



Building Resilience against Violent  
Extremism and Polarisation

# **Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today: *An analytical framework***

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## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to conduct a systematic and critical review of contemporary literature on processes of polarisation, the role they are perceived as playing in creating a matrix of adversities that can lead to increased vulnerability to what is often termed 'violent extremism', and the potential impact of practices that are understood as building pro-social resilience to such adversities. Through a wide-ranging review, taking in studies and practice on polarisation and 'violent extremism', the authors aim to identify a schema of what are broadly conceptualised as vulnerabilities – factors, operating on macro, meso and micro levels, which may either increase or decrease the likelihood that communities become fragmented and polarised within a European context.*

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## **The BRaVE Project**

BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) is a European research project bringing together researchers and stakeholders with a view to understanding which factors drive polarisation and violent extremism in European societies, as well as identify strategies in response that build resilient communities. It aims to systematise existing knowledge and assess the impact of policies and practices in preventing extreme ideologies and polarisation in European societies.

The project surveys relevant policies, programmes and research projects on the national, European and international level aiming at counteracting polarisation and violent extremism. Using this review of current approaches, it designs and builds a set of Polarisation Indicators, which will be discussed and refined through stakeholder workshops. It will particularly focus on the role of three sets of factors in providing fertile ground for extremism and polarisation to grow, or conversely in helping to build resilient and cohesive communities: historical and cultural factors; real and perceived socio-economic inequalities; and media discourses, particularly social media communication 'bubbles'.

The project will create an analytical framework that helps us understand processes of violent extremism and polarisation both towards the Far Right and religiously justified radicalisation. It will create relevant policy indicators on polarisation to assess trends on national and European-wide levels. It will also produce key insights and policy recommendations on the use of interfaith and intercultural education, arts and sports, with a special focus on youth, to build resilient communities and prevent polarisation.

BRaVE is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI), Italy. The lead researcher for the project is Dr Richard McNeil-Willson, also based at the lead partner organisation, European University Institute, Italy. Other consortium members include: Professor Maura Conway from Dublin City University; Professor Paul Taylor from the Lancaster University; Professor Andrea Kizsan, Dr Zsuzsanna Vidra and Michael Zeller from the Central European University, Hungary and Austria; Professor Harald Weilnböck and Oliver Kossack from Cultures Interactive, Germany; Robin Sclafani, director of a Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI), Belgium; and Oskar Baksalary of ITTI, Poland. The BRaVE Project is scheduled for completion in 2021.

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**BRaVE – Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation**

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## 1. Introduction

Europe has grown increasingly polarised in recent years. Various factors have been cited as causing this, including: new trends in identity and cultural politics; financial crises and political instability; the weaponisation of crises by malicious political actors; and the rise of irregular forms of media and social media (Wodak 2019; O'Callaghan et al. 2014; Ranstorp 2018).

This polarisation has taken place in the context of financial crises and swingeing austerity policies, creating significant precarity, financial insecurity and declines in living standards across Europe. This economic concern has combined with a growing discontent, as citizens demonstrate increasing disillusionment with existing political systems and traditional practice through support of parties that eschew the centre-ground. Meanwhile, new forms of populism and exclusionary identities have also come to the fore in countries not impacted by austerity, as populist leaders blend discourses attacking established parties and politicians, business, capitalism and corruption, fuelling the rise of polarisation (Norris and Inglehart 2018; Wodak 2015).

Further interwoven within the current context are reinvigorated 'racialised' elements in the politics of European security which cut across the political spectrum – the rise of counterterror policies predicated on the problematisation of minority articulations of identity, as well as anti-minority hostility filtered through the lens of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (McNeil-Willson 2017b; Krzyzanowski, Trianafyllidou, and Wodak 2018; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018). Through this has developed a normalisation or 'mainstreaming' of various radical right ideas, as populist right parties and irregular movements have further imposed issues of immigration, identity, and law and order issues onto political debates. This has led to instances whereby migrants and Muslims have faced targeting, whilst mainstream parties have co-opted some issues and discourse that were previously the monopoly of the radical right (Mudde 2016).

There is convincing evidence that this polarisation is driven by a 'radicalisation of the mainstream right' (Minkenberg 2015). Within this context, several new formations of racism have arisen. In Central and Eastern Europe, lingering articulations of national-socialist Antisemitism have been revived within localised grassroots movements, as seen in neo-Nazi marches and the recent violent attack at a synagogue in Halle. However, there has also been a rise in more covert forms of Antisemitism, as right-wing politicians in Hungary and Poland give credence to conspiracies and campaigns against George Soros, the Central European University and Open Society – all the while courting politicians such as Benjamin Netanyahu and the more openly militaristic elements of Israeli politics.

Such racism has also sometimes seen populist right parties attempting to appeal directly to Jewish voters, playing the card of concern about Islamist violence or attempting to shape a new enemy of the Muslim migrant as representing an existential threat to the nation. In regions of Europe where the extreme right have often targeted ethnic minorities (Jews, Roma, etc.), Islamophobia can develop in the absence of Muslim populations as illiberal governments engage in revisionist policies (Buchowski 2017). As such, populist governmental parties build their politics on the strategy of polarisation, creating or recasting new enemies to maintain their power. Meanwhile, traditional, established parties have co-opted elements of far-right policies or rhetoric in attempts to out-flank populism, often ultimately acting to legitimise and enforce polarisation.

The climate of polarisation is further exacerbated by both traditional and social media. The former, focussing on sensational news, tend to reproduce and promote information on violent actions, as well as to reproduce 'risk narratives' concerning migration and asylum seeking, the welfare state and security (Jackson et al. 2011; Grusin 2010; Vultee 2011). When people are

attracted to groups or ideas on the political extremes, social media algorithms tend to propose like-minded or sometimes more extreme content, creating an ‘echo chamber’ effect that constructs the appearance that fringe views are mainstream (O’Callaghan et al. 2014).

Indeed, we are witnessing the rise of a European public sphere that increasingly focuses on ‘crises’ and their coverage (Krzyzanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2009; Krzyzanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018) whilst social media sites disrupt traditional channels of news distribution. This has led to the identification of ‘trigger events’, moments within the news cycle that are catalysed by social media to re-circulate alarmist or outright false news, creating (mis)information or filter bubbles that reinforce polarisation (Ranstorp 2018).

This polarised Europe provides the context for the growth and legitimisation of current patterns of what has been called ‘violent extremism’, acts of violence that have become evident to varying degrees throughout Europe. Hate speech can legitimate violent attacks, pushing accepted public rhetoric further towards extremes and generating a polarising spiral often difficult to break. Whilst far-right groups spread Violent ‘Islamist’ groups also attempt to increase polarisation through destruction of the ‘grey zone’ in political debate (Brown 2015), and have often acted as a trigger for anti-Muslim hate crimes (Weaver 2018). This polarised context can act to ‘supercharge’ other factors associated with extremist violence, providing the fuel for individuals and localised networks to lean towards engagement with violent, anti-social acts.

The emergence of this security paradigm within contemporary Europe – the rise of populism, the polarisation of political parties and local communities, the alarmism of media and counter-terrorism, and the impetus this gives for acts of extremist forms of violence – urgently requires further analysis on how processes of polarisation, political extremism and violence interact. More research needs to critically engage with the terminology and processes of polarisation and ‘violent extremism’, to avoid some of the limitations that befall some of the current studies in the field (Ranstorp 2009). In this Concept Paper for the BRaVE project, we seek to develop an analytical framework that identifies the interplay and interaction between different factors that lead to polarised ideologies and societal fragmentation, paying special attention to historical and cultural factors, socio-economic inequalities and the role of media and social media.

Polarisation is understood in this paper as the thick and descriptive context of factors which are conducive for and coexist alongside drivers of what is broadly termed ‘violent extremism’. We thus articulate a framework for factors and vulnerabilities that create polarisation and enable the production of violence, before considering the main factors that could counter this through the building of pro-social resilience. The paper starts by offering definitions and discussions on the main concepts of ‘polarisation’, ‘violent extremism’ and ‘(pro-social) resilience’. Section three presents our analytical framework on polarisation and violent extremism, whilst sections four and five explore the main drivers that are understood as contributing to this and the factors that build pro-social resilience.

## 2. Definitions of Concepts and Terms

This section aims to expound upon current definitions and theories of polarisation and (what has come to be termed) ‘violent extremism’. Before we begin this process, it is important to be aware of the implications and problems with the central terms used here. Terms such as radicalism and extremism have a normative, relational and context-specific value: one is judged radical or extremist against culturally specific benchmarks, and this label is dependent on who is doing the labelling. In European societies, governments have increasingly attempted to claim the benchmark of ‘core values’, such as democracy, rule of law, minority rights, relative separation of

church and state, equality before the law including gender equality and/or freedom of expression. However, governments have utilised such terms hypocritically, ignoring the spirit or word of the law when electorally convenient or constructing core values in ways that make them near impossible to determine adequately. As such, it is integral that engagement with terms such as, and related to, 'extremism' is done in a highly reflexive way, as these represent politically charged terms used by those in power to define and demonise opponents. The way in which terms such as polarisation, 'violent extremism' and (pro-social) resilience are used in this paper will, therefore, be explored in depth and employed with high levels of caution and with care.

