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THEFUTUREOFEXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN

ACTIVITY: IRELAND

COUNTRY PROFILE

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INTRODUCTION

In the years leading up to 2020, Ireland had a number of small, but often loud, fringe groups that pushed a range of ideologies and beliefs, from ethnonationalist groups, to QAnon and 5G conspiracy theorists, and New Age health movements. Although some overlap existed within these movements, especially within groups and individuals on the far-right, their narratives rarely made it outside of their own online echo chamber.

When the pandemic struck, many of these groups became aligned by their desire to push back against COVID-19 restrictions. New Facebook groups organising protests and spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation about the pandemic gathered tens of thousands of followers, increasing by 90% between July 2020 and February 2021, according to previous research conducted by ISD¹. Telegram channels emerged pushing similar theories and gathering thousands of members, while individuals who had little influence before the pandemic were able to reach international fame through Facebook and other platforms².

Far-right groups particularly seized on this opportunity and used this new online ecosystem to spread their messaging, not only bringing people to the streets under an anti-lockdown banner, but also successfully gathering support for smear campaigns and disinformation campaigns aimed at people within minority communities. ISD analysis³ conducted on Irish COVID-19 conspiracy theory Telegram groups found that almost 1 in every 10 messages sent into the groups in 2020 were coming from an extreme right wing source.

2021 saw an evolution of new groups that initially attempted to distance themselves from the traditional far-right elements, but failed to keep extremist rhetoric out of their movement. Violence at a march in February 2021 shone a spotlight on the anti-lockdown movement and the consistent proliferation of conspiracy theories within their online communities.

As 2021 progressed and Irish society began to open up after one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in Europe, some of the individuals involved with these groups doubled down and became more extreme in their tactics and rhetoric, resulting in increased Gardaí protection for politicians and other public officials.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-LOCKDOWN MOVEMENT

The National Party

The National Party, a prominent ethnonationalist group active in Ireland, was founded in 2016 by Justin Barrett, who was once a leader of Youth Defence, an extreme anti-abortion group prominent in the 1990s. In 1998, Barrett published his own manifesto⁴ called the National Way Forward, outlining his vision of a “Catholic Republic” where immigration was restricted and abortion and divorce were banned. Barrett campaigned against the legalisation of divorce before proceeding to end his own marriage a number of years later⁵. Barrett has links to a number of European far-right movements, speaking at events organised by the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany⁶ and Italy’s Forza Nuova⁷ in the early 2000s.

Barrett and the National Party’s campaigns against the LGBTQ community are no secret. In 2017, Barrett made homophobic remarks about then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar⁸, while in the summer of 2020, the party was a prominent organiser of a homophobic smear campaign⁹ launched against Minister for Children, Roderic O’Gorman. O’Gorman, a gay man, was falsely accused of being a “paedophile apologist” for posing for a photo with UK LGBTQ rights campaigner Peter Tatchell. The National Party organised a ‘March For Innocence’ rally in Dublin city on July 11 2020 where protesters carried placards with nooses and shouted “pedo scum off our streets” at counter protesters.

The National Party are staunchly anti-immigrant and Barrett has spoken multiple times about the party’s policies around immigration. Speaking at a party conference in 2018¹¹, he said they would “exclude immediately all persons espousing the ideology of Islam” and prioritise immigrants that are “quicker and easier to assimilate”. He continued by saying “yes, that means Europeans”. In another video¹², recorded in 2019, Barrett claimed that if the National Party took power, they would strip then-Lord Mayor of Dublin Hazel Chu of her citizenship, despite the fact that she was born in Ireland.

When the pandemic struck in 2020, National Party members pushed back against restrictions and were regularly seen at anti-lockdown protests. At one protest in September 2020, organised by the National Party themselves, a prominent LGBTQ campaigner and counter protester was assaulted by National Party member Michael Quinn, who struck her in the head with a plank of wood wrapped in an Irish tricolour¹³. In October 2021, Quinn was sentenced to two years in jail for the assault¹⁴.



Figure 1: National Party members and supporters at the July 2020 ‘March For Innocence’ rally¹⁰)

Síol na hEireann

As well as the National Party, a smaller group called Síol na hEireann ('Seed of Ireland') are also prominent ethnonationalist campaigners. Led by a man named Niall McConnell, they describe themselves as a pro-life Christian nationalist movement¹⁵. The group is anti-Muslim and stages protests against a so-called "Islamisation of Ireland". In an email to ISD, McConnell rejected the claim that he is anti-Muslim, maintaining that he is "anti-Islam and anti-Zionist."

