



Building Resilience against Violent
Extremism and Polarisation

The role of socio-economic inequalities in polarisation and violent extremism

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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

Background and Introduction to the discussion paper (D7.1.)

BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) is an EU Horizon 2020-funded research project focused on understanding the factors that drive polarisation and (violent) extremism in European societies, as well as identifying strategies in response that build resilient communities. Work Package 7 (WP7) of the project is particularly concerned with ‘Polarisation and Extreme Ideologies: the Role of Socio-Economic Inequalities.’

The purpose of this short paper is to begin to think through the connections between polarisation and extremism, particularly in view of social and economic inequality. We are keen to highlight the role of crises because they often strain preexisting socio-economic divisions and because, at time of writing, we find ourselves in an unprecedented global health crisis that will have far-reaching and long-lasting social and economic impacts.

DISCUSSION

Inequality as a factor behind polarisation and violent extremism

Polarisation is a much-cited concept in understanding contemporary socio-politics, especially the rise of populist politics and its impacts on our societies. In the BRaVE project it is interpreted as a “thick and descriptive context of factors which are conducive for and coexist alongside drivers of what is broadly termed as ‘violent extremism’” (McNeil-Willson *et al.* 2019: 5). The concept of polarisation was originally developed to refer to the unequal distribution of income (socio-economic polarisation). It has also been used to analyse party systems and voting patterns (political or partisan polarisation), especially important in the current political climate of rising political extremism and polarisation of voters. Recently, the concept has been used to refer to the phenomenon of creating a security threat (securitising understanding of polarisation) by articulations of different kinds of polarisation: “the exacerbation of political, social, and cultural cleavages and inequalities” that creates or may create the context of violent extremism (McNeil-Willson *et al.* 2019: 7). Explanations about the relationship between polarisation and socio-economic inequality vary. On the one hand, demand side theories (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2016) emphasise the impact of globalisation, cultural modernisation, and the post-industrial economy that have created the ‘losers of globalisation,’ the ‘left-behinds’ who are particularly vulnerable in economic terms and are also prone to support populist politics. They are attracted by populists who speak to the conflicts demarcated by various cleavages and inequalities. On the other hand, supply side theories—which are analogous to ‘pull factors’ (McNeil-Willson *et al.* 2019: 16) and

‘opportunity structures’ (Kitschelt 1986)—examine the susceptibility to polarisation and appeal of extremism. Engaging in extremism not only presents a means to redress grievances, but can also “provide positive reward – such as increased standing in local communities, financial incentives or a greater sense of self-worth and stronger identities” (McNeil-Willson *et al.*, 2019: 16).

Research findings (UNDP 2016, Franc and Pavlović 2018) on links between social inequalities and the inclination to engage with extremist ideologies and **violent extremism** show that inequalities alone do not explain why individuals radicalise; there are several factors that influence radicalisation into violent extremism. Inequality at the individual level (measured by education, income, and poverty rate) and marginalisation do not consistently explain the phenomenon (Franc and Pavlović 2018). Several studies into the causes of radicalisation and engagement in extremist violence have disconfirmed claims that inequality is necessary or sufficient to produce radicalisation into violent extremism (Fahey and Simi 2019; Jensen, Seate, and James 2018; Ravdal 2018). Similarly, the notion that “giving young people jobs” would prevent polarisation, violent extremism, or adherence to extremist ideologies (either Islamist or far-right) is unhelpfully simplistic: it does not address structural drivers that motivate violence, nor certain social constraints and socio-economic injustices (Christodoulou and Szakács 2018). Both polarisation and radicalisation into violent extremism are complex phenomena that can develop out of varying mixtures of socio-economic, historical, cultural, or communication-based factors, which may register at macro-, meso-, and/or micro-levels. This complexity demands a correspondingly sophisticated conceptualisation and resultant policy approach.

Pathways into violent extremism

Yet these assertions should not lead researchers and policy-makers to disregard inequality, but rather to reconsider its causal effect on radicalisation into violent extremism. Radicalisation is processual: individuals ease into violent extremism over varying lengths of time (Crenshaw 2010). Furthermore, there are distinct processes within phases of radicalisation; becoming engaged, active engagement, and disengagement likely have different causal characteristics (Horgan 2008); and within those social inequality may play different roles. This underscores a fundamental feature of radicalisation: it is causally complex. Attempts to conceive of radicalisation as a linear process composed of ‘steps’ sometimes obscure the many pathways into violent extremism. Research recognises that radicalisation is equifinal—that is, there are many pathways—and that causal conditions like inequality are multifinal—that is, they, with the concurrence of other conditions, may produce radicalisation into violent extremism; otherwise, they may not. Incorporating the expectation of causal complexity into radicalisation research is the best way to understand the role of inequality.