## 2.1 Polarisation

**Polarisation** refers to the process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in **Manichean 'black and white' terms, as resulting from an essential conflict between two different social groups** (migrants/natives, élites/the people). We use the term polarisation in a descriptive sense, as the divination of a context within which factors of extremism are given greater impetus to occur. Whilst it is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor for violent extremism, which can occur independently, polarisation can provide an enabling and enhancing political context.

When looking through recent studies on polarisation, we find that definitions of the term have shifted across the last few decades, producing several kinds of polarisation. Whilst current debates around polarisation often place it within the context of 'extremism' or 'radicalisation', it is important to be aware that this is a relatively recent development. Literature prior to the start of the long 'War on Terror' tended, rather, to treat polarisation as devoid of security. Such articulations of polarisation include 'social polarisation', 'political polarisation', 'economic polarisation' – which will be explored further here – before giving way to contemporary securitised forms of polarisation which developed within the context of the long War on Terror.

The broader concept of polarisation was initially developed to refer to and understand to the unequal distribution of income – or, socio-economic polarisation (Esteban and Ray 1994; Wolfson 1994; Karatrantos 2018). From a socio-economic perspective, this was seen as 'the widening of the gap between specific groups of people in terms of their economic or social circumstances and opportunities' (Woodward 1995). Polarisation is, in a socio-economic context, initially used to understand changing in income distribution – the widening of rich and poor – or occupation – the expansion of jobs at the top and bottom of hierarchies – within economically advanced countries, and the subsequent impact this had on the middle classes (Sassen 1991). However, socio-economic polarisation has since been widened to include not just widening economic disparity but to include a variety of social inequalities and racism, and the impact this has on cohesion; when 'one or more of cultural, biological, educational, occupational, lingual, colour, historical and political or some other social characteristic of an individual in a society may make him feel alienated from others in society' (Chakravarty 2015: 77).

Another lens within which polarisation has been delineated and analysed is that of political or partisan polarisation. Polarisation is, indeed, one of the most established and discussed indicators of party systems, with a canon of research becoming established on the polarisation of parties or voting patterns. This has become increasingly relevant with the rise of right-wing populist parties and the fracturing of more orthodox political practices and landscapes in the last decade (Dalton 2008; Curini and Hino 2012; Sartori 1970). The polarisation of voters has been shown to create governmental instability, legislative deadlock, and the rise of political extremism (Dreyer and Bauer 2019). Such political polarisation can be seen in the extent to which the platforms of competing parties are opposed, the level of party ideological homogeneity and the level of dislike expressed towards other parties (Talisso 2019). Indicators of political polarisation on a national level have also been identified, including the number of extreme parties, their ideological focus

and the percentage of their vote-share (Schmitt and Franzmann 2016). Such a political focus on polarisation represents the ideological hostility within a multi-party system, and the extent to which this becomes reflected in voting patterns and behaviour.

Socio-economic and political forms of polarisation have, in recent years, been intertwined with the language of the long 'War on Terror', in what is a securitising of the understanding of polarisation. The creation of socio-economic real or perceived inequality, the impact this has had on community interaction and the growth of far-right and exclusionary political parties are increasingly seen as not only fracturing societal norms but creating a security threat that legitimises articulations of violence. Discussions on polarisation, when linked to concepts of terrorism, exhibit a similar use of language which suggests that – through 'violent extremism' and 'radicalisation' – polarisation can lead to an existential threat to the continuation of open, democratic societies (Cohnitz and Raub 2018).

This has led to new discussions on the societal dangers of polarisation and its role in enabling violence. Concerns have been raised over the rise of the far right – particularly the media-savvy 'Alt-Right' and 'Alt-Light' movements – as to the nature and credibility of the threat they pose to European democratic norms, structures and consensus-building (Waring 2018, 2019). Such polarisation has laid bare the fault lines of contemporary European societies – between the conservative old and the progressive young, urban and rural areas, and those who have and haven't been able to access higher levels of education (Gopffarth 2019). Meanwhile, elements of Antisemitism and Islamophobia have become mainstreamed, evidenced from public online conversations to the private dinner table (Schwarz-Friesel 2019; Sabbagh 2018). Such articulations of polarisation – the exacerbation of political, social and cultural cleavages and inequalities – have created a context in which formations of so-called 'violent extremism' can and have begun to co-exist.

## 2.2 Violent Extremism

*'Violent extremism' is defined here as the use of violent acts, or threat thereof, by irregular actors in the pursuit of political aims to erode democratic processes and pluralistic values, often at the expense of minority faith, cultural or political communities.* Polarisation, the context within which 'violent extremism' often sits, is understood here as affecting large segments of society, whilst 'violent extremism' is therefore confined to and conducted by only a small minority of individuals. It is a term that is difficult to describe, highly contested in its construction, and one that can be, and has often been, problematically used (Lowe 2017).

In the context of democratic societies, so-called 'extremist' organisations are increasingly understood as engaging in articulations or threats of violence as part of an expressed desire to create an homogenous society based on rigid, dogmatic tenets. This involves the seeking to make society highly-conformist through the active suppression of opposition and the subjugation of minorities (Mudde 2007; Schmid 2013). Such practices involve a rejection of the rule of law and demonstrable propensity for force or violence (Schmid 2013) – although it is important to stress that such behaviour is far from restricted to just the political extremes. This understanding forms the basic discursive foundations of 'extremism' and 'extremist' groups in this paper.

Current literature has sought to discern certain traits that are used exclusively by groups that operate on the political extremes, to create a workable definition. Berger finds extremism to be 'a spectrum of beliefs in which an in-group's success is inseparable from negative acts against an out-group' (Berger 2018: 6), whilst Schmid suggests a focus on simplified mono-causal interpretations of the world (Schmid 2013). Coolsaet also highlights simplistic 'Us versus Them' narratives, used by extreme right and Islamist groups to promote hatred, intolerance and violence

(Coolsaet 2015). Often cherry-picking from religious or nationalist doctrines, such ideologies rely on superficial understandings and interpretations of complex events or beliefs and aim to pit certain groups against others through exclusivist violence.

These understandings highlight ideology as the most significant means of understanding 'extremism'. However, 'extremisms' have very different ideological tilts: the extreme right targets Islam as a radically different culture or religion; whilst Islamist groups often take aim at elements of the secular, democratic West (Busher and Macklin 2014). Moreover, the construction of Europe and European values differ significantly across different far-right groups (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016).

It is critical to highlight that extreme ideologies in themselves are unlikely to lead people towards violent action without a particular set of enabling cultural, socio-economic, historical and political conditions (Coolsaet 2017). 'Extremisms' are reinforced, for instance, in complex ways by structural socio-economic inequalities. For instance, the economic restructuring of post-industrial European economies has aggravated income disparities, weakened the 'safety-net' provided by welfare state systems and created precariousness and the diminishing legitimacy of political institutions and parties (Kriesi et al. 2008). The restructuring of the labour market as heavily reliant on migrant workers, for instance, has meant that migrant labour has been used as a laboratory for flexible forms of employment in way which has diminished workers' rights on international, national and regional levels. This has created just one of a certain set of conditions which have enabled oppressive and violent ideas and actions to be justified.

It is also problematic to over-emphasise the role of ideology, as it risks essentialising engagement in 'violent extremism' by side lining the role of acts and manifestations, the processes that lead to them and the political context within which they occur. Attempts to remedy an overly ideational definition of 'violent extremism' have emerged, such as that of 'hateful extremism', defined as the trilogy of behaviours, beliefs and (intended or actual) causes which amplify hate, encourage or cause violence, and threaten the safety of individuals, communities or wider society (Allen 2019). However, little consensus on the usefulness and acceptance of such definitions has been found within debate.

It is important that ideological polarisation and extreme beliefs are distinguished from extreme political actions. Micro-level qualitative studies, for instance, have suggested that those who engage in right-wing 'extremist' groups are not driven by their ideas in isolation; rather, individuals are socialised into such extreme worldviews at a later stage in their membership of extreme activist groups or communities (Blee 2002, 2007). Thus, holding extreme worldviews is far from a precondition for engaging in violence, and those who engage in violence do not all hold extreme beliefs. In this respect, it would be highly disingenuous to state any simple correlation between ideological polarisation and violence.

*This paper conceptualises the interplay between polarisation and 'violent extremism' as two parallel, inter-related processes. Violent extremism can occur in a non-polarised context, and violence does not necessarily result in growing polarisation (Ranstorp 2018). A polarised context does not necessarily led to violent extremist actions. But a polarised context clearly acts as an enabler for 'violent extremism': in a highly polarised context, individuals are more likely to operate in an antagonistic manner and therefore be drawn into engagement with violent groups and actions. In other words, societal polarisation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for violent extremism to occur but it is certainly linked to it in many complex ways.*

## 3. Analytical Framework: Polarisation

### 3.1 Causes of Polarisation

There are several competing or complementary factors which have been suggested for the recent growth of processes of polarisation in Europe. Through an examination of current literature, the authors of this paper have developed four main areas which dominate current research: socio-economic inequality and financial shock; the weaponisation of political crises; malicious actors and so-called 'extremist' groups; and the rise of irregular forms of media and social media.