In July 2020, Síol na hEireann were one of the organisers of a protest staged outside Croke Park football stadium in Dublin¹⁶, after Muslim worshippers used the grounds to celebrate Eid. A month later, in August 2020, McConnell posted a video online¹⁷ of himself and other members of Síol na hEireann protesting outside a church in Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo after the priest had allowed Muslims to pray in the chapel. McConnell confronted the priest, calling him a "heretic" and accusing him of bringing "foreign, satanic, cultists" into the church.

McConnell also has ties to international far-right groups, most notably Britain First founder Jim Dowson and former British National Party president Nick Griffin, who have appeared on YouTube livestreams¹⁸ with McConnell.

During 2020, McConnell and his followers appeared at a number of anti-lockdown protests. During one protest in September 2020, McConnell spoke to a crowd gathered outside the offices of The Journal.ie and accused the publication of "pumping anti-Irish Marxist, communist" and "LGBT propaganda"¹⁹.

Irish Freedom Party

Also involved in promoting anti-immigrant rhetoric in Ireland is the Irish Freedom Party (IFP), a Eurosceptic party led by Hermann Kelly who was once press officer for former UKIP leader Nigel Farage. Although Kelly has said²¹ that he has "never plugged theories of racial superiority", he has made a number of public references to the "replacement" of Irish people. In a video interview²² with himself and Jim Dowson where they are speaking about abortion and immigration, Kelly said Irish political parties want to "kill Irish kids and replace them with every other nationality". In June 2020, Kelly shared a video²³ of teenagers engaging in anti-social behaviour and claimed that a "multicultural society is a recipe for endless aggro and trouble".

As well as opposing immigration policies, IFP have pushed anti-LGBTQ narratives, opposing what they call²⁴ "genital mutilation and trans ideology". In July 2020, IFP also engaged in the homophobic smear campaign against Minister for Children Roderic O'Gorman and organised a 'Hands Off Our Children' rally²⁵ on the same day as the National Party's 'March for Innocence'.

IFP was highly involved in the Irish anti-lockdown movement from its early days, with the party's then-chairperson Dr. Dolores Cahill speaking at multiple rallies across Ireland and Europe in 2020.



Figure 2: Niall McConnell, Nick Griffin, Jim Dowson in an April 2020 livestream²⁰

Dr. Dolores Cahill

Dr. Dolores Cahill has risen to international prominence since the beginning of the pandemic by making myriad false claims regarding COVID-19 and vaccines²⁶ and connecting with similar-minded groups in Europe and beyond. Cahill has a PhD in immunology and was, until September 2021, employed as a Professor of Translational Science in University College Dublin²⁷.

In March 2021, she resigned her position as chairperson of the Irish Freedom Party four days after telling a crowd at an anti-lockdown protest that children who wore face masks would have lower IQs²⁸. In July 2021, Hermann Kelly posted a letter on Facebook²⁹ that he said was sent to Dr. Cahill in March, asking her to consider her duties as chairperson in light of her recent actions. The letter pointed to Dr. Cahill's use of the "weakest and most obtuse arguments" against lockdowns as well as her tendency to do "crank media interviews".



Figure 3: Dr Dolores Cahill falsely claims that metals in the vaccines may be causing people to be magnetic³⁰

Dr. Cahill has been involved in setting up a number of businesses and organisations over the last year. One such venture is the World Doctors Alliance, an international group of doctors and scientists who oppose COVID-19 restrictions and often tout false, contradictory and conspiracy-driven information about COVID-19 and vaccines. An ISD investigation³¹ into the World Doctors Alliance found that the group increased their online following by more than 13,000% since the beginning of the pandemic.

On August 18, 2021, a warrant was issued³² in the UK for Dr. Cahill's arrest after she failed to answer a summons following her involvement in the organisation of an illegal rally in Trafalgar Square in September 2020. The arrest warrant was then withdrawn and Dr. Cahill was subsequently fined £2,500 for holding the protest in what was described as a "flagrant breach" of COVID-19 restrictions at a November 1, 2021 court hearing³³.

Throughout 2021, Dr. Cahill pivoted to espousing sovereign citizen and 'freeman of the land'-type theories. People involved in such movements misinterpret common law, natural law and inalienable rights to claim they cannot be subject to any state legislation. In June 2021, Cahill trained³⁴ to be a "peace constable" with a UK-based organisation called the Common Law Court and held "common law courts" in a castle that she owns in the town of Athy, Co Kildare. In a video recorded on September 29, 2021³⁵, she says "what we are doing in the UK and Ireland is training people...every man and woman has the same powers as the police." She then encourages people to arrest pharmacists and teachers who she says are engaging in "criminal behaviour" by their involvement in the administration of vaccines.



