

Political mainstream has to fight



BARIA ALAMUDDIN

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In these divisive times, it has become rare to see collective displays of European unity; a reassertion of the bloc's core values of tolerance, human rights and the rule of law. It was thus cause for celebration last week when a two-thirds majority of MEPs supported a motion that Viktor Orban's regime in Hungary posed a "systemic threat" to the EU's democratic model, paving the way for sanctionary measures. Nevertheless, the 197 MEPs who opposed this motion are a warning sign of how xenophobic populists have transformed themselves from a contemptible minority to a continent-straddling insurgent force.

Orban stands accused of corruption, repression of migrants and undermining the rule of law. Measures against Hungary's civil society, oppositionists and the media pave the way toward single-party statehood. Comparable measures in Poland for dominating the Supreme Court render the judiciary beholden to

its authoritarian masters. Italy, Austria, France, Denmark and elsewhere are similarly blighted by a resurgent far right, with scarcely-disguised encouragement from Moscow. Meanwhile, racist violence in Germany is a stark reminder of fascism's ugly face.

Democratic Europe breathed a sigh of relief last week when the anti-refugee Sweden Democrats only gained 17.5 percent of the vote in the Swedish elections, despite fears that it could outperform the mainstream parties. The integration of refugees was a dominant issue when I chaired the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's 2016 security conference and I was impressed by the refreshingly enlightened desire of politicians and citizens alike to facilitate the absorption of Syrians and Iraqis into Swedish society. If the extreme right can win 17.5pc of the vote in moderate, tolerant Sweden, then God help the rest of Europe.

Having proved too treacherous and self-serving even for Donald Trump, the loathsome fascist demagogue Steve Bannon has embarked on a never ending road-trip to unite Europe's disparate extreme right. If these transnational forces of



Extreme right showed its strong presence in Swedish elections.

evil act collectively invade EU institutions, neo-Nazis could wield greater international influence than at any moment since World War II. America, with its com-

plex federal system, has a long way to go before becoming an authoritarian state; yet the Trump administration's war against the media, gerrymandering of state

boundaries, obstacles to minorities' voting rights, and demagogic governance style fly in the face of the US Constitution's inspiring aspirations.

The suburbs, where madness me

There's a killer stalking suburban London. Or is there



EVA WISEMAN

There is a serial killer stalking the suburbs here, leaving small heads in quiet gardens. Often, he keeps the tails. When I told a friend I was writing about the Croydon cat killer, as he (or a copycat) appears to be holidaying in Washington State, her lips collapsed into a little moue, and then she looked away. "What?" I pressed, and she paused before replying, earnestly, "But what if he comes for you?" It was a risk I'd considered, having just celebrated our kitten's first birthday, but one I am willing to take, because this story — some believe the same man has killed more than 500 cats over the last four years — is compelling and terrifying. And it encourages obsession: It pricks at ancient anxieties.

In midcentury America, the suburbs were seen by some as a dangerous social experiment — this style of living brought sickness. Suburban men fell ill from the stress of commuting; suburban women, trapped at

home, had it even worse. In a best-selling 1961 study the authors renamed these regions "Disturbia."

The place of suburbs in our collective psyche has been on my mind recently, as last year, with great internal drama, I moved out of the city, got a cat for my daughter — pets, of course, traditionally being tools for children to practice grief upon — and settled all the way down. In Britain the idea of suburbia has none of the David Lynchian perversion or drama of the United States. But it's still thought of as an in-between place, a punchline, where small neat gardens reflect the dimensions of their owners' minds. Suffocating, but safe. Until a predator shatters the illusion.

The first deaths happened in a place called Croydon. A South London suburb that, for David Bowie, "represented everything I didn't want in my life, everything I wanted to get away from." It was a "complete concrete hell," he said cheerfully in 1999. "I suppose it looks beautiful now." (It doesn't.)

Accounts vary on when pets began to turn up on their owners' doorsteps, cut in half, decapitated and disemboweled. But by late 2015, patterns had begun

emerging — the killer appeared to be moving in concentric circles around the capital. One Facebook group nicknamed him "Jack the Rippurr." A local couple formed an improbable team of crime fighters under the name South Norwood Animal Rescue and Liberty, or Snarl. "She's a cat person," Tony Jenkins explained of his partner, Boudicca Rising (between them the middle-aged couple house 31). As the victims added up — Ukiyo, belly sliced open; Oscar, decapitated; Charlton, head and tail missing — Jenkins and Rising recorded the deaths, collected remains, performed post-mortems, and approached the police, but it was their petition of more than 40,000 signatures that led to an official investigation.

And for a period, the police took them seriously. Last November, a detective sergeant, Andy Collin, expressed his concerns that the killer might, eventually, "cease getting that gratification and escalate the attacks to humans, specifically vulnerable women and girls." But today, as deaths continue to rise, more figures of authority are backing away from humans as the cause. Writing in *The New Scientist* this summer, Stephen Harris, a retired professor of environmen-

tal sciences at the University of Bristol, declared that the deaths that have captivated the capital for years are in fact the work of foxes. "We have known for decades that foxes chew the head or tail off carcasses, including dead cats," he wrote, claiming no killer has been caught "because there is no 'killer.'" (Jenkins and Rising loudly dispute this interpretation.)

And yet, somehow that does little to dispel London's feeling of existential threat. Headlines like "Slaughter in Suburbia" have given way to stories about an increase in murdered rabbits, while the cats continue to turn up, bloodless and cleanly disemboweled. One head was left on the penalty spot of a garden football pitch. "Does he exist?" we ask ourselves, and then, "Does it matter?" We have invoked him anyway, and he lurks in shadows inside us, and in half-remembered folklore — perhaps our gardens are just his most recent hiding place.

In Michelle McNamara's true crime best-seller "I'll Be Gone in the Dark," about her search for a murderer who stalked the California suburbs, it was the lamp-lit detail, more than even the crimes themselves, that stayed with me — the way the

