

***Management of Violence in Divided Societies: Prevention  
of Violent Extremism and Strengthening of Democratic  
Principles***

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# **Management of Violence in Divided Societies: Prevention of Violent Extremism and Strengthening of Democratic Principles**

## **Introduction**

Democracy is more than a system of governance: it is the byproduct of trust between the people and institutions. It is built on a belief in both society and the individual, fed by consensus while it aims at development and sustainability. In recent years, there has grown a general feeling in a number of European citizens that the EU may in fact lack an effective democratic system. The truth is that more often than not, we tend to discuss democratic principles as if they are well established within a society, providing us with a default mode of operation. Lately, however, a surge of racist episodes, xenophobic attacks, the rise in hate speech and the prevalence of social exclusion, has not only led a large number of EU citizens to believe that democracy failed them, but has also shown how fragile the democratic culture is. The youth involvement in different acts of violence has exacerbated the situation by adding up to a general feeling of deficit and a negative evaluation of the political elites. On the other hand, the prevention of extremism through the rolling out of violence policy procedures is strongly connected to the enhancement of democratic citizenship. It follows from the above that the questions of whether a lack of democracy can provide us with the root cause of violence and whether the strengthening of democratic principles can become the leading process towards violence prevention, are challenges to be further analyzed and discussed.

The paper highlights the challenges that democracy and democratic participation face today, as seen within polarized European societies, especially as an outcome of the migration and security crises. We examine the associations between problems with

democracy and youth extremism and seek to discuss all possible connections between democracy, or the lack of it, to radicalization and violence. We propose that institutional responsibility and state accountability are prerequisites to the education of citizens in the ways violence manifests itself in society as well as the ways radicalization can be countered. Finally, we present policy proposals for the effective prevention of both extremist and violent attacks using examples of democracy strengthening and the active engagement of citizens as important tools in the process.

### **The Radical Factor**

It is widely acknowledged that, as long as people maintain their trust in the democratic system and feel that they can influence the decisions that affect their everyday lives, extremism is confined to the outer fringes of society. Nevertheless, a democratic and open society can never be entirely invulnerable to violence-promoting extremism: in different contexts and under different circumstances, individuals will be tempted to resort to violence in order to achieve change. It is difficult to distinguish between factors that give rise to political violence and affect the long-term threat from violence-promoting extremism. However, most researchers agree today that radicalization - whereby people gradually adopt an extremist value system with the intention to use and support it, often in violent terms, to facilitate social change - is an important factor behind violent and terrorist action.

The concept of radicalization has dominated the scientific debate on terrorism in recent years, with many conflicting definitions accompanying it. Particularly problematic is the debate on the ideological-political incitement of radicalization, where there is a danger that the adoption of radical political positions will be seen as synonymous with violent and terrorist action, which is far from reality. In a structured debate on terrorism and politically motivated radicalization, we must acknowledge methodologically that there are different paths and mechanisms of radicalization, while the process works in different ways, for different people at different times and in different contexts. In fact, it is difficult, but also methodologically problematic, to approach radicalization as a broad-spectrum theory. However, there are three key characteristics of violent radicalization that most researchers agree on: a) the acceptance of an extreme ideology that identifies and becomes

the purpose of life for an individual, b) the belief in the necessity of violence to achieve the goal and c) the use of violence to promote a cause.

According to Borum, radicalization is a process whereby people adopt extremist belief systems—including the willingness to use, encourage or facilitate violence—with the aim of promoting an ideology, a political project or a cause as a means of social transformation<sup>1</sup>. More generally, radicalization is defined as the process of adopting an extremist value system and the intention to use, support or facilitate violence and fear as methods for achieving change in society. Accepting the need to forcibly impose their views on the rest of society through the use of violence or punishing „others“ for their different actions and beliefs are the last stages of the radicalization process that also lead to violence. The process can take place within any extremist group from the far left and the far right to fanatical eco-terrorists, and it should be noted that it does not always have to lead to terrorism and the use of violence. Extremism is defined as the excessively unwavering and extreme perceptions and measures that lead beyond norms and law.

We can distinguish five broad categories for stimulating the process of radicalization today:

- Anti-capitalist, far-left and anarchist radicalization.
- Far right, fascist, neo-Nazi and nationalist radicalization,
- Religiously inspired radicalization, which usually promotes religion as a factor of political and social change,
- Extremely radical ecology and animal rights,
- Mono-thematic radicalization, provoked by violent movements around a
- particular issue such as opposition to abortion, feminism or the rights of theLGBT community.

