



## Continuing Education as a Way to Oppose Extremism

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The French speaking community of Belgium is an exception in the European political landscape. Despite strong socio-economic difficulties enhanced by the financial crisis, the nationalist far-right political parties are almost non-existent.

Although the absence of aggressive nationalism can partly be explained by a lack of charismatic leadership, it is also important to note the containment of hate speech in the public life by political parties, media and NGOs. And this is where the role of civil society and continuing education needs to be outlined. The *Centre d'Action Laïque* (CAL) has been recognized for twenty years as a coordinator for continuing education. It has 7 regional infrastructures in Brussels and Wallonia, each providing local activities such as conferences and publications and Belgium wide campaigns. In 2013, CAL launched a campaign against populist discourses as enemies of freedom. Acknowledging the difficult socio-economical context, this campaign organised events in all major cities in Wallonia and in Brussels. Thanks to the importance of the campaign and its wide diffusion, it has been channelled in all major national media. Not only did this campaign bring attention to this issue, it also warned of its dangers and gave arguments to anyone opposing it.

Civil society organisations are a necessary part of the cordon sanitaire against aggressive nationalism and hate crimes. In several EU countries, political parties gave in to the temptation of taking over parts of those nationalist and hate speeches, thereby legitimizing them. This led to an increase of the membership and support for those groups. This is for instance the case in Greece. Instead of isolating and refuting Golden Dawn arguments and its very existence as a threat to democracy, parties decided to treat it as a political opponent. In France, the Front National is now seen as a normal party despite its extremist views. This happened with the dissolution of the republican front which opposed a systematic rejection of it from all political parties, media and public life instances. In both these countries, the far-right is growing with the aggressive nationalism it implies. As the Greek example shows, it isn't so much the normalisation of the party from within but how it is considered by others that changes its acceptance.

In Germany and Spain, the fear of history repeating itself has led to a very strong commitment towards continuing education. In Germany, the organisation for political education, the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* has to obey to three principles that are at the heart of continuing education: prohibition of indoctrination, controversy and teaching. It is in charge of ensuring education and awareness to citizens. In Spain, a country that has been hit very hard by the crisis and has had to deal with extremely hard cuts in the public sector, aggressive nationalism couldn't overcome the cordon of politically educated citizens and a strong civil society.

For political reasons, political parties do not always want to upset the nationalist electorate and try to align with their ideas. This is why the work of civil society organisations and in particular organisations promoting continuing education as a means of prevention is so important to block the progression of aggressive nationalism in OSCE member states. CAL calls all OSCE members to support those organisations by any means possible.