One explanation for polarisation processes is financial inequality or shock – most relevant in the contemporary context, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The demand for populist, radical and extremist politics is over-represented by lower middle-class (artisans, etc.) and working-class (industry workers) men, whose livelihoods are jeopardised by economic globalisation involving restructuring, production de-localisations and unemployment. There is recent evidence that in Western Europe the vote for radical right parties is associated with anti-immigration attitudes, low education, economic precariousness and Euroscepticism for both men and women (Spierings and Zaslove 2015) – narratives which have often been used by powerful political and financial actors for self-gain. The 'losers of economic and cultural modernisation' have lower levels of education and are less endowed with the knowledge needed to cope with the challenges of globalised multicultural societies (Rydgren and Ruth 2013). This would also explain why men are more often attracted to radical/extreme right political forces than women, who are more often employed in jobs less negatively affected by globalisation (Swank and Betz 2003). Moreover, right-wing populist parties have begun to display redistributive and social-welfare-oriented agendas that can appeal to the working classes.

One wide-ranging study that links financial inequality with polarisation comes from Funke, Schularick and Trebesch (2015), who examine a broad dataset of responses to financial crises from 1870 to 2014. They find that political uncertainty rises strongly after financial crises, with governmental majorities shrinking and polarisation rising. Particularly, they find that financial crises are more likely to lead to – on average – 30% more support for the extreme right, who will often attribute blame to minorities or foreigners. There was also an increase in articulations of political activism, such as general strikes, street protests and violent riots (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2016: 27). Furthermore, similar political dynamics in normal recessions or shocks that are not financial in nature did not seem to elicit the same polarisation nor support for the far-right, suggesting a strong link between economic shocks and the polarisation associated with contemporary European populism.

The correlation between inequality and right-wing extremism is not clearly established: this relationship is not a cause-effect one, but is mediated by other factors, for example cultural ones. It is often the fear or perception of degrading social mobility rather than its actual experience which attracts people to these parties and groups; and the worst off often do not vote for the radical right (Rydgren and Ruth 2013). Similarly, economic modernisation and socio-economic disadvantage alone cannot explain the radical right vote as is demonstrated by the success of these parties in wealthy countries that have been little affected by economic crisis, such as Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. One recent study of support for anti-Muslim groups in the UK shows that it is far from confined to the young, uneducated and economically insecure (Goodwin 2013). Indeed, notions of perceived wellbeing, inequality and relative deprivation are also key here – people in these countries may not have suffered particularly in the economic crisis but nevertheless display concerns over future precarity (Rydgren and Ruth 2013). In addition, their point of reference may no longer be their immediate community but an ideal of prosperity that has become a moving target in late modernity (Bauman 2000). Middle-classes in these countries may compare themselves, not to their neighbours or

colleagues, but rather to an intangible lifestyle of business managers and stars, bloggers, self-made start up creators and other such new professional and social profiles which make a standard middle-class living pale as a very austere way of life.

Despite the role of socio-economic crisis and inequality therefore, it is important to emphasise that conceptualising populism and polarisation as a wholly or mainly working-class phenomenon is inaccurate and distorting. Political events inspired by populist movements or parties – the 2016 Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, or the rise of parties such as La Lega, AfD or Rassemblement National – have strong links to powerful actors in media, the government and business, and such movements would be unable to gain traction were it not for financial backing and partial parliamentary legitimisation. Rather, economic disruption and decline, often alongside the shock of austerity policies, has become one of several ‘crises’ weaponised in support of radical anti-social and far-right populist movements.

The weaponisation of political crises is also cited as creating and fueling polarisation. Political crises, as well as economic crises, and the way these are framed and reframed, are a significant factor in the creation of polarisation. When established political parties or governments become disconnected from the concerns of their citizens, individuals may be lured by groups who propagate extreme narratives that promise easy solutions to complex challenges. Moments of political crisis (e.g. when there is a sudden event or change) can easily be used, particularly by populist politicians, to amplify zero-sum and polarising narratives, often against minorities.

Irregular migration into and within Europe has been a particular topic that has been weaponised, as ‘myths and fears [about migrants] can deepen the polarisation’ (Lenos 2016). Polarisation here represent a set of processes dominated by discourse, resulting in groups in society becoming adversaries and ‘a sharp psychological division between “us and them”’ (Lenos 2016). As result of discursive othering through crises, hostilities develop, resulting in a political climate where prejudices, hate speech and even hate crime flourish. The importance of the creation and exchange of highly-charged discourse around crisis events is also seen in Brandsma’s claim that polarisation relies on the enactment of an ‘us-and-them’ thinking, based on identities and groups, and fuelled by talking about identities in combination with judgment about events (Lenos et al. 2017).

In creating polarisation, the demand-side factors need to combine with supply-side cultural and political factors: populist radical right and extreme right actors exploit events that are framed to highlight supposed identify cleavages and propose remedies (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow and Byrd 2007; Giugni et al. 2005). Since the 1980s, economic globalisation has been associated with the growing salience of nationalism and ethnicity in European society and politics, intertwining with European integration (Triandafyllidou 2001). In this process of racialisation of social relations, divisions and inequalities of class, gender, education and place of residence are increasingly perceived, represented and explained in public and political debates as resulting from cultural differences; conflicts represented as problems arising from the interaction between cultures (Ålund 1999; Miles 1993). These processes of racialisation of social relations reflect and combine with long-term political changes as economic cleavages lose ground to the advantage of identity/ethnic cleavages in structuring conflict in the political system in Western Europe (Gougou and Mayer 2013). The wave of jihadist terrorist attacks and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of the mid-2010s have expanded the political and ideological space available to radical and extreme right-wing political actors to attack migrants and Muslims (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018). In this context, mainstream parties have either been unable to defuse, or actively stoked, the identity issue in the political agenda, failing to set out a positive case for immigration and enabling the growth of perceived anxieties around immigration and Islam (Goodwin 2013).

Whilst this weaponisation process is critical, further explanation is needed on the actors and the way they engage disruption tactics to target existing political systems or hierarchies. Polarisation is understood as coming from a 'broad spectrum of state and non-state actors, including extremist far-right and Islamist extremist groups', who have 'exploited technology and election cycles to exacerbate... polarisation that has afflicted societies' (ISD). The privileged position that is given to technology and state political events – both in their definition and programmatic responses – align polarisation with the rise of European populist movements, which have sought to shift the rhetoric and policy of mainstream governments towards the far-right; against universal definitions of human rights and welfare, and towards issues of state security and privileged majority rights.

The European Union's High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation finds that polarisation and violent extremism are being fuelled by right-wing populist movements 'promoting anti-democratic, intolerant and divisive messages' (HLCEG-R 2018: 3). They cite similar concerns over the use of the internet and social media and the risks of an increasing polarisation have for the undermining of societal peace and shared values. Polarisation is understood as an ideological context, the result of specific extremist narratives (8, 10 & 37), created by, most notably, 'Islamist extremist ideology' and 'right wing extremism', brought about in some instances as a result of 'polarisation dynamics' (HLCEG-R 2018: 8, 10, 37).

The rise of social media is another factor named as creating polarisation, particularly the way in which social media has altered mainstream journalistic practice or engagement with politics and news. Polarisation is cited as the coming together of 'hate speech and fake news [as well as other dystopian narratives (e.g. sensationalism)] combined with prejudices and stereotypes', which together create and enhance 'social fragmentation and the phenomenon of conflicting diversity' (Sardoč and Deželan 2018: 6). This is particularly significant in the context of the long War on Terror and the fear and anxiety over security in Europe, which commonly seeps into irregular media language. This includes 'immigration and refugee policies, the rise of fundamentalist ideologies, typologies of those individuals who may be predisposed to carry out terrorist attacks, and the polarisation among diverse populations who may undermine and threaten the stability of democratic societies' (33).

Social media has changed the way that mainstream organisations have crafted the news cycle, also leading to greater levels of polarisation. Increasing use of social media in mainstream news has had 'substantial implications on how national and European politics is covered and, indirectly, understood by citizens who rely on social media as an important source of news' (Barberá, Vaccari, and Valeriani 2017: 26). Such social media contributes has fragmented the public sphere, as journalists and their audience pursue one another on the basis of political considerations, rather than a desire for impartial, objective information as the standard for democratic governance (47-8).

Social and online digital media have been credit with creating several problematic effects. Firstly, the so-called 'filter bubble' or 'echo chamber' has acted to promote limited, sometimes Manichaeian views by prioritising certain content over others. This can help to present fringe views as more mainstream, giving platforms to polarising media and promoting and amplifying it amongst online milieus. Algorithmic processes can push individuals and networks towards more extreme content. Engagement with a very limited amount of media on a certain political topic, for instance, can result in the promotion of incrementally extreme content, goading community divisions. This has also resulted in a breakdown of trust towards online and mainstream content, creating a process of 'trench warfare' whereby viewpoints that align with a certain *Weltanschauung* are prioritised, whilst those that challenge these are framed as either threatening, unreliable or irrelevant (Karlsen et al. 2017).

The roles of these factors in enabling and promoting polarisation are highly multi-faceted and interlinked. In the following section, we will seek to develop a clear matrix of factors by which levels of polarisation within European societies can begin to be assessed and analysed.

## 3.2 Mapping Polarisation Factors

Having conducted an initial review of some of the factors seen as creating polarisation, the BRaVE project aims to build a set of Polarisation Indicators. As part of the initial approach to achieving this, we have established an early set of 20 factors which are seen in literature and practice as contributing towards fluctuations in levels of European polarisation.