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<sup>1</sup> Borum R., (2011), Radicalization into Violent Extremism I, a review of social sciences theories, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 4, Issue 4.

## The Complexity of Radicalization

The term radicalization appears in the context of research into political violence in the 1970s, to interpret the interactive and procedural dynamics of the formation of violent and often secretive groups. Within this theoretical and research context, radicalization is understood as the actual use of violence, scaled in means and intensity. Della Porta defines political violence as collective action that is considered illegal by the state and includes the use of physical violence to cause harm to the adversary in order to achieve political goals.<sup>2</sup>

Although the social mechanisms that motivate individuals to join a violent extremist environment - regardless of whether it promotes a classless, an ethnically homogenous or an Islamist society - present similarities, it is important to note that the relationships of radical groups with their environments are multifaceted and largely understudied. The reason is that research tends to focus on separate groups rather than on intergroup relations and the interaction between the societal, social and individual risk involved in their decisions.

People may adopt a radical stance from a refusal to accept the foundations upon which our open society is built to their belief that the rule of law lacks legitimacy. Breaking the law and using violence to achieve social change then, appear as justifiable courses of action. Both individual and collective feelings of powerlessness can be a breeding-ground for violence and cause people to give credence to dogmatic political solutions. Extremist groups are joined together in a black-and-white and/or conspiratorial view of the world. They face issues concerning socioeconomic exclusion and may perceive themselves as targets of discrimination. Others may believe that their lives do not live up to the expectations and norms of society and feel frustrated. A deep, universal distrust in the democratic system underlies their motives. Extremists separate themselves in opposition to the dominant surrounding social and cultural environment: hostility for the outgroup and the glorification of violence are central to the infrastructure of their group.

Seferiades and Johnston argue that political violence occurs in periods of „conflictual irrelevance“, periods in which either reactio-

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<sup>2</sup> Della Porta D. (1995). *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

nary collectives and groups cannot convincingly express their grievances and claims (lack of organization), or the authorities and the state are unable or unwilling to respond to the demands (deficit of reforms), in case these two periods coincide the violence comes to cover the impossibility of political expression<sup>3</sup>. In this context, politically motivated radicalization for Della Porta and LaFree is „the shift in perceptions about polarizing and absolute interpretations of a state of affairs and the expression of increasingly radical aims and objectives.“ This process includes hostility and targeting of social groups, institutions and state structures, but also the increasing use of violent means“<sup>4</sup>.

Sageman argues that the dominant parameter is not ideology, but the sense of „belonging“ to a group that promotes a social identity that conflicts with the dominant social identity that each state supports. In this scenario, two or more groups will attempt to cancel each other out for resources and results. Affiliates will associate certain characteristics with their group and misjudge others. When one distinguishes between categories, one at the same time defines one’s own space in society. This is the inception of radicalization, and if group-thinking is for certain people functional in ordering reality and boosting their confidence through reciprocal exclusion, then they are fraudulent in that they allow people to bear the misinterpretation of certain groups being superior/inferior to others. That is, the members of the groups who believe that they have been cut off from the state support the conflict with it, creating the conditions for the development of potentials of confrontation and polarization. In this way, a Politicized Social Identity emerges from the bottom-up, which incorporates the individual grievances and promotes the demonstrations as a means of expressing political grievances<sup>5</sup>.

An interesting interpretive scheme, with important references to psychology, is the theory of McCauley and Moskalenko, according to which, in the journey of a person towards radicalization and

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<sup>3</sup> Seferiades, S., and H. Johnston (2012). „The Dynamics of Violent Protest: Emotions, Repression and Disruptive Deficit“, in S. Seferiades, and H. Johnston (eds.), *Violent Protest, Contentious Politics, and the Neoliberal State*, Surrey: Ashgate, pp. 3–18.

<sup>4</sup> Della Porta D. and LaFree G., (2012), Guest Editorial: Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol.6 (1), pp. 4- 10.

<sup>5</sup> Sageman M., (2017), *Turning to Political Violence: the Emergence of Terrorism*, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 520.

finally violence, certain common mechanisms can be recognized - „unconscious direction of a mental process in which feeling or emotion play an important role“<sup>6</sup>.

