traditional religious beliefs (Mudde, 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023). We specifically address the educational programmes and proposals conceived and administered by far-right governments, such as those of the presidency of Javier Milei (2023–) in Argentina, Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023) in Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2014–) in Turkey, and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) with the Christian Democratic Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) (2000–2005, 2017–2019). Another case is the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which has been represented in the Bundestag since 2017 and holds significant parliamentary representation. Despite the common denominator of 'far-right', this is by no means a monolithic group of parties. Apart from their diverse cultural and contextual characteristics, parties such as the AfD, for example, also hold right-extremist positions that are formally evaluated by the German *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution), Germany's domestic intelligence agency, as contrary to the principle of equality (or equal value) of all people and are therefore on the verge of illegality/unconstitutionality.

By comparing the educational programmes and ideas of far-right actors in Argentina, Brazil, Austria, Germany, France and Turkey addressed in the articles in this issue, we have been able to distinguish some common features. However, we would like to clarify that we are not implying that these features are necessarily new or that they are only held by far-right actors. Nor are we suggesting that these features necessarily apply to the ideas and agendas of all far-right actors.

First, the different articles demonstrate how schools have continued to serve as arenas for new culture wars or 'Kulturkämpfe' (cultural battles) over the political mission and the very content of schooling and higher education (Chait, 2023). Furthermore, education and certain knowledge domains seem to have transformed into a strategic arena for far-right actors to disseminate their values, beliefs, and ideas. The targets of these curricular battles range from gender studies, theory and politics, sex education, the teaching of Marxist, collectivist ideas, multiculturalist content, post-colonial theory, race theory to Islamic education or studies. Interestingly, the claim of indoctrination by the public education system is used as a discursive leitmotif by European and Latin American far-right actors. In Turkey, Erdoğan's educational programme confronts secular tradition by *promoting* Islamic education. The AfD party of Thuringia (Germany) advocates strengthening practical teaching content in schools (e.g., home economics, woodworking, metalworking, electrical

engineering, etc.) to counter what they perceive to be an overly theoretical orientation.

Secondly, far-right parties are not only concerned about the curriculum and teaching content but also about the school structure itself. In Germany and Austria, for instance, pupils are assigned to different educational tracks after the fourth or sixth grade (at the age of nine or eleven), depending on the federal state. The programmes of far-right parties in both countries promote merit-based selection, earlier tracking, and greater differentiation within the education system, showing in this respect certain coincidences with the historical educational agenda of centre-right-wing parties such as the Christian Democratic Party in both countries.

Thirdly, most far-right actors tend to favour neoliberal agendas in the educational sphere. Specifically in Latin America, far-right programmes advocate institutional alternatives to public education, which does not imply that actors from other political factions have not advocated for those alternatives before. However, specifically, the government of Milei in Argentina is promoting a liberalisation agenda to encourage private education, homeschooling, the introduction of school vouchers and cutting funds to public educational institutions.

Fourthly, far-right actors in general defend authoritarian, hierarchical and/or discipline-oriented principles that in some cases even challenge democratic values in general. One of the most striking cases seems to be a school programme implemented by the Bolsonaro government, the so-called Civic Military Schools Program, where military agents function as educational and disciplinary managers and/or monitors.

Fifthly, in most cases, discourses related to “restorative nostalgia” (Reynolds, 2004, p. 2) are visible. This form of ‘nostalgia’ assumes that the truths of times gone by have been corrupted and that the goal is to restore these ‘real’ truths to a prominent place. Often, a perceived collapse of morals is thematised to call for the restoration of Western, national and/or nativist cultural values, i.e., a ‘return to the way things were’. For instance, for far-right actors in Latin America, nostalgia specifically targets symbols and measures of the right-wing civil-military dictatorships that were in power between 1960 and 1980. These visions are linked to the nostalgia of a precedent order of alleged cultural, ethnic, political, and/or religious homogeneity or ‘purity’. Also, in Western Europe, the othering and/or targeting of migrant students, often connected to Islamophobic visions, seems to be a common element.

In their contribution, Cinthia Wanschelbaum, Nuria Giniger, and Guadalupe Viñuela Flores analyse the educational programmes and ideas of the government of Javier Milei in Argentina. Coming to power in December 2023, he aims for a radical and unprecedented cultural and institutional transformation based on conservative ‘libertarian’ principles.

Catarina Ianni Segatto, Mario Aquino, and Andrea Pineda analyse the far-right rhetoric and discourse associated with Bolsonaro’s education policy in Brazil. Here, the offensive against gender ideology and sex education is at the forefront, but also a supposedly ideological ‘Marxist indoctrination’ of children.

Bruna Dalmaso-Junqueira and Iana Gomes de Lima focus on the already mentioned Civic Military Schools Programme for the vulnerable school population in Brazil. The authors demonstrate that the promoters of this programme defend patriarchal, racist, and queerphobic ideologies.

Philip Schnell and Oliver Gruber explore the programmatic and parliamentary discourses on

education policy of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), one of the earliest and most successful far-right parties in Western Europe. Their analysis reveals a pronounced nativism towards migrant children and against Islam, as well as for the promotion of a merit-based differentiation of education.

Rita Nikolai, Moritz Gawert, and Line Suar reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of the school policy positions of the far-right AFD party in Thuringia, Germany. This party also advocates a differentiated and structured school system, while its cultural struggle is directed against Islam, but also against gender-sensitive language and sex education.

Anette Gräfe-Geusch focuses on the classroom context and teaching practices. Based on an ethnographic study in Berlin secondary schools, she examines how teachers perceive and respond to far-right attitudes such as racism and xenophobia expressed by their students.

Efe Peker compares the rhetorical strategies and measures adopted by far-right parties and actors in Europe and North America regarding universities. He demonstrates that, under the guise of neutrality and academic freedom, an agenda is being pursued that equates and counters gender, left-wing ideology, and multiculturalism (with particular focus on the influence of Islam).

Finally, Ece Cihan Ertem examines the educational policy of the governing *Justice and Development Party* (AK party) in the context of the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2014–). She specifically examines the Islamisation of early childhood, primary, and secondary education during the country's recent authoritarian turn.

Together, these articles highlight the urgent need to further discuss the similarities and differences between far-right educational ideas, agendas, and policies from a global perspective. What are the transnational networks and cooperations deployed by far-right actors? What possible 'neocolonial' entanglements are emerging between actors of central and peripheral regions? The school network of the MAARIF Foundation of Turkey (FMT), a Turkish government-funded organisation, is one example of an attempt to spread Islamic visions and values through education worldwide and particularly in Africa (Angey, 2018; Binaté, 2019; Cavlan, 2022; Djamanca & Etüdléri, 2018).

Finally, a crucial question arises in view of the various similarities between the cases analysed: are we witnessing phenomena that we might consider as processes from a past era? In other words, do the various far-right actors advocate the possibility of a 'great regression' (Geiselberger, 2017) in education that could call into question human rights and democratic values? These and other questions are raised in this issue, which we hope will spark a lively debate and further research.

The Editorial Team

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