The development of these factors was achieved through both a top-down and bottom-up approach to the identification of potential indicators. This included indicators derived from previous related EU projects – such as the *Accept Pluralism* and *MEDIVA* projects ('Accept Pluralism' 2010-2013; 'MEDIVA: Media for Diversity and Migrant Integration' 2010-2012) – and a review of relevant literature and related studies. For each indicator, a short description was written and descriptive levels (high, moderate and low) were developed to answer the question of how one might qualitatively assess the degree to which a country or region is polarised, according to the described indicator. Following the description of each indicator, a means of quantitatively assessing the descriptive levels of each indicator was introduced by way of proposed statistical measures. Suggestions of suitable open data points that could be used as sources on which to deploy the proposed measures were amassed from online desktop research.

This process resulted in a set of 100 initial indicators. Indicators were then divided into the four key conceptual categories featured in the BRaVE project framework: Socio-Economic (indicators relating to financial and welfare factors of polarisation); Historical (indicators relating to state factors and historic conflicts and politics); Cultural (indicators relating to identity and cultural practices); and Communication-Based (indicators relating to offline and online content and interaction). Indicators were assigned to conceptual categories according to their descriptions, with 33 indicators falling into the Socio-Economic category, 26 into the Historical category, 20 into the Cultural category, and 21 into the Communication-Based category. This formed an initial 'long list' of indicators, and the first point of the indicator development process.

Having defined a set of initial indicators, synthesis of the indicators was conducted to ensure that each indicator was sufficiently unique from others in character. Indicators were laid out under their concept headings and their associated descriptions were used to determine overlaps. Overlaps were determined based on three factors: 1) the point of reference; 2) the collective sense; and 3) the unit of measurement.

Similar point-of-reference indicators were found to address the same referent: for example, the initial indicators of *Application of Racist Discourse Legislation* and *Existence of Racist Discourse Legislation* both refer to legislating against racist discourse. These were thus synthesised into the overarching indicator *Hate Speech Legislation*. Collective sense indicators were those that might focus on different referent points but inferred an overarching theme. For example, the initial indicator *Racist Violence in Public Life* focussed on instances of racist violence, whilst *Social Protest* focussed on one group protesting against another. However, both collectively refer to forms of conflict and were thus combined into the indicator *Inter-Group Conflict*. Meanwhile, unit-of-measurement indicators were those indicators that ultimately utilised the same means to determine whether polarisation was present. The initial indicator *Regional Inequality*, for example, related to the income and expenditure of differing regions within the same country, while *Economic Polarisation* referred to regions being divided into those sitting above or below

the national mean. Both would entail measurement of regional economic irregularities and were thus combined under *State Welfare*.

The process of synthesising the initial 100 indicators resulted in the development of 20 unique indicators, which were then arranged according to a further level of conceptual categorisation within the BRaVE project: that of macro, meso and micro levels of classification. Here, macro refers to state level indicators, meso to community level indicators, and micro to individual or familial level indicators. Again, indicator descriptions were used for these classifications. Table 1 presents the 20 refined indicators produced from the initial set of 100, which make up the *BRaVE Polarisation Indicators*.

Figure 1: BRaVE Polarisation Indicators

Category	Macro	Meso	Micro
<b>Socio-Economic</b>	State Welfare	Minority Recruitment	Individual Assets
	Segregation	Diversity Programmes	
<b>Historical</b>	Far-Right Political Influence	Lack of Representation	Individual Voting Behaviours
	Laws Protecting Minorities	Inter-Group Conflict	
<b>Cultural</b>	Lack of Transnational Identity	Lack of Cultural Mixing	Individual Perceptions of Self and Other
		Ignorance of Minority Culture	
		Restrictions on Minority Symbols	
<b>Communication-Based</b>	Exclusionary Production Practices	Polarising Communication Online	Selective Communications
	Hate Speech Legislation		
	Polarising Media Content		

These 20 factors form the framework of the BRaVE project’s Polarisation Indicators. They aim to synthesise the current literature and practice within the four areas of the BRaVE project focus: socio-economic factors; historical factors; cultural factors; and communication-based factors.

At the socio-economic level, BRaVE Polarisation Indicators touch on not just financial inequality and deprivation but the role of state welfare and minority-state interaction. The diminishing of social welfare and the erection of further barriers to support, coupled with a racialisation of the language of welfare, as governments link migration to the decline and privatisation of welfare, has fuelled elements of polarisation. Community segregation, minority recruitment and access to equal rights of employment, education and training are linked to these broader processes of racialisation, alongside access to or prevalence of diversity programmes at both state and community levels. The financial assets and support of individuals are also relevant to the likelihood of polarisation developing.

At the historical level, the influence of the far-right (both in the contemporary political environment and in the past) has been found to be relevant, as well as the representation that minority groups and opinions have at levels of governance. Politically disenfranchised individuals and groups often feel powerless and resentful of their lack of agency in remediating social disadvantage (Grossman et al. 2017). In such situations, group violence become a more attractive means of redressing perceived inequalities. The laws protecting minority groups also impact on polarisation, as states with limited or less consistently enforced hate crime and minority rights legislation are more likely to legitimise racism and community division. Individual voting

behaviours are also deemed relevant, as the likelihood of significant voting for populist parties or policies can stoke community division and trigger polarisation processes.

At the cultural level, the role of identity and perception were both found to be indicators of the prevalence and likelihood of polarisation. Articulations of identity that failed to transcend narrow, national or regional conceptualisations were understood as conducive to polarisation, with such identities exclusionary by design, hostile to alternative cultural or faith groups and communities, and framed as in direct competition with, and threatened by, the continued coexistence of other identities. Feelings of hostility towards outgroups were also bound up with feelings of victimhood and humiliation, which have been found to be powerful narratives of polarisation and means of affiliation and maintaining attachment to extremist groups (Klandermans and Mayer 2005; Khosrokhavar 2017).

Finally, on a communication-base level, exclusionary production practices, hate speech legislation and polarising media content are found to be factors for polarisation. Polarising communications also add to this, inciting individuals and enabling the creation of violent material from extreme groups across the political spectrum – Islamist groups, far-right organisations or, in some cases, governmental actors. Selective communications furthermore can direct individuals through algorithms towards incrementally extreme content or ‘echo chambers’ online (O’Callaghan et al. 2014).

These 20 BRaVE Project Indicators help us to further understand, define and identify causes of and instances where polarisation is taking place. They form broad, societal processes of polarisation which, in turn, provides the context and environment for encouraging and enabling factors of violent extremism amongst a limited number of groups and individuals. Having explored the causes and indicators of polarisation, the paper will now analyse the processes that lead to engagement in so-called ‘violent extremism’.

## 4. Violent Extremism

The rise of discussions on ‘violent extremism’ have led to a host of factors suggested as conducive to violent extremism. However, as McGilloway et al. state, there is:

*... no single cause or route responsible for engaging in violent extremism. Radicalisation was seen as a process of change, but that some may be more predisposed to being vulnerable if catalytic events/precipitating factors are present (McGilloway, Ghosh, and Bhui 2015).*

Determining such precipitating factors may be useful in theorising what conditions are more likely to push polarised groups and communities towards opportunities for violence. Again by conducting a thorough review of current literature and practice, the authors have identified factors cited as helping to created extreme political violence, which have been placed in the following four categories: a conducive environment; opportunity for violence; the cultivation of violent discourses; and the development of mobilising networks.

## 4.1 Causes of Violent Extremism

### Conducive Environment

Certain environments are found to be more conducive for the development of violent extremism within the literature and current practice. Broadly, such a conducive environment is highly polarised and faces high levels of socio-economic stresses. This can be seen in the three factors delineated here as *Community Isolation*, *Discrimination/Racism*, and *Relative Deprivation*.

Community segregation from failed or poorly implemented integration practices (Silber and Bhatt 2007; Jenkins 2007; Justice 2004) can enable the development of violence (Hoffman et al. 2007). A lack of successful strategies of integration may lead to communities failing to interact and participate in meaningful societal engagement, creating community segregation or 'enclavisation', eroding the stake that some individuals hold in society. Such segregation lays the groundwork for becoming more likely to reject societal laws and norms and to accept in their place hostile ideas and acts. A causal relationship between integration and violence cannot be assumed (Rahimi and Graumans 2015) – particularly as this approach risks ignoring structural limitations faced by Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Europe (Cantle and Kaufman 2016) and perpetuating anti-minority and anti-immigration discourse (Hoffman et al. 2007). However, segregation has been shown to contribute towards localised economic and social degradation, as well as creating 'fertile terrain for radical mobilisation' (iCoCo 2007).

Relative deprivation is also an important contributory contextual factor for 'violent extremism' (King and Taylor 2011). Relative deprivation is the perception that specific inequalities (material, cultural, social status) are both unjust and are due to specific groups, resulting in resentment and hostility (Runciman 1966; Christmann 2016). It often impacts on the so-called 'left behinds' of post-industrial society (Speed and Mannion 2017), those most poorly equipped to deal with the new information economy or competing for jobs in a globalised society with increased outsourcing and declining labour rights. This may also include individuals the so-called 'precariat' of the newly developed 'gig economy' (Standing 2014). This is found within some majority-White working-class communities facing both post-industrial decline and disproportionate austerity politics who have turned to the far right to salve concerns about wage labour and global capital, and the abandonment of traditional means of democratic engagement in favour of supporting sometimes violent confrontation (Burgat and Arqué 2017).