McCauley and Moskaleiko have identified twelve mechanisms that lead to radicalization and divide them into three main categories: a) individual, b) group, and c) mass<sup>7</sup>.

## Individual

1. personal victimization,
2. political frustration-grievance,
3. joining a jihadist organization - the slip,
4. joining a radical group- the power of love and
5. inspirational preaching as a mechanism

## Group

1. excessive coherence due to isolation or a sense of threat,
2. competition for the same support base,
3. competition with the state,
4. internal competition - division.

## Mass

1. martial arts,
2. hatred and
3. the martyrdom.

On the other hand, an explanation for radicalization comes from the socio-cognitive domain, following Piaget's suggestions on preferences following cognitive stages<sup>8</sup>. On the genesis of nationalism, Piaget believed that, at least in the beginning of a child's social life, prejudice is inevitable due to cognitive limitations that,

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<sup>6</sup> McCauley C. and Moskaleiko, S. (2008), 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, pp. 415–433.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Piaget and Weil, 1951, as cited in Brown, R. (1995). *Prejudice: Its social psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

afterwards, follow a specific developmental pattern. That is, at the age of four, a child's grasp of the world is somehow egocentric, characterized by a fuzzy distinction between the part and the whole that makes it difficult for him or her to elaborate on the concept of country, too. Later, at about eight years old, the child begins to understand that members of different countries may not share the same views and, thus, be dissimilar in that measure. When decentration and integration takes place, at the age of about ten years old, the child may then understand the nature of a country. In other words, understanding parallels cognitive abilities. That is why it is important to design early-stage initiatives that help children and young people cultivate life skills and even involve them in peer-based programmes.

### **Why do people join radical groups?**

The desire to resort to violence is often described as an emotional driving-force that comes from within. The extremist environment can be a context that creates meaning for individuals with poor self-esteem. Membership in an extremist group can satisfy a need for power or control, status, social interaction, friendship or identity and affiliation. Individuals who join extremist movements often come from conflict-ridden and socially vulnerable homes. The use of violence among young people may be an attempt to compensate for a feeling of frustration and powerlessness and can often reflect social problems such as mental ill-health and stereotyped gender roles. This is particularly true of young people who are often both the victims and perpetrators of violence. From being the threatened ones, the young change into the aggressors, a process that helps them overcome the fear of punishment they had undergone themselves as children. A repetitive practice like that provides them with the material out of which radical opinions may crystallize: the qualities of their authoritarian siblings that the young people have now made their own.

Radicalization may even be the product of unsuccessful imprinting, as in the developmental cases of behavior manifested by some orphanage children, who, in the absence of early learning and deprived of environmental examples that would discourage the development of prejudice, display a hostile face to the society that "isolated them".



However, research shows that many of radicalized individuals also come from well- educated and relatively high-income families.

According to Aboud, radicalized individuals can be brought up to fill in three categories: the conventional type category, in which one is content with one's social life and society and, in which, one owns an external set of values borrowed from other people<sup>9</sup>.

The authoritarian type category, in which, prejudice stems from internal needs, rather than social pressures whereas one exhibits aggression and seeks revenge. And a third category, of which members display difficulty in coping with life's struggles. All types, Aboud concludes, may have a fairly common background but the manifestations of their inner feelings diverge.

The very social dynamics and social interaction within extremist groups are key to individuals' developing a propensity for violence. Leadership figures also play a crucial role in attracting people into violent environments.

Ideologies and personal discontent aside, violent extremism is a complex construct. Anti-democratic attitudes in European societies have lately gained a foothold among certain groups of young people. Political circumstances can affect people's long-term willingness to sanction violence as a means of achieving aims and young individuals may be enticed into violence-promoting extremist environments.

People who have become radicalized have some common characteristics, such as strong extreme beliefs, and in many cases, recently expressed hatred for the government, democracy, political elites or the society in general and a sense of alienation and exclusion from their societies. Another feature is the total acceptance of a violent ideology and the influence of the radical propaganda that circulates mainly through the internet.

Dissatisfaction is considered one of the basic prerequisites for joining a process of radicalization. Facts that can lead Muslims in Western countries to this situation are the belief in the persecution of their „brothers“ around the world, disconnection from society, feelings of rejection and discrimination - especially for second- and third-generation immigrants - and a more general

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<sup>9</sup> Aboud, F. (1988). *Children and Prejudice*. Oxford: Blackwell.

search for identity. This dissatisfaction may be rooted in the direct experiences of individuals themselves or other members of their community or may be the result of the wider process of shaping young people's identities. In particular, the feeling of rejection by society in adolescence can cause a deep identity crisis and lead to an ardent search for deeper meaning, which is largely the case in the process of radicalization of European Muslims.