Figure 4: Dr Cahill with members of the UK-based Common Law Court David Laity (L), John Smith (M) and Mick Stott (R)³⁶

Conspiracy theory and YouTube influencers

Conspiracy theory narratives have been circulating in Ireland for a number of years, spurred on by a number of popular YouTubers who took their influence from similar personalities in Trump's America. For example, Gemma O'Doherty, a former journalist, has been drawing the attention of the Irish public for a number of years over outlandish and hateful claims regarding immigration³⁷, LGBTQ rights³⁸ and vaccines³⁹. She has also claimed that a number of mass atrocities, such as the Christchurch mosque shootings⁴⁰ in 2019, were "false flag events". O'Doherty has stood for presidential, European and general elections over the last number of years securing a minimal number of votes each time. O'Doherty's YouTube account, which had 26,000 subscribers, was permanently removed⁴¹ in 2019 for violating hate speech rules and in July 2020, Twitter also removed her account⁴², where she had 58.9k followers⁴³.

O'Doherty and another former journalist, John Waters, staged some of the first public rallies against COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland at the beginning of May 2020, while also bringing a case against the State arguing that restrictions on public movement were illegal. The case was dismissed in May 2020⁴⁴, with the judge saying that "unsubstantiated opinions, speeches, empty rhetoric and a bogus historical parallel are not a substitute for facts". An appeal against this dismissal is due to be heard on a limited basis in the Supreme Court⁴⁵.

O'Doherty's videos have still proved popular within online conspiracy communities, despite her platform bans. In June 2021, Beaumont Hospital in Dublin brought a defamation case against O'Doherty after she posted videos online describing the hospital as a "death camp" and claiming that the COVID-19 vaccines had "killed hundreds of thousands". The High Court ruled against O'Doherty⁴⁶ and ordered that the videos be taken down.

O'Doherty was arrested while staging a protest on a footbridge in Co Wicklow in August 2021 and was subsequently found guilty of threatening and abusive behaviour, refusing to give her name and address to a Garda, and resisting arrest⁴⁷.



Figure 5: O'Doherty claims that COVID-19 is a plan to usher in the New World Order⁴⁸

During 2021, O'Doherty has taken a less prominent role in the organisation of anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests, but some of her most fervent supporters continue to make their presence known. One of these supporters is Dolores Webster, who is a constant presence at various protests and uses the pseudonym 'Dee Wall' to post anti-lockdown videos online. Webster coughed in the faces of a number of teenagers⁴⁹ who were counter-protesting an anti-mask rally in Galway in October 2020. In July 2021, she told her supporters⁵⁰ that they could "have their vengeance" at a protest later that month where they could "storm the building" and "take every head out of it and f*cking stand on it".

New Age and holistic health movements

The Irish far-right's involvement in the organising and promotion of anti-lockdown rallies was highlighted in media coverage throughout 2020⁶⁷. However, by the beginning of 2021, new groups were being formed which originated from very different movements with little-to-no original interaction with extremist movements – a clear example of the way conspiracy theories help bring together disparate movements.

These new groups were born out of New Age health conspiracy theories, the most prominent of which being RiseUp Éireann, a group led by Co. Kerry woman Barbara Barrett. Barrett is a holistic health and reiki practitioner⁶⁸ who uses the pseudonym 'Shakti Ji' to post online. RiseUp Éireann was listed as the main organiser of a rally that took place on February 27, 2021 in Dublin city centre that resulted in a baton charge⁶⁹ after a protester shot a firework at Gardaí. RiseUp Éireann's Facebook pages were removed shortly afterwards.

RiseUp Éireann has been involved in spreading a range of conspiracy theories, from QAnon to the Great Reset, and it has also become a vehicle for wider far-right narratives to spread. In May 2021, the National Party spread the false claim that Gardaí had kidnapped a man's children over his disagreement with COVID-19 restrictions, a claim that was also promoted by RiseUp Éireann (see figure 7)



Figure 7: National Party campaign spread through RiseUp Éireann pages

RiseUp Éireann promotes their events as “freedom festivals” and peaceful protests, yet extremist elements can often be found at the events. Speakers at the events are regular promoters of conspiracy theories associated with far-right and antisemitic movements and members of the National Party have been spotted handing out flyers at their events. For example, Graham Carey, a Yellow Vest Ireland member, spoke at a RiseUp Éireann event in Galway on July 9, 2021. Carey has a long history of sharing far-right propaganda and conspiracy theories online and had recently posted a video⁷⁰ of himself calling for people to “wipe the Jews out” for their involvement in the pandemic.

