

# [***Conor McGregor: How MMA star became a figurehead for the far-right in Ireland***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJ0-0VV1-DY7V-G01F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*"Ireland, we are at war,"*](https://twitter.com/TheNotoriousMMA/status/1727463168283124036?lang=en) UFC star Conor McGregor declared to his millions of social media followers on November 22, 2023.

It's not clear precisely what McGregor was referring to, but this post, was viewed more than 19 million times on X, formerly known as Twitter. It was later followed by a series of tweets about immigration which were then circulated amongst Telegram channels, seen by CNN to have links to the far-right.

As far back as 2022, McGregor had expressed his support for people protesting against immigration**.**

The day after McGregor's war tweet, a stabbing outside a school in central Dublin left three children and an adult injured. Hours later, rioters with links to the far-right descended on the city.

While local media later reported the alleged attacker was a naturalized Irish citizen who came to Ireland from Algeria in 2003, misinformation alleging the assailant was a foreign national had quickly spread online.

[*Ciaran O'Connor,*](https://www.isdglobal.org/isd_team/ciaran-oconnor/) a senior analyst with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a think tank that researches online hate and disinformation, told CNN that the far-right has grown in Ireland because of social media platforms such as X and Telegram which are commonly used by extremists.

"The far-right are promoting McGregor as the voice of the people, taking advantage of his platforms to boost their ideology," O'Connor told CNN, adding that he believes McGregor's "tweets in the lead up to the riot were a call to action against illegal immigration."

The Telegram channels that had circulated McGregor's declaration of war the night before the stabbing claimed asylum seekers posed an innate, existential threat to Ireland's citizens.

According to the Irish government, around 500 rioters spilled into the streets of Dublin and the rampage quickly turned violent. Police cars, buses and trams were set on fire. Rioters threw fireworks, flares and bottles injuring police officers, while shops were looted causing "tens of millions" of euros in damage.

One protester could be seen on video holding a sign reading "Irish Lives Matter," while others were heard chanting anti-immigrant slogans, as "get them out" reverberated around the nation's capital in a night of violence.

[*Paul Murphy, a TD*](https://twitter.com/paulmurphy_TD?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) - a member of the Irish parliament - from the People Before Profit party, who has had members of the far-right protest outside his home in Dublin for his outspoken support of refugees, told CNN that "in terms of active members of the far-right, there's between 200 to 300 between all far-right organizations: national, freedom party, Ireland first - form a multitude of micro far-right parties."

Despite Ireland's two far-right parties, the Irish National Party and the Irish Freedom Party, respectively received around0.2% and 0.3% of the vote in the 2020 general election, Murphy said the far-right are a small but growing minority.

This comes after the Garda - as Ireland's police are known - told CNN there were 231 anti-immigration related public gatherings in 2023.

After the riot on November 23, 2023, police commissioner Drew Harris said, "What is clear is that people have been radicalized through social media," before describing rioters as "a complete lunatic hooligan faction driven by far-right ideology."

As riots raged in Dublin, [*McGregor, posted on X, "You reap what you sow."*](https://twitter.com/TheNotoriousMMA/status/1727807517000872434)

Local media reported this triggered a police investigation into the UFC star and others for allegedly "inciting hatred online." The Garda told CNN that they would not comment on McGregor's case.

McGregor also took to social media to suggest that he might run for [Irish] President. The seriousness of his online claim remains unclear, though in a subsequent post McGregor positioned himself as providing [*"fresh skin in the game."*](https://twitter.com/TheNotoriousMMA/status/1731679486372970656?lang=en)

"These parties govern themselves vs govern the people ... I listen. I support. I adapt. I have no affiliation/bias/favoritism toward any party. They would genuinely be held to account regarding the current sway of public feeling ... It would not be me in power as President, people of Ireland. It would be me and you," said McGregor.

McGregor did not respond to CNN's request for comment. However, following the Dublin riot the 35-year-old told [*the Guardian in a statement*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/29/dublin-riots-conor-mcgregor-accuses-irish-officials-making-him-scapegoat#:~:text=) that, "We Irish are known for our beautiful hearts, and we have a proud history of not accepting racism."

'The Notorious Conor McGregor'

The rise of McGregor is one of the most famous rags-to-riches stories in sports.

A working-class boy from Dublin, McGregor was driven by a desire to become world champion in a sport relatively unknown in Ireland.

As he started winning fights, the MMA octagon became McGregor's colosseum. He entertained spectators with his precise boxing style and his quick wit charmed an ever-growing fan base.

"The Notorious" Conor McGregor brand was born and, before long, he was the first person in history to hold two UFC belts simultaneously, rising to become the world's highest paid sport star in 2021, according to Forbes.

Yet McGregor was dogged by [*accusations of sexual assault,*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/15/us/conor-mcgregor-sexual-assault-allegation-miami-nba-game/index.html) which he has denied, while a string of defeats to Khabib Nurmagomedov, Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Dustin Poirier left the fighter with onetitle victory in the last eight years.

With his fighting career in flux, McGregor has turned his attention to sparring with people on social media, which has touched a nerve in Ireland's political establishment.

Political analysts and far-right experts have told CNN that McGregor's unique brand of Irish patriotism that won him supporters as a fighter has mutated into a strand of "far-right" Irish nationalism.

"Far-right figures who do promote ethnonationalism - of Ireland for the Irish - celebrate when McGregor is becoming more aligned with their brand of nationalism," O'Connor said.

McGregor has become "a vocal anti-immigration influencer and is using his enormous reach and influence to encourage hostility and suspicion of migrants and asylum seekers," he added.