Ajil, drawing on literature from various disciplines (political science, security studies, social psychology, sociology, social movement theory, civil war scholars, inter alia) that discusses grievances linked to outbreaks and acts of violence on a domestic and international level, has identified three 'ideal types' of grievances: socio-economic; political; and ethnic, racial and religious grievances<sup>10</sup>.

Violence from extremist groups can constitute a threat to parts of the democratic system. The threat of violence against elected representatives and persons in authority can further weaken the justice system. Hate crime committed against individuals on the basis of their ethnicity, religious faith, sexual orientation or political conviction increases the risk of social polarization.

The glorification and justification of violence are central to extremist groups, but violence is not necessarily considered as merely a tool to achieve a political aim. When extremist groups commit violent acts that are aimed at the very core of our democratic system, they become an ever-pressing concern for the whole of society.

### **The Pandemic Crisis as a Catalyst**

One of the major effects of the pandemic is that many people find themselves in an unprecedented and difficult situation to manage. They were exposed to conspiracy theories and misinformation on the internet and became targets of extremist propaganda. After all, terrorist and violent extremist groups have adapted their tactics to make them attractive to groups that were particularly vulnerable in the special circumstances of the pandemic.

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<sup>10</sup> Ajil A. (2020), Politico-ideological violence: Zooming in on grievances. *European Journal of Criminology*.

The new conditions are reflected as following:

- **Economic impact:** Governments' measures to respond to the pandemic threat are expected to have significant economic implications (including rising unemployment). This situation can intensify social division, protests and the polarization of society.
- **Social impacts:** Lockdowns have led to increased social alienation of the population, as well as increased symptoms of anxiety and stress, resulting in the exposure of vulnerable groups and individuals to risk. High levels of anxiety and stress often lead to the strengthening of conspiracy theories targeting ethnic and racial groups or to the indiscriminate targeting of the state and political or economic elites.
- **Misinformation and exposure to internet propaganda:** In this state of stress, many people seek explanations for the origin and extent of the crisis. The lockdown has, in fact, helped to increase internet browsing, which has increased exposure and vulnerability to misinformation and extremist propaganda. People who feel isolated or even youngsters who are very active on the internet and social media are exposed to misinformation and various extremist narratives.

The pandemic crisis widens social and economic grievances and in fact contributes to creating fertile ground for the development of hate speech and targeting, as well as the promotion of simplified „solutions“. Feelings of uncertainty and worry about the future can also make extremist narratives appealing. An example is the demonstrations and violent clashes with the police, as part of the reaction to the pandemic management measures that broke out in various European countries and in the USA. These events are an indication of a strong social and violent mobilization, which can be further exploited by extremists.

### **What about Democracy?**

We should never forget that democracy cannot be taken for granted but must continuously be improved, strengthened and safeguarded. It is important to intensify the efforts to safeguard democracy in order to counter tendencies that may constitute a long-term challenge to the democratic system.

In contemporary democracies, protest feeds on the difficulties currently facing political representation and is expressed within the framework of direct rather than representative democracy. The increase in protest-based attitudes and behaviors observed in many countries around the world (especially among younger generations) is undoubtedly related to the current climate of widespread mistrust in the institutionalized and representative mediation of politics<sup>11</sup>. Young people today enter the political arena in a profoundly changed context: the crisis in attitudes towards political parties and partisan identification, the blurred lines of the Right-Left cleavage, the diminished civic norm of the duty to vote and the increase in abstention, and the heightened legitimacy of a protest culture that has become commonplace, are all phenomena observed by political sociologists in a number of Western democracies<sup>12</sup>. At times, radicalism becomes extreme – radicalism through violence – and turns to outright opposition to the democratic system by means of the violence it fuels and as a result of its disdain for democratic pluralism<sup>13</sup>.

The work to safeguard democracy and to thereby prevent violence-promoting extremism is also one of the fundamental components of the fight against terrorism and its breeding grounds. Awareness of democracy must be strengthened on all levels of society and efforts must be made to counter the breeding grounds for all forms of violence-promoting extremism. These efforts cannot be limited to measures taken by the police and judicial authorities but must be cross-sectoral in nature and be based on a broad consensus in society.