As well as RiseUp Éireann, the holistic health-to-COVID-19 misinformation pipeline is also evident in the case of Ivor Cummins. Cummins was, until 2020, a metabolic health researcher and influencer, who pivoted towards criticising lockdowns and pandemic responses. He currently has over 14 million views on his YouTube channel⁷¹ and 143,000 followers on Twitter, where he promotes analysis which challenges scientific consensus around the pandemic which experts say are based on faulty science⁷². In one video from September 2020, Cummins falsely claimed that the pandemic had its worst impact by June due to community immunity to COVID-19 after exposure to COVID-19 and similar viruses. He also proposed that lockdown polices could lead to a higher impact on mortality over the next season and long term. The level of infection rates and deaths that have occurred since September 2020 prove this claim to be false⁷³ and doctors who have looked into his specific claims say that they are flawed⁷⁴.

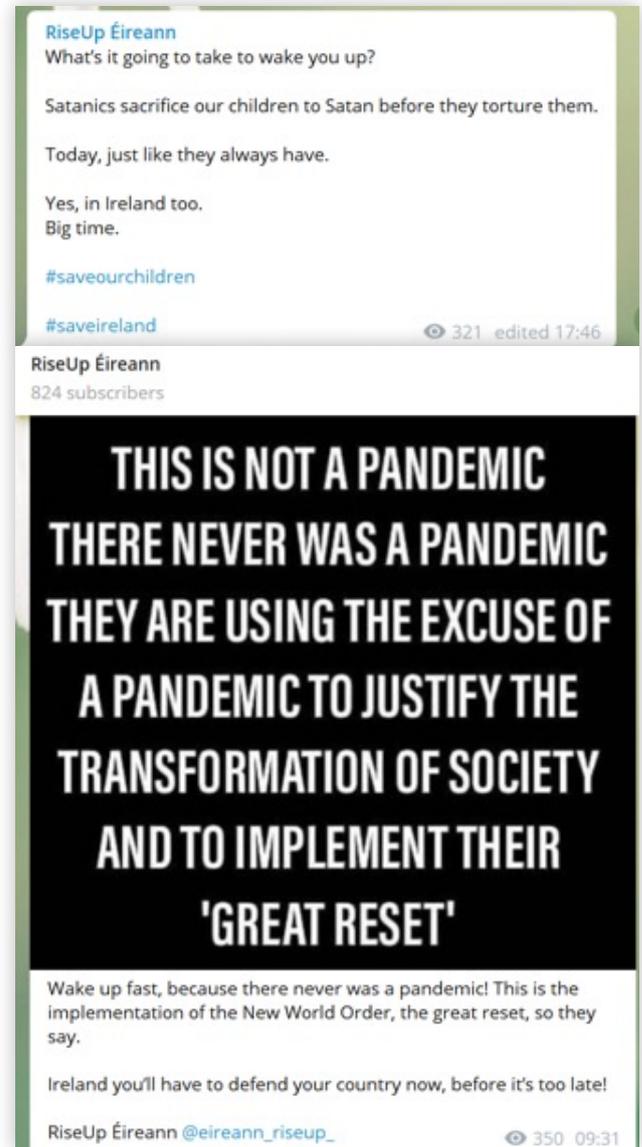


Figure 8: RiseUp Éireann posts spreading QAnon and Great Reset narratives

HARMFUL ACTIVITY

The effects that these movements have on individuals was catapulted into the public consciousness in September 2021, when a video went viral online showing a man, struggling to catch his breath, being persuaded to leave the intensive care unit of a hospital in Letterkenny, Co Donegal where he was being treated for COVID-19. In the video, an individual identified as Antonio Mureddu, a sovereign citizen extremist with links to the Italian far-right party Lega Nord, can be heard telling the ill patient, Joe McCarron, that if he stays in the hospital the doctors will “fucking kill you”. McCarron, who was unvaccinated and had bought into many of the claims made by those spreading COVID-19 misinformation, left the hospital that day but was rushed back to intensive care two days later after the disease had spread to his brain. Joe McCarron died on September 24, 2021.

In the viral video encouraging McCarron to leave the hospital, Mureddu also praised the efforts made by Dr. Dolores Cahill who he alleged, along with individuals linked to a ‘common law’ group in Ballybofey, Co Donegal, were involved in organising McCarron’s removal from hospital⁷⁶. Cahill has denied the events in Letterkenny had anything to do with her. A Gardaí investigation has since been launched into the incident.