Racism and discrimination can also enable community violence, in a two-step process. Malicious groups focus on rights and race relations as a means of both recruiting members and increasing societal legitimacy. Meanwhile, community relations are degraded by the growth of counter-terrorism legislation in Europe that has tended to discriminate on grounds of race. Experiences of racism and discussions over racial inequality can also form a strong push factor, particularly when placed in the context of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism programmes that problematise and securitise BME communities (Fernandez, Walker, and Younis 2018; Patel 2017). This is supported by studies which show that Muslims are, for instance, far more likely to be referred to counter-terror and counter-extremism programmes than other communities (Ingham-Barrow 2018). Far-right groups, meanwhile, feed on counter-terror narratives, which can portray irregular migration, minority groups and Islamic activism as a threat.

Much of this conducive environment is comprised of manifestations of polarisation, which form significant 'push' factors towards engagement with violent group and acts. However, these factors are not enough on their own and require additional elements – opportunity for violence, extremist discourse and mobilising networks – to turn into 'violent extremism'.

## Opportunity

Whilst a conducive environment provides the widespread grievances, or 'push factors', the opportunity for violence in turn creates a set of 'pull factors'. Here, groups can set out means of redressing socio-economic and political inequalities through engagement in violent extremism, attracting individuals who feel aggrieved within contemporary societies. As well as offering a means of responding to grievances, engagement in violent extremist groups can provide positive reward – such as increased standing in local communities, financial incentives or a greater sense of self-worth and stronger identities. Such pull factors form, in some senses, a similar set of processes to what is also understood as 'opportunity structures' (Kriesi 2006; Kitschelt 1986). The three Opportunity factors are here delineated as *Political Injustice*, *Active Redress* and *Positive Reward*.

A significant opportunity factor is the perception of political injustice – often on an international level or as 'distant suffering'. The treatment of Muslims in Palestine since 1948, the Bosnian Genocide of 1995, the Iraq Invasion by the US and allies in 2003, and the lack of intervention by Western forces in Syria in the 2011 civil war have all acted as key framing loci for the recruitment of foreign fighters (Hamid 2016). Similar approaches have been used by far-right organisations, who have framed, amongst other things, the 'refugee crisis' or Islamist-justified terrorism to stoke racism at home and seek international collaboration to enable greater far-right gains. Senses of political injustice therefore act as a significant push factor, when used by groups in conjunction with existing polarisation and the promise of violence as a means of resolution.

Active Redress examines the extent to which politically extreme organisations can successfully present themselves as legitimate responses to formations of political injustice. One demonstration of this is Islamic State, offering an alternative to the political injustice in Syria (and wider Middle East) and Islamophobia in Europe, the Caliphate framing a means for redress of actual and perceived power imbalances. The credibility of extremist organisations in offering redress is therefore important in ascertaining the extent to which they can promote 'violent extremism'. Groups readily mobilise claims around existing (or perceived) intersecting divisions and inequalities amongst different groups (such as class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, gender) to attract, recruit and retain members. Joining such a group and engaging in violence therefore becomes a way of taking back a missing sense of agency (Spalek and Davies 2012; Grossman and Tahiri 2013).

Engagement with violent extremist organisations and politics may also have quantifiable benefits to the individual, or to the community(s) with which they identify. This can include greater individual standing within community or activist networks, financial or other material incentives, support from extremist networks (perhaps where state support reaches its limits), or a sense that it will advance the interests of the wider community. Engagement with violent groups can be seen as an 'occupational change process', with individuals following a 'career in terrorism' by evaluating its perceived 'reward, standing and recognition' (Pisiou 2012). The reward gained from engaging in radical violence can be in the form of physical, material, social or emotional capital (85-106) or can benefit the wider community in an act of perceived altruism (Pape 2003; Pape and Fieldman 2010).

## Discourse

On the individual level, violent extremism is also made more likely by the development of certain patterns of discourse or narratives. Exclusionary identities are here taken to extremes and violence framed as the end-point of polarisation. This is often coupled with disengagement from mainstream or more 'traditional' forms of politics and may be accompanied by psychological stresses (although the role of such factors is highly contested). The three factors identified under

the Discourse label are: *Exclusionary Identities*, *Mainstream Disengagement* and *Psychological Stress*.

Exclusivist identities form an important part in the process of moving individuals from more traditional forms of societal and democratic engagement towards loyalty to violent organisations (McDonald 2018). This can be seen, for instance, in both violent 'Islamist' groups and far-right groups – a sense of belonging found in an *Ummah* that requires an expansionist global Caliphate to be established through acts of violence (as in Islamic State or al Muhajiroun), as well as the creation of a White supremacist proto-ethno state (as in Identity Evropa or Golden Dawn) (Kenney 2018). This sense of belonging may also be coupled with 'dissonance-reducing mechanisms' and a 'just world bias' (Maikovich 2005), easing the transition towards violent behaviour, suppressing information contradictory to the group's aims and creating a group identity (Karlsen et al. 2017; Blee 2007). Individuals therefore become more able to engage in acts of violence because of their identification with in-group ideals and subjugation to organisational hierarchies. Exclusion can also lead to identity quests, visible in several statements taken from Islamic State fighters, who report the need for a sense of belonging and mission, a 'quest of significance' (Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2015) and a 'search for identity contributing to a sense of belonging, worth and purpose' which may have been lost (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008).

Psychological stress factors – including, but not limited to, personal trauma, egoistic concerns, mental health issues and highly gendered values – have been cited as promoting violent extremism (LTAI). There is, for instance, a greater prevalence of young men engaging with violent extremism than women or other demographics, and overt and often stereotyped articulations of masculinity are a mainstay within extremist literature and symbolism (McDonald 2018). Issues of globalisation alone cannot account for such trends: men have constituted roughly 83 per cent of the total number of European departees to Islamic State since 2014 (Scherrer 2018), with slick social media visuals using optics of weaponry and the battlefield to push the ideal of a strong, masculine fighter (McDonald 2018). Far-right groups similarly idealise forms of hyper-masculinity, simultaneously looking to restore conservative gender roles framed as under threat from left-wing politics, 'called upon to protect their "nation" or "race"' from greater equity and cultural diversity (Mudde 2018).

Some studies have cited child maltreatment and childhood trauma as a factor in extremism – similar to risk factors of members of conventional street gangs and other forms of violent offending (Simi et al. 2015), whilst strong mental health support has been shown to demonstrate some positive results in countering extremism, suggesting links with mental health issues. A 'potpourri of psychological theories' have developed around explanatory factors of extremism (Victoroff 2005) and attempts to determine a pathology, medical condition or single psychological profile of those more likely to be involved in violent extremism have been consistently and unsurprisingly unsuccessful (Horgan 2003). However, the history of the individual and the way in which they have overcome (or not) instances of trauma may be relevant in determining motivations for some forms of violent engagement, and certainly this represents one building block in current counter-extremism practice.

### Mobilising networks

Finally, a key route towards engaging in violent forms of extreme politics occurs through involvement in mobilising networks (della Porta 2013). These can include formalised extremist groups, underground networks or friendship groups. Key roles are played by charismatic recruiters, who build support and interest, channelling individuals towards extremist groups and networks (Kenney 2018; Kenney et al. 2013). Recruiters operate both in geographical communities and in online spaces, able to reach out through online propaganda videos or social media engagement. Violence is also supported by an antagonistic environment, in which different

groups fight over competing claims, causing individuals to become more likely to entrench into hostile conditions. The three factors delineated in *Mobilising Networks* are: an *Antagonistic Environment*; *Charismatic Recruiters*; and *Online Radicalisation*.

In an antagonistic environment, individuals, groups and communities are pulled towards extremism through the existence of competing radical milieus, as groups become more inclined towards outbidding of violence (Macklin and Busher 2018). This conceptualisation of 'reciprocal' or 'cumulative' extremism suggests that the more antagonistic groups there are – and the more active they are – the somewhat greater likelihood there is of violence developing. However, movement/counter-movement interactions between extremist groups do not necessarily fuel extremism nor further polarisation in the wider society. Indeed, in some cases they can result in a situation where the extremist groups become increasingly disconnected from the wider community and irrelevant, or raise wider community awareness to avoid violence (Busher and Macklin 2014).