Existing research that adopts such an approach reveals that inequality can be a causally relevant part of radicalisation. Jensen, Seate, and James (2018) show that economic crisis and material rewards (i.e., individual-level push and pull factors), and community crisis and group biases (i.e., group-level push factors) are present in several radicalisation cases. Fahey and Simi (2019) discover that coming from a lower- or working-class background (which we can plausibly associate with inequality) was causally relevant in combinations of conditions that produced violent extremist attacks in the United States. Looking at far-right terrorism in Western Europe, Ravndal (2018) finds that socio-economic hardship is part (along with the presence of left-wing militancy and a contextual legacy of authoritarianism) of one of two causal pathways that explain high national rates of far-right terrorism and violence. These and other studies substantiate the view that socio-economic inequality can be a significant factor in the process of becoming engaged in violent extremism—though only in conjunction with other causes.

Discrimination

Looking at structural drivers, several important phenomena need to be accounted for when examining factors behind violent extremism. One is discrimination experienced by certain social groups. Concerning economic discrimination of minority groups, Piazza (2011) shows that countries where there is a higher rate of discrimination of deprived (ethnic) groups are more vulnerable to domestic terrorism. Also, while inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient) may be an important predictor of violence, other factors, such as inter-group inequality between natives and immigrants (or other social groups) (Verwimp 2016), are often the real determinant.

Actual and perceived inequality

The pushes of economic discrimination and inequality to radicalisation and violent extremism may also manifest at the level of perception, rather than material fact. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010: 799) found that prosperous, apparently well-integrated young Muslims can be attracted to violent interpretations of Islam for the need to “reconstruct a lost identity in a perceived hostile and confusing world.” This appeal of identity (re-)construction is of course not unique to Islamic extremism but rather is a common enticement to all forms extremism, particularly where structural inequality compounds identity-based grievances. Besides discrimination and inequality as objective manifestation of injustices, subjective or perceived aspects also need to be taken into account.

Several studies (Pilkington 2018, UNDP 2016, Franc and Pavlović 2018) reveal that subjective inequality is either as important as objective inequality or even more important to account for extremist views and behavior. The sense of subjective inequality is fueled by perceived injustices such as feelings of victimisation, lack of human protection (both on the individual and group levels).

In brief, looking at the role of socio-economic inequalities in polarisation and violent extremism, the following questions should be asked: How do polarising discourses address socio-economic inequalities? How are various pathways into violent extremism linked to socio-economic inequalities? How does discrimination of socially disadvantaged groups play a role in violent extremism? When and how is perceived inequality more important in violent extremism than actual inequality?

Policies targeting socio-economic factors behind violent extremism and polarisation and building resilience

Existent research shows that socio-economic inequality is one relevant part of radicalisation and polarisation processes. Because of the complex causal nature of radicalisation and polarisation investigation of any one set of explanatory factors must be related to other causes: socio-economic, historical, cultural, or communication-based and registering at macro-, meso-, or micro-levels. Yet disaggregating socio-economic inequalities is a fruitful exercise because a crucial distinction exists between *real* and *perceived* inequalities. Cases of polarisation along socio-economic divides and cases of radicalisation from impoverished or disadvantaged backgrounds exhibit the malign effect of real inequality. Polarisation along other cleavages and radicalisation of well off individuals can include important perceptions of inequality.

