

Let's Confront the "Dead Cat"

Interview with **Ruth Wodak**

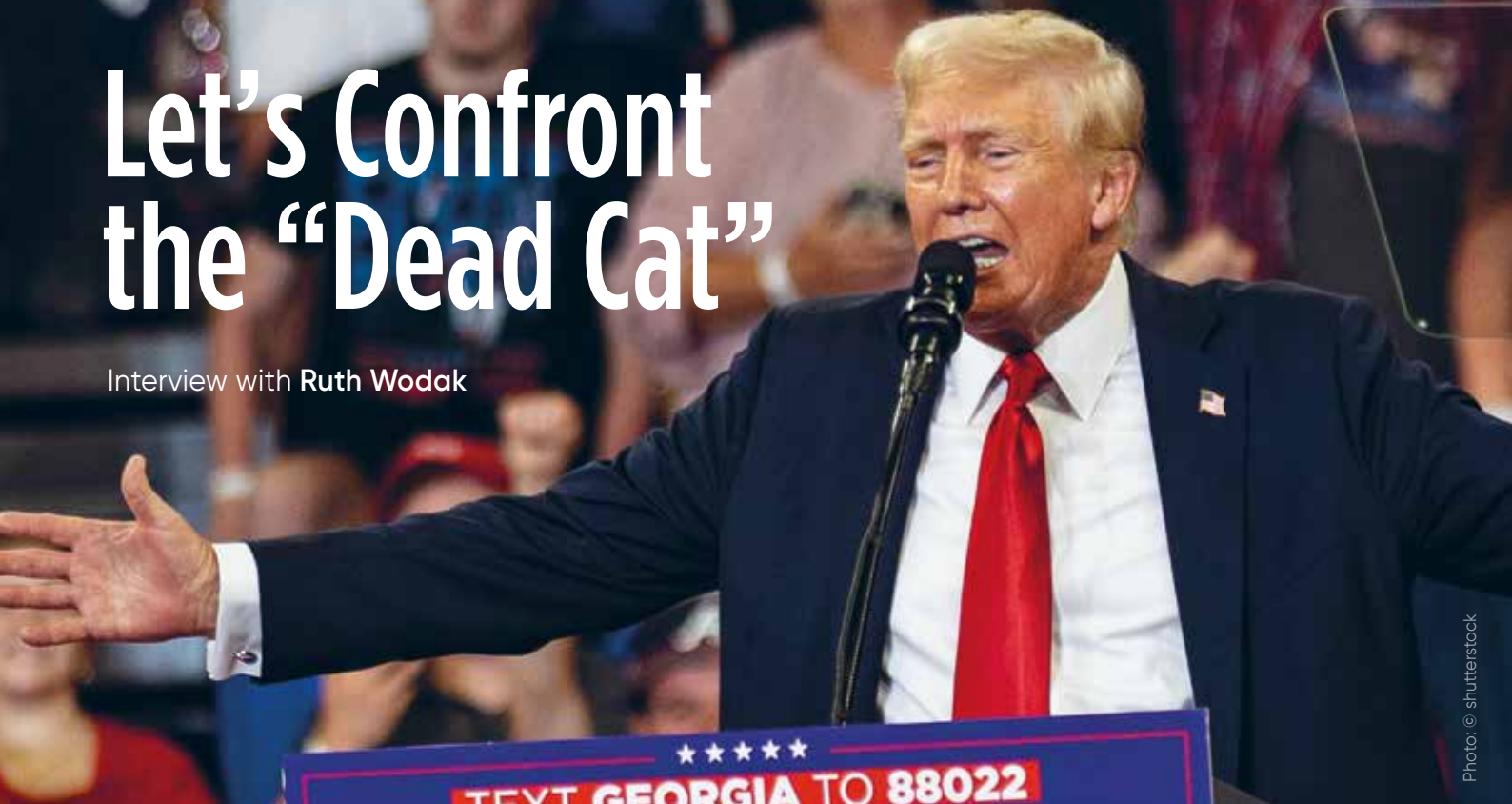


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Discourse analyst Ruth Wodak explores how far-right movements exploit societal insecurities through strategic language and why meaningful conversations and grassroots engagement are key to resisting their rise.

Cengiz Günay: The title of this year's issue of our magazine REFLECTIONS is How to navigate the storm. Would you agree that there is a storm, and if so, how would you define the storm?

Ruth Wodak: Well, I would certainly agree, there are many insecurities which lead to anxieties and fear. They stem from multiple storms which were not predictable. We are experiencing a massive geopolitical change and on an individual level we do not know what is going to happen, while we all thought that we knew what would happen, at least in the near future. We can describe the storm as a polycrisis. The term stems from Adam Tooze (who probably took it from Jean-Claude Juncker). It describes a massive crisis which is not the sum of the various smaller

crises, but it is something qualitatively different: a multitude of insecurities and uncertainties. The polycrisis also triggers the fear of losing control. We were used to being agents, agents who could structure their lives, at least in some ways. Now many people have the feeling they have lost control over their lives. This sentiment was enhanced by the pandemic, the current wars, economic crises, political crises, corruption, the fear of being overwhelmed by migration. This also leads to a loss of trust in politics and the media.