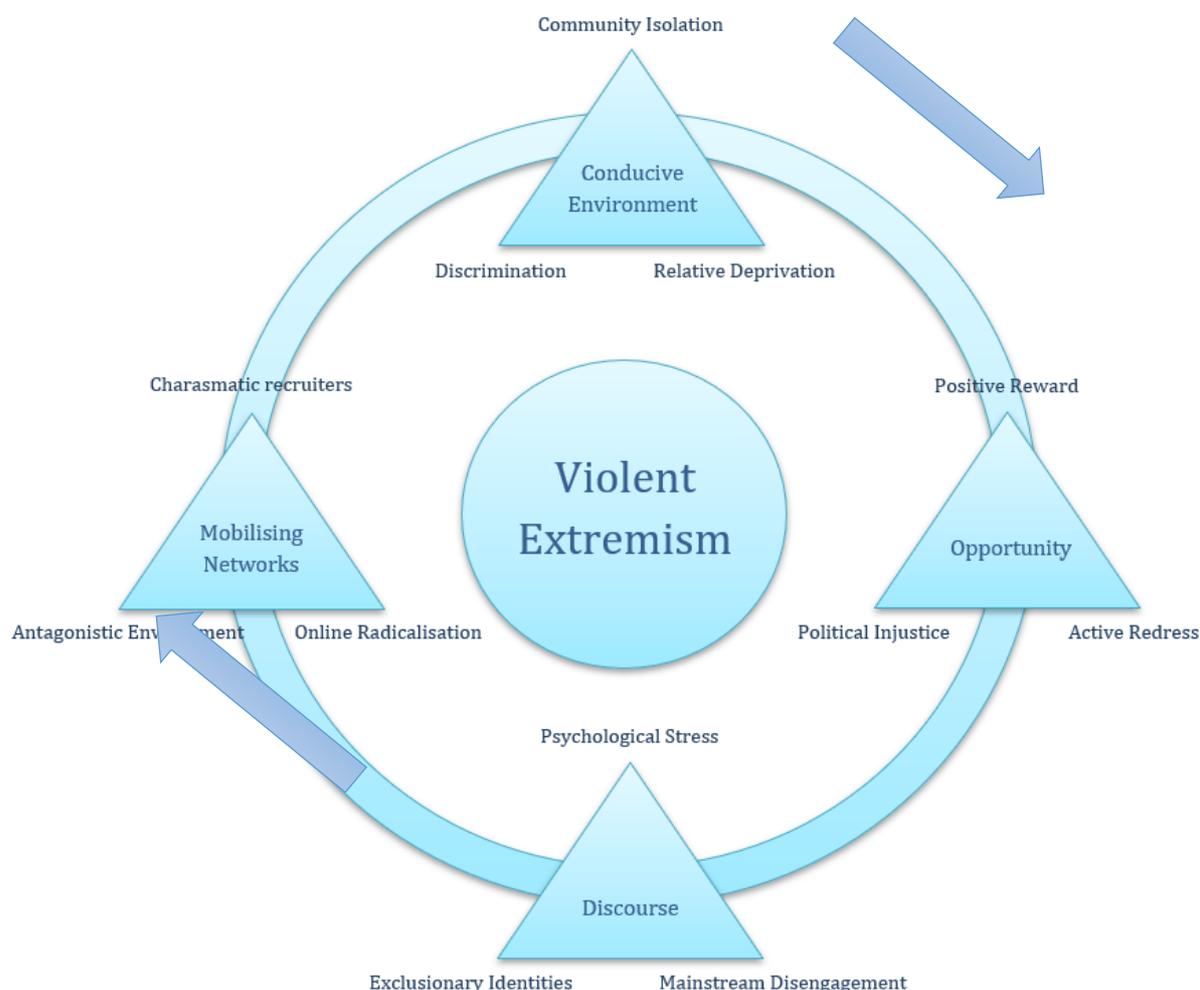
Charismatic recruiters may also be a significant factor in the growth of violence, with the presence of charismatic figures being cited as the critical factor in areas with high levels of European foreign fighters travelling to Islamic State (Soufan and Schoenfeld 2016). Such recruiters utilise their high levels of knowledge on the community and community issues, coupled with peer-to-peer engagement with often-disillusioned youth who have criminal records. Such personal forms of recruitment and engagement often enable recruiters to access clusters of friends, neighbours and family members, particularly in dense community networks (McNeil-Willson 2019). Examples range from Khalid Zerkani, Abu Hamsa al-Masri, Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary to Christopher Yaxley-Lennon (Soufan and Schoenfeld 2016).

Another factor has been the proliferation of social media, which has given politically extreme groups new means of publishing unfiltered information and disseminating them across vast international landscapes. The online sphere has therefore created a conduit beyond physical boundaries to enable wider networking and interaction between extremist groups and potential members. The way in which algorithmic social media rewards loyalty to one's own group and enables violent forms of media to be disseminated has been cited as contributing towards clashes – studies linking higher levels of Facebook usage with greater likelihood of anti-refugee violence (Müller and Schwarz 2018). The role of social media in contributing to violence thus represents an increasingly important element of network-based extremism alongside the other factors outlined here.

## 5. Modelling Factors of Violence

From these factors of violent extremism, the BRaVE project has developed the BRaVE Model of Violent Extremism, based on current literature and practice around 'violent extremism'. The conducive environment – largely comprised of a polarised society – provides the push that enables processes of violent extremism. Pull factors, here understood as opportunity, encourage individuals and groups from polarised communities and political contexts to move towards violent groups and acts. Initial engagement and continued commitment to the group is further supported through discourses that legitimise violence, whilst extremist networks enable engagement in direct violent acts. This is illustrated in the BRaVE Model of Violent Extremism:

Figure 2: BRaVE Model of Violent Extremism



## 6. Resilience

*Resilience entails the ability of people to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma.* Having outlined our approach for understanding the dynamics that lead to extremism(s) and polarisation, we now explore the role of pro-social *resilience* in responding to adversities caused by polarisation. Given the complexity of how the identified polarisation indicators and vulnerabilities to violent extremism intersect, building pro-social resilience requires an equally intersectional and multi-scalar or multi-systemic approach (O'Halloran et al. 2019). To address and mitigate the vulnerabilities that derive from polarisation necessitates a multi-level and socio-ecological framework that understands the interplay of risk and protective factors, and both mitigates vulnerabilities while building on existing strengths.

## 6.1 The Development of Resilience

Resilience has gained popularity in policy-making discourse in recent years. However, too often, its mobilisation has been limited to the idea of individual psychological resilience within a context of neoliberalism (Hall and Lamont 2013). This is a limited understanding of resilience. For just as there is no single factor involved in multisystemic trajectories of polarisation and extremism, resilience is formed dynamically, and is a process comprised of multiple push and pull vectors at micro, meso and macro levels that are context-bound.

Resilience-based approaches to addressing violent extremism focus on what is keeping people resistant to violence, rather than what is making them vulnerable to it. Instead of asking why people are radicalising to violence, the question becomes why *aren't* more people radicalising? (Grossman et al. 2017). Resilience experts have pioneered a way of thinking that shifts the burden of being psychologically resilient from individuals (Mukherjee and Kumar 2017), and focuses instead on resilience as a socio-ecological phenomenon (Ungar 2013). In this paradigm, resilience is a dynamic process (Hunter and Warren 2013) that can be enhanced or diminished by the allocation and negotiation of intersecting contextual factors and social resources (Sippel et al. 2015; Ungar 2008).

Resilience as a process entails the ability of people to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on a variety of sources of strength and resources to maintain core functioning when met with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Resilience must be understood as 'relational, subjective and contextual' (Bottrell 2009; Ungar 2004) insofar as it comprises micro (individual), meso (community) and macro (structural) factors. The dynamic interplay of such factors can strengthen or weaken resilience (Bonanno 2005). This means that the same factors that strengthen resilience might also be capable of weakening it, depending on the contexts and the circumstances.

Resilience here is a dynamic interplay of people's cognitive realities and their circumstances and society. The social-ecological framework of community resilience pioneered by Ungar et al (Ungar 2011; Ungar et al. 2007; Masten and Wright 2010) enables us to work with the idea of resilience as a dynamic, interdependent, multisystem and multi-level process, rather than a fixed set of features or attributes for individuals or groups. It analyses resilience risks and protections as 'opportunity structures' through assessing communities' adaptability and transformative capacity in response to changes, challenges and adversities, which is relevant for understanding community resilience strengths and vulnerabilities (Grossman et al. 2017). In this sense, resilience may be a feature of some violent extremist organisations. For this reason, our emphasis is on pro-social, rather than anti-social resilience.

There is now a growing body of literature that seeks to understand the pro-social resilience of people to violent extremism. A recent comparative Australian/Canadian study on Understanding Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism (Grossman et al. 2017) pioneered a quantitative BRAVE-14 measure that enables insight into the factors that make young people more or less resilient to violence. The measure comprises 5 key traits that young people need in order to be resilient:

1. *Cultural identity and connectedness*: Familiarity with one's own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms; knowledge of 'mainstream' cultural practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms if different from own cultural heritage; having a sense of cultural pride; feeling anchored in one's own cultural beliefs and practices; feeling that one's culture is accepted by the wider community; feeling able to share one's culture with others

2. *Bridging capital*: Trust and confidence in people from other groups; support for and from people from other groups;
3. *Linking capital*: Trust and confidence in government and authority figures, and in community organisations; the addressing of inequalities to support trust;
4. *Violence related behaviours*: Willingness to speak out publicly against violence; willingness to challenge the use of violence by others; acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts (ethical code of conduct for social media platforms)
5. *Violence-related beliefs*: Degree to which violence is seen to confer status and respect; degree to which violence is normalised or tolerated for any age group in the community.

This study was based upon earlier work that sought to understand the resilience of Somali communities to violent extremism undertaken by Grossman, Stephenson and Tahiri (2014) in Melbourne, Australia, by Weine and Ahmed (2012) in Minnesota, the USA, and by Joosse, Bucierus and Thompson in Canada (2015). These studies pioneered a framework for researching violent extremism in relation to community resilience. Weine and Ahmed (Weine and Ahmed 2012; Weine 2017) devised a model, Diminishing Opportunities for Violent Extremism (DOVE), to *identify protective resources* that can help mitigate the risk factors for involvement in violent extremism. These studies found that having a positive cultural image and identity, including family and community support networks, and access to traditional knowledge, or *bonding capital*, are key to being resistant to violent extremism.