McGregor has been accused by some Irish politicians of fanning the flames of discontent online, voicing his anger at Ireland's immigration policy and asking questions that strike at the core of Irish consciousness: does Ireland, a country with its long history of emigration, remain a country that welcomes people seeking refuge?

"I think these tweets are incredibly irresponsible for someone who has ten million followers on Twitter alone to be whipping up this level of poison and hate," Labour Justice spokesperson Aodhan O Riordain told RTE News last year. McGregor has said he's being made a "scapegoat."

The former UFC champion appears to have picked his corner, in the fight for Ireland's soul, but whether he is willingly or unwillingly platforming "far-right" views remains unclear.

"When he first came to prominence in 2012, he got attention by acting like a clown - and people received him well," [*Ewan MacKenna,*](https://twitter.com/EwanMacKenna) who authored the book "Chaos is a Friend of Mine: The Life and Crimes of Conor McGregor," told CNN.

"He will become whatever the crowd wants him to be and he molds himself into whatever brings him the most attention, and with ***politics***, it would be similar."

McGregor has previously claimed he regularly deletes his posts on X for "personal" reasons but has also said: "My statements, widely publicised, stand."

'We all go to war'

McGregor's UFC slogan was once: "When one of us go to war, we all go to war," and the MMA fighter has continued to evoke war imagery in recent months.

"McGregor, when he first came onto the [MMA] scene, he used his sense of Irishness to portray an image of a fighting Irish warrior, but in the last couple of months, he has pivoted this towards ethno-nationalism and this idea that Ireland must protect itself from refugees," said O'Connor.

In a later post, now deleted by McGregor, the fighter reacted to footage of a bus of asylum seekers, writing: "People of the community are not told who these men are. Or why they are here. This is what I mean when I say we are at war. You cannot expect the people of Ireland to tolerate this. We will not."

In a separate, now deleted post on X, the UFC star said: "Do not let any Irish property be took over unannounced. Evaporate said property. It's a war."

Since November 2018 , there have been a number of instances when properties or locations linked, to the housing of people seeking asylum or international protection were set on fire, according to analysis by Irish media.

The UFC star, in a now deleted post, said: "I stand with the people of the East Wall," in reference to protests which started in Dublin's East Wall district in November 2022 over plans to house refugees in a disused office block. McGregor's tweet was then circulated widely in Telegram channels with links to the far-right.

Ireland, a country of just over five million people, saw 141,600 immigrants arrive on its shores in the year leading up to April 2023 - the highest figure in 16 years with some attracted by its strong economic performance (9.4% real GDP growth in 2022), according to the Central Statistics Office Ireland (CSO).

In 2020, Ireland was ranked in the Migration Policy Index's top 10 of countries for having "a comprehensive approach to integration, which fully guarantees equal rights, opportunities and security for immigrants and citizens."

But for many ordinary workers, the benefits are failing to reach their pockets and they struggle are struggling to afford high housing prices and rents.

This leaves many without a stake in society, or a home to live in, and so Ireland is often seen as a nation of exiles, with more than 64,000 people leaving its shores to try their hand at a life elsewhere over the same time period.

[*Matthew Donoghue,*](https://people.ucd.ie/matthew.donoghue) a professor in social policy at University College Dublin, told CNN socio-economic inequality can create a "sense of insecurity that the far-right have become adept at exploiting for their own gain, scapegoating people and groups who are facing exactly the same pressures."

"The pressures people feel can be a result of complex political, economic and social factors but instead the far-right offer a simple - but incorrect - narrative of blame," he added.

In November, McGregor shared, before unsharing, an X post by anti-immigration Irish influencer Mick O'Keefe about residents in rural Ireland putting up a checkpoint to deter asylum seekers from entering local areas.

O'Keefe regularly writes to McGregor on X, calling him "President McGregor." O'Keefe did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

AI-generated images of McGregor have also circulated online, showing him bare-chested, holding a rifle and leading a mob of armed Irishmen.

In one video posted on X, [*Keith Woods,*](https://twitter.com/KeithWoodsYT/status/1728861436716470750) an Irish anti-immigration influencer, lambasts Ireland's new hate speech laws, claiming they are a way to silence people speaking out against immigration.

The same video then shows an AI-generated image of McGregor wearing a crown on his head, wrapped in an Irish tricolor.

Woods has appeared on far-right agitator Nick Fuentes' "America First" show. During a separate show, Fuentes - an American White nationalist and Holocaust denier - said that McGregor should "rise up" and "salvage [Ireland] because it's going to be either the Irish or it's going to be the Blacks," before adding: "Only one side is going to come out of this thing alive."

McGregor, who follows Woods on X, has liked his posts in the past, including one where Woods quoted Irish 1916 patriot Padraig Pearse saying, "Ireland belongs to the Irish."

The phrase has become the new slogan of the far-right Irish National Party, for which Woods has been seen canvassing and holding the party's banner.

Woods did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

Harnessing social media

As recently as 2019, Foreign Policy said that Ireland was one of Europe's "last countries without extreme nationalists in parliament."

But the Dublin riots and subsequent protests have cast the spotlight on the emergence of a new right-wing strain of ***politics*** and its amplification on social media.

Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, told CNN that "far-right groups in Ireland are harnessing Twitter (now known as X) to spread their messages in the same way far-right groups do so in other parts of the EU."But she added: "It is true that Ireland's far right is less developed than in places like Germany and France, where there are rising political parties of this persuasion, or in Italy, Sweden, and other countries where the far right is part of the governing majority."Donoghue added, "there is a larger (yet small) base of committed activists using social media, especially that they are able to organize more effectively than before. However, it is very important to note that they are roundly rejected by the vast majority of the Irish population."

By Caolan Magee, for CNN

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