Preventing individuals from being enticed into violent extremist environments and preventing such movements from establishing themselves and spreading in societies is also a matter of strengthening and safeguarding the democratic system. Ideologically motivated violence or the threat of such violence is normally directed at society's institutions or its representatives; however,

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<sup>11</sup> Isin E. F., G.M. Nielsen (eds). 2008. *Acts of Citizenship*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Muxel, A. (2019). "Youth and Politics in France: Democratic Deficit or New Model of Citizenship." In *The Routledge Handbook of French Politics and Culture*, edited by Demossier M., Lees D., Mondon A., Parish N., London, Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Van Tilburg, W. A. P., E. R. Igout. (2016). "Going to Political Extremes in Response to Bore- dom." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 46(6): 687–699.

it also affects private citizens based on their ethnic, religious or sexual identity or on their political views.

A society that does not clearly distance itself from violence-promoting extremism risks becoming polarized.

## **Strengthening Democratic Principles**

In a society where all citizens have equal rights, obligations and opportunities, regardless of their identity or background, extremism will be confined to the fringes. Such a society not only requires the authorities to respect human rights and treat individuals fairly and legitimately, but also requires every individual to be aware of their rights and to respect the rights of others.

To counter intolerance and extremism, the principles of democratic governance and respect for human rights must be put to practice. Ideological violence has a tendency to occur in societies in which intolerance, xenophobia and anti-democratic attitudes are rife. That also means that violence occurs in societies where education lacks the necessary resources to bridge the gap that exists between different individuals and to change stereotypic views of the world. Devine paved the way for sentimental and behavioral methods of stereotype management by distinguishing people into the ones who uncontrollably make use of their beliefs and those who make the effort to replace them<sup>14</sup>. This is an important dynamic of conciliatory social control efforts for intergroup restoration and healing.

Devine spoke of three conditions that must apply in order for stereotypic responses to be overruled. First, one must realize that a stereotype exists before attempting to ignore it<sup>15</sup>. Second, one should have adequate processing resources to rise above a stereotype. Gathering unbiased information and replacing rotten convictions lies at the core of preventive work and democracy-promoting initiatives. The third reason is understandably motivational. One must be willing to think and act in a different way than the one that most readily comes to mind. That is why we have to increase awareness of the values upon which our whole system is based.

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<sup>14</sup> Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, pp. 590-598.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

The part that institutions can play in bringing all groups together was stressed by the Extended Contact Hypothesis as administered by Wright, Aron et al.<sup>16</sup>. The hypothesis claims that observed relationships between members of different groups release anxiety stemming from intergroup competition and reduce fear that disconnects the self from the others. This get-together includes all the benefits of co-operation in an environment where categories remain psychologically alive and positive attitudes are able to generalize. What is more, group representatives that set a fine example for intergroup relations may lead to heightened positive intergroup attitudes. Such environments support collective purposes for people to work upon.

Fostering group diversity in a social construct that would evenly nurse majority and minority group members is an important parameter of prevention programmes. Effective communication and cooperation between different groups should be sought after by means of violence prevention programmes.

### **Policy Proposals**

1. Implement cultural, democracy-promoting initiatives in civil society.
2. Promote those initiatives to ensure that all individuals are entitled to human rights and freedoms. Build a solid implementation and accountability framework, ensuring effective response in both private and public spaces.
3. Increase awareness of the values upon which our democratic system is based.
4. Communicate knowledge of violence-promoting extremism among authorities, municipalities, organisations.
5. Combat discrimination, xenophobia and different-social-group intolerance by developing or establishing mechanisms and structures to allow authorities, municipalities and civil society organisations to cooperate more effectively on preventive work.
6. Intensify efforts to prevent individuals from joining violence-promoting extremist movements. Help individuals exit such movements.

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<sup>16</sup> Wright, S. C., Aron, A., McLaughlin, V. T., Tracy, R., & Ropp, S. A. (1997). The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), pp. 73-90.

7. Strengthen efforts to counter the breeding grounds for ideologically motivated violence.
8. Increase election turnout and build democratic awareness.
9. Run cross-sectional and context-specific research in an effort to recognize and tackle different manifestations of violence.
10. Develop programmes for measuring the progress of initiatives.
11. Build strategic interdisciplinary networks against radicalization and extremism.

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