At the same time, Grossman and Tahiri (2014) found that *bridging capital*, 'the capacity to link and interact meaningfully between communities with different backgrounds, values and belief systems', is just as vital. When 'bonding capital is privileged at the expense of bridging capital', in the case, for example, of families valuing their children's conformity to particular cultural norms over the relations these young people have with external communities with different expectations, they may encounter family disapproval and exclusion. In this scenario, young people within their Somali communities may experience alienation or expulsion from their family groups, placing their cultural resilience at risk. *Flexible, as well as strong, cultural identities* are critical, then, in enabling young Somalis to experience healthy cultural identity and belonging – factors that prevent polarisation and socialisation into violent extremism - in their Western contexts. Healthy cultural identities are therefore critical factors in building resilience to polarisation and extremism (Grossman 2014).

To these resources, we might add a worldview that resists exclusivism: the privileging of *us* over *them* (Grossman et al. 2016). Together with a refusal of complexity, partitioning the world into black and white sustains polarisation. In recent times, for example, far right and Islamist violent extremist groups have taken explicit advantage of misunderstandings of Islam perpetuated in dominant media, strategically deploying images that are designed to heighten antagonism towards Muslims, in order to further marginalise Muslim minorities living in West for political gain (Wignell et al. 2017). Within this milieu, therefore, resilience may be built by challenging such stereotypes through targeted complex image-making and interfaith education initiatives that enable interaction of different and culturally diverse members of the community. Together with a refusal of complexity, partitioning the world into black and white sustains polarisation. Therefore, to reduce vulnerability to polarisation, it is critical to focus on building an appreciation for complexity.

## 6.2 Factors that may build resilience to vulnerabilities arising from polarisation, including violent extremism

Akin to the factors associated with polarisation and violent extremism outlined in the previous sections, these resilience building resources also work intersectionally at macro, meso and micro scales. The table below provides a framework for conceptualising factors that may build pro-social resilience to the adversities, including violent extremism, caused by polarisation.

Figure 3: BRaVE Resilience Factors

Category	Macro	Meso	Micro
Socio-Economic	Equality of Opportunity	Equality of opportunity	Agency
	Social Cohesion	Sufficient resources	
Historical	Social inclusion	Positive Political Engagement	Community Engagement/Support
Cultural	Complex and flexible cultural identity (bridging)	Family support / collective identity (bonding)	Sense of belonging
Communication-Based	Supportive Environment	Democratic media reporting	Online resilience
		Pro-social messaging	Positive cultural image
		Trusted accurate information	

### Socio-economic factors

Equality of opportunity supports the development of resilience amongst people of all backgrounds, but particularly those from minority backgrounds who may have experienced discrimination. Governments and institutions play an important role in facilitating equality of opportunity and, where appropriate, positive discrimination to mitigate perceived inequalities and injustices. In times of labour market uncertainty, measures that enhance community support and services through the provision of adequate housing, employment and youth services are core to building pro-social resilience (Weine 2017). In the case of atomised social relations, social support networks could also be a protective resource, empowering individuals' sense of agency.

At a meso community level, linking capital is an important source of resilience, connecting communities with powerful institutions of the state. Unlike bridging capital which is mostly horizontal, linking capital is 'vertical'. (Grossman et al 2017) As above, governments can provide equality of opportunity through policies designed to mitigate inequality and ensure that there is equality of opportunity for all members of society. When there is a perception of sufficient economic and social resources shared by different groups, this can support resilience against polarization between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', and foreclose vulnerability to violent extremism.

Disenfranchised individuals and groups often feel powerless and resentful of 'their lack of agency in remediating social disadvantage.' In such situations, violence may become a means of redressing perceived inequalities. (Grossman et al 2017) Indeed, recent research indicates that

‘deviant or problem behaviour can help some individuals experience *themselves* as resilient [original emphasis].’ Developing resilience to the adversities produced by polarisation requires that we consider how a polarised view of society is inscribed in – but not simply driven by – crucial socio-economic structural divisions. Extremist groups readily mobilise claims around existing (or perceived) intersecting socio-economic divisions and inequalities among different groups (around class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, gender) to attract, recruit and retain members. Joining such a group becomes a way of taking back a missing sense of agency. Building on the need for agency, prevention work should avoid top-down processes and focus instead on work at grassroots level by credible and respected community members and mentors, especially when working with young people (Grossman and Tahiri 2013; Spalek and Davies 2012).

### Cultural factors

Complex and flexible cultural identity (bridging capital), as well as family support, collective identity and community purpose, contribute to resilience (Grossman and Tahiri 2013). Support for parenting and parent education and family involvement in education are other important protective resources (Weine 2017). As discussed earlier, bonding capital or intra-community connections may also be protective resource that enables resilience. Without extra-local connections or ‘bridging capital’, however, ‘a community runs the risk of missing out on the knowledge, resources and skills available in other networks.’ This may lead to feelings of isolation (Grossman et al. 2017).

Mere exposure to cultural difference or otherness is not sufficient to constitute ‘bridging capital’ – there must be an inter-cultural exchange of resources that are seen to benefit both or all groups before bridging capital can be established. (Grossman et al 2017). Interaction of complex and flexible cultural identities is thus vital to building resilience to the vulnerabilities caused by polarisation. Securitisation of ‘suspect communities’ – as occurred in the UK government’s ‘Prevent’ policy (Choudhury and Fenwick 2011; Qureshi 2014) – effectively shuts down complexity by reducing genuine interaction and reproducing negative perceptions of particular, usually Muslim, minorities. With the understanding that resilience is linked to those individuals and groups able to draw on multiple cultural resources and affiliations, resilience building initiatives should promote the conviviality of different cultural groups.

For all people, at a micro level, sense of belonging is a vital protective resource. Indeed, scholars have identified the need to be part of something as a key factor in motivating people join violent extremist organisations. (Barelle 2014) At meso and macro levels, in an age of heightened mobility, belonging is increasingly contested. The concept of belonging *as such* theorised by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*, locates ethical belonging as being predicated on the fact of one’s presence in a particular place, rather than belonging due to cultural, political, racial or religious ties (Agamben 1993; Gerrand 2016). This idea resonates with the work of Geographer Ash Amin, who has theorised that in order to live together in times of cultural multiplicity, contingency and precarity, ‘a narrative of community that takes the stranger as a given’ is critical (Amin 2012). Building resilience to vulnerabilities that result from polarisation will likely require greater educational resources that address what it means to belong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beyond nativism and nationalist exclusivism.

### Historical factors

As outlined in the previous section, historical factors play a role in shaping perceptions of national and cultural identity, or who belongs in a particular community. The ways in which history is narrated in schools, and represented in public discourse, can shape understandings of nationhood and determine the extent to which nations accommodate different cultural groups

and faiths. In each European context taken into account in this study, different trajectories of nation building have come at the expense of particular groups who have not been included in the imagined community. In Hungary, for example, the transition from communism to democracy arrived via state institutions in which anti-semitic and anti-Muslim attitudes were present. In Germany, awareness of Nazi crimes has enabled the building of resilience to the authoritarianism in politics.

Weine and Ahmed's (2012) research with Somali communities in the United States identified a series of protective resources that can shape historical factors. These included interfaith dialogue, religious education, youth civic engagement, youth political dialogue, opportunities for peace-building and messaging to challenge the legitimacy of violent extremism. In addition, rational and argumentative approaches to convince youth to reject extreme ideologies are less effective than engaging young people in an inclusive dialogue about national issues which includes a discussion of their desire for national pride and related emotions (Miller-Idriss 2012).

This echoes recommendations by RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network) practitioners who state that, when it comes to preventing polarisation, addressing the affective and emotional dimensions of the appeal of extreme ideologies is crucial: 'communication should not only be about facts and figures, because feelings of fear, threat and injustice are perhaps even more important' (Lenos 2016). RAN practitioners point to the importance of addressing the 'middle ground' which is vanishing to the advantage of the extremes and enhancing the commonalities and shared histories and identities in preventing and mitigating polarisation (Lenos et al. 2017).

Sense of purpose is also important to developing resilience, and can be found through adaptive as well as maladaptive means, depending on the resources available. Farhad Khosrokhavar (2017) sees the emergence of violent extremist movements occurring alongside the decline of social movements connoting political solidarity, such as communism and labor unions, which enabled empowerment of 'the lower strata of society' and provided purpose and dignity. In the absence of these, he has argued that young jihadis were vulnerable to the promises of a 'neo-Ummah', because they believe it will provide respite from their 'anomie' status as Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries of the West (2017). Inter-culturally sensitive democratic organisations that provide people with dignity and purpose are thus critical to the project of building resilience to vulnerabilities caused by polarisation, and have been shown to create relevant community and social support in mitigating vulnerabilities associated with isolation, psychological stress and poor mental health.

### Communication factors

Information and Communication Technologies can enable mechanisms of polarisation, extremism and resilience. Social networking sites, for example, enable the dissemination of extremist content to wider audiences, bringing new challenges for those preventing polarisation and ideological extremism (Aly et al. 2016, Cottee & Hayward 2011, Nilsson 2015, Joosse et al. 2015, Klausen 2015, Qureshi 2015, Ranstorp 2010, Thomas 2012; De Koster and Houtman 2008; Caiani and Guerra 2017, O'Callaghan et al 2013). Mediatised images may also reinforce or shift the limits of existing narratives of nationhood (Bhabha 1990) and public discourses about who belongs in a particular community. These can carry pro or antisocial content and therefore can augment or mitigate vulnerabilities to violent extremism and polarisation, depending on the algorithms governing the circulation of materials online.