Cengiz Günay: What are the societal effects of the polycrisis?

Ruth Wodak: There are different ways of coping with all these insecurities. Some withdraw in a Biedermeier way. They lose their interest in politics and just want to live their lives in peace. And yet, some of these crises are existential in the sense that you might lose your job, or you don't have enough money to heat your apartment or to buy your food. Others become susceptible to radical political views. People search

for saviors who promise them to get back control, which was one of the slogans supporting Brexit, and they tend to believe leaders who blame arbitrary scapegoats and promise simple solutions. These phenomena – partly – explain the rise of the far right. Positive narratives are unfortunately missing. The effect is, that a growing number of liberal democratic countries are now governed by far-right parties.

Cengiz Günay: Is the far right the reason for the systemic changes or is it their consequence?

Ruth Wodak: Far right parties have been around for quite some time (for example, Jörg Haider became leader of the FPÖ in 1986). Therefore, they are not the cause of the crisis, but they instrumentalize it. In the 1980s and 1990s, they were not that popular. They had a core constituency of approximately 15%. But, they have now successfully instrumentalized the feelings of insecurity and unpredictability, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain in

1989 and the subsequent immigration from former Communist countries.

Cengiz Günay: A distinctive feature of far-right parties is their strategic usage of language. As one of the vanguards of critical discourse analysis you have done many studies. What is critical discourse analysis?

Ruth Wodak: Critical discourse studies challenge spoken, written and visual texts and discourses. We question who said what, why, what happened before, what happens after, with which effect? We challenge the essentialization and naturalization of discourse, the claim that "there is no alternative" (i.e., Margaret Thatcher, the "TINA-Argument").

Cengiz Günay: What is the discourse of the far right?

Ruth Wodak: Their discourse highlights alleged dystopian threats and creates scenarios of danger. This strategy is something Trump uses continuously. People felt understood and acknowledged by it. They were experiencing terrible times, and Trump's dystopian discourse is acknowledging their misery. On the other hand, such parties and their leaders present a way out of the misery, thus they create hope. Trump and others present themselves as saviors. They promise to save Europe, Austria, the United States or Turkey, and so forth. The notion of a "messiah" is not new. Indeed, already Hitler suggested that he was sent by God to save Germany.

Cengiz Günay: So, they suggest an absolute truth, that there is just one truth?

Ruth Wodak: One truth. And this truth is disseminated in an extraordinarily clever way. They appeal to emotions and to the "common sense" of the people. Far right movements have created an entire parallel world of discourse. They

use their own newspapers, TV stations, YouTube channels, telegram messengers and TikTok. They present stories, comics, rap songs, and short videos which elaborate alleged world conspiracies and blame so-called globalists who are accused of manipulating the world. This discursive world can also be quite entertaining. Once you become part of this discursive parallel world, you don't believe anything that comes from outside of this world. This makes communication and dialogue so difficult. Anything you say, all facts which you list, will be immediately turned down as "fake news".

Cengiz Günay: They offer a spectacle.

Ruth Wodak: It's very much a spectacle, we call it politicotainment. With the culture war they claim to be waging and the symbolic politics they advocate, they appeal to many emotions: For example, resentment, greed, fear, pride. Finally, people think, "you are allowed to be politically incorrect". They say something "what you always wanted to say".

Cengiz Günay: What I observe is that Trump and other right-wing populists present themselves as victims and at the same time, they act as villains. I really have difficulties of bringing that together.

Ruth Wodak: We call it the "strategy of victim-perpetrator reversal." It is very powerful. Instead of being the perpetrator you perform as a victim, and you distract people from what you're doing. Victimization often goes together with what I call the "dead cat strategy". This is a well-known rhetorical strategy: to change the topic, distract people and create a new discourse. When confronted with an uncomfortable topic, you – metaphorically – drop a dead cat on the table, and everybody starts talking about that dead cat. When asked about difficult topics such as unemployment, the budget deficit and

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been demonized enormously among conservatives. Obviously, the fear of taxing the rich is bigger than the fear of hollowing out human rights, the rule of law and liberal democracy.

Some mainstream parties frequently endorse a strategy of overtaking the far right. Indeed, also the Social Democrats thought that stricter migration policies would help them win back voters from the FPÖ. Of course, this strategy did not work. The Social Democrats could never win back the voters they had lost to the far right and the conservatives could not hold them either.

Cengiz Günay: What is the long-term effect on democracy? Polarization is in nature destructive—it is against compromise, the essence of democracy. Is democracy resilient enough to withstand these developments?

so forth, you drop “a dead cat”, and people forget the important topics, they rather start talking about the dead cat.

Cengiz Günay: How to confront the dead cat? It’s a very human thing to get distracted and talk about it.