Socio-economic inclusion programmes

One major policy trend has been that the goals of counter-radicalisation (‘battling extremist ideas’ and ‘fighting the root causes of radicalisation’) are separated from social cohesion-building and integration agendas in order to avoid the stigmatisation of entire communities (Lindekilde 2014). Policies increasingly target the socio-economic inequalities that vulnerable groups at risk of radicalisation face—but without treating certain groups as inherently suspect (i.e., as ‘suspect communities,’ Breen-Smyth 2014). As noted in the BRaVE policy report, policies which effectively address jihadist violent extremism engage with issues of segregation and discrimination by employing complex social re-integration measures (e.g., in so-called ‘EXIT programmes’). These measures typically combine socio-economic (in particular, by facilitating new work placements), cultural, and political dimensions, thus targeting both real and perceived inequalities. It is also found that while anti-jihadist policies do take real and perceived inequalities into account, policies targeting far-right extremism, focus more on the cultural, political dimensions and rarely on the socio-economic dimension: far fewer policies were identified that address the problems arising from real or perceived inequalities behind far-right extremism.

Community resilience

Many effective programmes share some commonalities: for example, adopting a personalised approach and providing direct support to people at risk of radicalisation. While the individual approach is vital, a community pillar is also an essential part of an effective policy response. Building trust, partnership, encouraging community support are important parts in the social integration of excluded, discriminated individuals.

Other inclusion measures: universal basic income

Research and policy often recognise the need to address inclusion and inequality at a community or group level, but sometimes fail to incorporate measures that actually respond to this necessity. Part of this deficiency is the result of insufficient policy solutions: existing policies struggle to address this facet of polarisation and radicalisation issues. Universal basic income is one initiative that has been mooted as a potential solution. Yang claims that “the less our system appeals to the downtrodden, the weaker we are in the ideological war. When people give up hope in a current system, they are more vulnerable to finding hope in another system or ideology” (Dailywire 2019). Van Parisj (2014) similarly says that “We need something like a mobilizing Utopia, a sort of vibrant alternative to suicidal neoliberalism, to their murderous alternatives that are provided for some people, even by the worldwide Islamic State (...) basic income is not the whole of it but it is an essential, indispensable ingredient (...) for a sane economy, a free society (...) a society that gives real freedom for all.”

In the current crisis, universal basic income has once again come to the forefront of policy discussions as a potential remedy to socio-economic difficulties (e.g., Fanggidae and Lassa 2020, Neves and Merrill 2020, Shanahan and Smith 2020, Wignaraja and Horvath 2020). Some countries are even making attempts to introduce schemes on a mass scale (BBC 2020). While earlier experiments with universal basic income have failed in some respects—for example, producing no decrease in the unemployment rate of unemployment—one successful aspect is noteworthy: the unemployed felt much happier when receiving the basic income, a factor that maybe is worth taking into consideration when thinking about extremism and polarisation. It can be assumed that those who feel more satisfied with their life are probably much less likely to be attracted by extremists, especially in the aftermath of a global economic and health crisis.

In sum, the main issues arising from an examination of how counter-extremism policies address socio-economic inequality focus on: how do complex integration programmes tackle real and perceived inequalities? What can community building do to prevent radicalisation and extremism? What are the effective measures targeting groups at risk of radicalisation? Can universal basic income be a solution to reduce the sense of real and perceived inequality?

Questions

Based on these research and policy matters the following issues are proposed to be discussed in the workshops:

1. Inequality as a factor behind polarisation and violent extremism

➤ Polarisation and social inequalities

*What are the most important/typical polarising discourses used in the given country?
How are socio-economic inequalities addressed in these discourses?*

How does the current crisis impact these discourses?

➤ The link between socio-economic inequalities and extremist ideologies

How are socio-economic factors relevant in radicalisation into violent extremism?

➤ Pathways into violent extremism

What (typical) pathways into violent extremism can be identified? What socio-economic causes can be identified behind them?

➤ Discrimination

What roles do economic and social discrimination play in triggering violent extremism?

➤ The link between real and perceived inequalities and their relevance in extremism

How important are real and perceived inequalities in extremist radicalisation?

How does the current crisis with its negative impact on the socio-economic status of various social groups influence the risk of radicalisation?

2. Policies targeting socio-economic factors behind violent extremism and polarisation and building resilience

➤ Social (re-)integration measures (e.g., EXIT programmes)

How important are real and perceived dimensions of inequality in these programmes (anti-Jihadist and anti-far-right extremist)?

➤ Social integration policies focusing on community cohesion, community building, community development

What can community development achieve in preventing extremism? How can community leaders and authorities work together? What existing collaborations can we see and how effective are they?

➤ Universal basic income

Can basic income schemes be a solution to reduce the sense of perceived inequality? In what ways could basic income be a means to prevent further polarisation and violent extremism as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis?

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