In an Australian study undertaken with families who lost a young family member to violent extremist conflict, participants identified interculturally sensitive school programmes as being a crucial part of creating an environment to support pro-social resilience online. (Gerrand and Grossman 2018) Such programmes, they suggested, could be delivered and then recorded and published on social media as durable community resources.

The concentration of media, and the ways in which algorithms operate, are critical to democracy and also enable building resilience to violent extremism and polarisation. Given the amount of distorted and violent material that is readily accessible online, trusted accurate information, supported by a transparent online fact-checking mechanisms, might assist young people in being more resilient to polarising or violent extremist influences. This information could include youth-specific pro-social messaging regarding constructive actions that young people might take to mitigate injustices.

Given that many young people are attracted to violent extremist groups out of anger, frustration, sense of humiliation and to find belonging and purpose, this initiative could offer young people genuine alternatives to anti-social behaviour and provide links to mentors, internships and paid work with a variety of social justice initiatives as well as creative organisations set up for this purpose. A mentorship programme that connects youth with ‘someone like them, from the community they grew up in’ could also be established to provide role models and facilitate connections with youth who may avoid and feel intimidated by authorities. (2018)

Social media spaces have been studied as sites of identity-work, self-expression, sociability and branding (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2011, Papacharissi 2013). The nature of social network sites means that while young people engage in these spaces with considerable technical competence, they are also highly vulnerable to being subjected to, and manipulated by, a range of perspectives, dynamics and political agendas (Harsin 2015). Social networking sites function based on sophisticated marketing and image-based messaging. Violent extremists act to attract media coverage and to convey themselves symbolically in ways that produce intimidation and fascination (to simultaneously instil fear and attract people) (Khosrokhavar 2017).

Yet social media can also have positive effects in exposing or ridiculing extreme ideologies and extremist groups (Ellinas 2018), which BRaVE will explore through engaging into dialogue with social media developers and contribute to mapping an Ethical Code of Conduct. Both off and online platforms can be mobilised to disrupt and reframe ideologies underpinning violent and polarising messaging. In addition, digital affordances enable the dissemination of complex cultural imagery that can act as bridging capital, offering opportunities for showcasing complex cultural identities to a range of targeted digital publics. Media reporting and social media therefore can serve as critical resources that contribute to building pro-social resilience.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

This paper has aimed to determine how current literature and practice conceptualises polarisation, violent extremism and resilience, as well as to establish the relationships that exist between the terms. In doing so, it looks to create the following core concepts: *BRaVE Polarisation Indicators*; a *BRaVE Model of Violent Extremism*; and a set of *BRaVE Resilience Factors*. This creates the general framework upon which the Building Resilience against Violent Extremism (BRaVE) project and future research can draw.

By analysing current understandings of polarisation – resulting in the composition of several indicators – the paper has developed an overview of contemporary studies and tracked the evolution of the term from its nascency, through to its use in the context of the current long War on Terror. It has also created a matrix of Polarisation Indicators, which offers researchers and practitioners a basic set of guidelines from which contemporary forms of polarisation can be assessed. These have been divided into the four categories of the BRaVE project – socioeconomic,

historical, cultural and network-related factors – and mapped to see how they operate on the macro, meso and micro levels of society.

Such polarisation, as we have outlined here, forms a thick descriptor of processes occurring within certain areas of European societies. It is understood as providing the wider contributing context for far more localised processes of what has largely come to be termed (though not unproblematically) ‘violent extremism’ – instances of irregular violent acts played out to promote an anti-social agenda, aiming to further degrade and attack community cohesion and the rights of an often disadvantaged ‘out’ group or groups. However, whilst polarisation can create the conditions for violence to occur, it is important to stress that it is not a pre-requisite, nor would it be accurate to suggest a linear relationship between processes of polarisation and articulations of ‘violent extremism’.

This paper has also aimed to map the process of factors understood as contributing towards ‘violent extremism’, as illustrated in the *BRaVE Model of Violent Extremism*. It finds that the many possible factors converge around four key areas: a conducive environment (or ‘push’ factors); a sense of opportunity for action (or ‘pull’ factors); a relevant discourse which radicalises an individual’s political and societal framing; and mobilising networks that enable this to transition into violent forms of action. Such a model offers the opportunity to consider how mechanisms of societal polarisation transform into individual acts of violence and to view such violence as a dynamic set of processes that takes place within a political and social context.

Finally, this paper has sought to similarly delineate protective factors of resilience which can be drawn from contemporary literature and practice, in a set of *BRaVE Resilience Factors*. By building on existing studies of resilience, the paper has put forward a series of factors that may act to build resilience through approaches which account for socioeconomic, cultural, historical and network-related factors on the macro, meso and micro levels. Again, it is problematic to assume a direct link between factors of ‘violent extremism’ and practices of pro-social resilience, yet such resilience factors do aim to offer a response to the identified drivers of polarisation and ‘violent extremism’. Together, through the cultivation of psychological, economic and societal resources, these approaches form the foundation of supportive means by which communities can slow or reverse societal polarisation and localised violence.

There are, of course, limitations inherent in this approach. It is important to avoid oversimplifying the relationship between polarisation, ‘violent extremism’ and resilience, as well as to view pro-social resilience as simply ‘mirroring’ anti-social polarisation and violence. Such approaches negate the complicated array of factors that can lead (or not) to violence and risk enabling unethical predictive or ‘precrime’ approaches to violence which have characterised some of the more problematic elements of preventative counter-extremism (McNeil-Willson 2017a). Furthermore, the expansion of counterterrorism discussions to include polarisation and resilience can create as many problems as solutions, adding an inappropriate security lens on social, economic or political issues and amplifying oppressive narratives from the long War on Terror.

The attempt to map the current literature and practice, however, does offer an important opportunity to further understand how polarisation, ‘violent extremism’ and resilience are currently understood by researchers, policymakers and practitioners. This is an important exercise, not necessarily in determining definitively the processes involved in the promotion and countering of violence but rather in providing a more enhanced foundation for further research into the interplay between discussions of ‘extremism’ and counter-extremism in contemporary European societies. Concerns around terrorism and the rise of politically divisive and exclusionary groups and discourses represent a highly visible discussion in Europe, and the responses that are developed have implications for community cohesion, minority integration and a vast swathe of human and civil rights.

This paper has looked to take a step closer to understanding the current state of play – both within sections of society suffering from polarisation and experiencing instances of ‘violent extremism’, as well as within current counter-extremism and resilience-promoting responses. This helps to inform further research, discussion and practice on polarisation and ‘violent extremism’, offering the opportunity to replicate, refine, challenge or rebuild societal responses from a far more significant vantage point.

## 8. Suggestions for Further Research

The paper has furthermore highlighted significant areas that are under researched with regards to polarisation, violent extremism and resilience in Europe.

Firstly, with regards to polarisation, it represents a still emerging framework of analysis for understanding violent extremism. Whilst the BRaVE project is, perhaps, an important early step, the processes that drive polarisation and its impact over time and between national contexts requires significantly more long-term analysis and study. Research on processes of polarisation within a temporal context is, currently, greatly lacking as research had either focused on socio-economic inequality or on political polarisation without addressing the linkages between these levels and their impact on processes of violent extremism and violent radicalisation.

The impact that societal polarisation has on the factors that produce it are also important to understand – how does societal polarisation in turn alter the factors that have brought it into being? For instance, what is the relationship between polarisation and heightening socio-economic inequality or disinformation on social networking platforms, once polarisation has taken hold? The problems of polarisation and violent extremism remain fast evolving, constantly moving targets for analysis, and ascertaining with a degree of precision their interaction with society has proven difficult.

Secondly, on violent extremism, there are severe limitations in the way in which it is understood as interacting with policy. The relationship between violent extremism and policy is still largely conceptualised as travelling in one direction: the policy *responds* to violent extremism. But, as counter-extremism projects take root, more is needed to understand how violent extremist groups respond in turn, adapting to policy to become more prone to violence or demobilisation, depending on the interactions that occur and how they take place.

This requires careful and considered reflexion both on how state policy can have unintended impacts on extremist groups (even those that it does not target), as well as the malleability of violent extremist groups. Even the act of determining a group to be ‘extremist’ can have significant implications for the tactics that such groups chose to pursue. Furthermore, we still lack significant detail on the aims of counter-extremism, the limits that projects should have and how we measure successful or unsuccessful counter-extremism.

Finally, with regards to resilience, there is still limited research which seeks to use resilience effectively in a European context. Resilience has been studied more in the domain of psychology or in the context of the 2009 financial crisis as resilience of people in the face of economic adversity. The research reviewed in this paper points to important directions but there are many gaps to be filled particularly within the European context. It should also be noted that sociological work on resilience has looked at communities within countries with developing economies. This has created too elaborate of a division between Europe and the Global South, despite both areas suffering from often overlapping societal trends and security concerns. An area of concern for the

future and that is so far poorly understood concerns the role of the climate crisis in exacerbating existing vulnerabilities further contributing to polarisation and violent extremism. How does addressing socio-economic issues and environmental sustainability, for instance, change the capacity for violent extremist organisations to operate? Furthermore, in an age of automation, the internet of things is likely to further complicate our understanding of regionality, and the relationship between polarisation, violent extremism and resilience. Developing frameworks for building pro-social resilience at micro, meso and macro scales, and applying these to cross-regional case studies, is thus an urgent priority.

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