Ruth Wodak: The media fall into this trap all the time. I remember, for example, when the conservative and far right government of ÖVP and FPÖ passed a law which increased legal working hours. The trade unions were opposed to it and started organizing strikes. What did the government do? They suddenly started talking about a headscarf ban in primary schools, and kindergartens. Of course, there were almost no girls at that age wearing headscarves. It did not matter. The media immediately jumped on it. Instead of discussing a political measure that affects many more people, the media highlighted the alleged problem of headscarves in primary schools – a problem that didn’t even exist.

Cengiz Günay: My observation would be that the far-right discourse is more and more permeating other political spheres. Are we generally moving more to the right?

Ruth Wodak: I wouldn’t say that societies in general are moving to the right. But I agree that certain issues and the related rhetoric have become normalized and that the conservative parties are shifting to the right on issues such as migration or asylum policies, not so much when it comes to EU policies. Jan-Werner Müller once wrote that no far-right party can come into power if they’re not supported by the conservatives. And that seems to be plausible. We have learnt this from history. Currently, if you take Austria for example, who supported the far right to get into government? The Industrial Association – the big businesses. They were convinced that it was better for them to build a coalition with the far right than with left-wing parties. The left has recently

Ruth Wodak: Liberal democracies are quite resilient, not everywhere but certainly in some countries. I believe that people must understand that their institutions and the rule of law must be protected and defended. This is what Trump is currently disregarding in the U.S. This is dangerous for the US democracy. But we also observe a few success stories such as Poland: we will see whether the change in Poland will work in the long run. We also observe protest movements in Turkey and Serbia. So, you know, there are also positive news. They are less talked about because media loves conflicts and scandals, and bad news sell well.

Cengiz Günay: What can we do?

Ruth Wodak: We need to confront such parties, their disinformation and disruptive strategies and say: “I reject your discourse. I’m rather going to talk about what really matters”.

Cengiz Günay: How do we do that?

Ruth Wodak: One way of doing that is, confronting them with facts. Of course, very often that doesn't really help, but might be an entry point where you start a conversation. Check whether a dialog is possible, and then, what happens in the conversation. First, you ask people what they think, and then you listen to them. You don't teach them. You shouldn't tell them that what they're saying is wrong. The moralistic position certainly doesn't help. You show empathy and then you put your own opinion and facts on the table, and then start a discussion. That can help. I've already had such conversations. It is not possible in situations where there is a big audience. It is only possible in smaller settings. I call it "Grätzel-Politik" – Neighbourhood Policy. In these small and informal settings, people tend to tell you about their grievances; why they can't buy bread, what they are struggling with and why they're angry. And they're very angry! And you can tell them that you're also angry. You can share that you are also struggling with rising prices and that you worry about the future. This might help building a positive relationship which opens the door to other issues. It is not easy, and it takes time, but you attempt starting a conversation. Politicians should risk entering into such settings and conversations.

Cengiz Günay: It's probably also an important acknowledgment of people's agency, right?

Ruth Wodak: It is a strong signal that they and their woes and problems matter. It was interesting to see how happy and grateful people are when you talk to them. And you know what, when I came back home after such encounters, I was also very happy.

Cengiz Günay: Should we become more activist?

Ruth Wodak: Yes, indeed. Many of my friends have become activist, making small steps to counter the anger and the feelings of not being listened to. Actually, I believe that people with quasi permanent jobs shouldn't be frightened at all to attempt such "Grätzel-Politik". Nothing can really happen.

Cengiz Günay: And yet they are those who are the most scared, often.

Ruth Wodak: And that's terrible. It is part of the politics of fear. What are people afraid of in a rich country like Austria? And yet, the fear of losing out is enormous. Because people are constantly told that they are under existential threat. Elderly people tend to be more frightened. They have more difficulties in coping with change. I think we need an explanation why change happens, and politicians must find a more positive narrative which compensates for the fear of change.

Cengiz Günay: A narrative that frames change as something positive. Barack Obama did that somehow, right?

Ruth Wodak: Obama was fantastic in this regard. "Yes we can!" was a positive message for necessary change. It was a brilliant slogan. Such slogans are currently missing. If you look at the posters of mainstream parties, they are empty and superficial, they do not send out a realistic positive message. The posters of the far right on the contrary, appeal to resentment.

Cengiz Günay: If we do something, there is hope, right?

Ruth Wodak: We need to be aware of how certain crisis and issues are being instrumentalized. And alternative narratives, positive narratives must be created and launched.

Cengiz Günay: Can we do that as ordinary citizens? We probably need politicians for that as well, right?

Ruth Wodak: Yes, of course, we need politicians, but as ordinary citizens, we can also attempt to enter conversations in our everyday lives. And in that way, everybody is also political.

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Ruth Wodak is an Austrian linguist and emerita Distinguished Professor of Discourse Studies at Lancaster University. She is renowned for her work in Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on political communication, nationalism, right-wing populism, and antisemitism. Wodak has published extensively, including influential books such as *The Politics of Fear and Discourse and Discrimination*. Her interdisciplinary approach combines linguistics, sociology, and political science. She has received numerous honors, including the Wittgenstein Award and several honorary doctorates.