As well as their influence in Joe McCarron’s removal from hospital, ‘common law’ groups have also taken to targeting schools and teachers. At the end of September 2021, the Minister for Education Norma Foley and several schools across the country were sent letters purporting to act as a “notice of liability” and threatening negative consequences if head teachers did not agree to halt mask wearing, social distancing, and other measures put in place in schools to stop the spread of the virus⁷⁷. The letter was from a group called the Common Law Court of Éire and in it they threatened recipients that they would “strip you of your assets: homes, cars, land, make no mistake about this” if they didn’t agree to their terms.



Figure 9: Screenshot from the viral video showing Joe McCarron leaving Letterkenny hospital⁷⁵

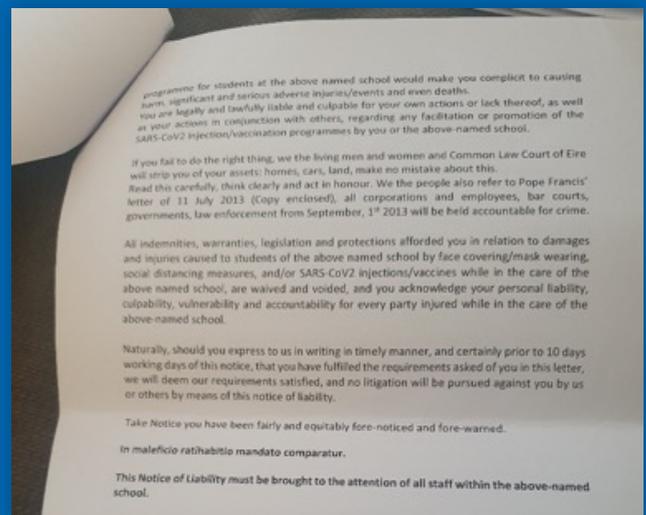


Figure 10: Letter sent to Minister for Education and teachers from the Common Law Court of Éire⁷⁸

The latter half of 2021 generally brought about a reduction in public support for the COVID-sceptic movement, with rallies and marches being poorly attended. But amongst those which remain there has been a notable shift towards violence from the rhetoric espoused at these events. An example of this can be seen in a video of Graham Carey⁷⁹, livestreamed on Facebook on October 26, where he discusses gun owners taking action against politicians. Protests have been held outside the homes of political figures and healthcare officials on a weekly basis since the middle of September 2021. Those targeted include Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly and Chief Medical Officer Tony Holohan and has resulted in extra Garda patrols⁸⁰ being issued to protect those most at risk. Tanaiste Leo Varadkar's home has been the scene of a number of these protests, where homophobic slurs could be heard directed towards Varadkar and his partner.

When vaccine passports were introduced to gain entry to bars and restaurants, there was widespread opposition to them across the political spectrum and wider society. Those involved in COVID-sceptic and conspiracy theory movements saw their introduction as discriminatory and began launching abuse campaigns against businesses who were complying with the passes, many of whom had been unable to open since March 2020⁸¹.

Another strategy employed by some of the members of these movements involves using an Irish website that tracks death and funeral notices to find sudden deaths in young people and falsely claim these deaths are a result of the vaccine. Grieving families⁸² have had to deal with online abuse and their loved one's names and images being used to organise protests and further the anti-vaccine agenda.

CONCLUSION

Ireland is a small country and the close knit nature of the far-right community, combined with the surge in new conspiracy theory movements accompanying the pandemic, means that extremist elements have more avenues for communication and more audiences to direct their content to than ever before.

In-fighting among the groups and individuals gives an impression of a somewhat fractured movement compared to a year ago. Síol na hEireann's ties to Jim Dowson⁸³, for example, have drawn the ire of some within the far-right in Ireland. Dr. Dolores Cahill has also recently had a very public skirmish⁸⁴ with Ben Gilroy, a notorious anti-government campaigner.

The poor performances of both Justin Barrett and Dr. Dolores Cahill in a by-election in Dublin in July 2021 may give the impression that these movements are not gaining political support in Ireland, but Facebook pages associated with far-right groups have gained over 44,000 followers in the last three months and Telegram channels also continue to add new members, exposing more people to the online ecosystem where these movements operate. The overall political impact of these movements will not be fully visible until Ireland's next general election, due to take place in 2025.

The pandemic has successfully pushed theories and ideologies commonly associated with far-right movements into a more mainstream space and the emergence of new influencers has given these theories some credibility among people who had never been exposed to them previously. A lack of distinct leadership gives the impression of a fairly rudderless movement, yet the uptick in violent rhetoric and increasing use of intimidating tactics means the impact these groups can have on individuals and in wider society should not be underestimated.

ENDNOTES

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