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OPEN LETTER

Contrasting extremism and radicalisation in a syndemic society

[version 1; peer review: 3 approved]

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Abstract

The purpose of this document is to make recommendations on the necessity to transform current P/CVE policies, emphasizing the importance of a more effective involvement of Politics to contrast the spread of extremism and radicalisation in Europe. In fact, in a syndemic and post-Caliphate world, problems and challenges toward political violence are more and more institutional, systemic, and political.

According to the first HORIZON2020 PARTICIPATION PROJECT's results, the crisis of participation and the crisis of integration are closely linked to current extremism and radicalisation processes; at the same time, fragmentation, interrelation between different kind of extremism and hybridisation, request a new approach that involve, in a more effective way, civil society and political society to contrast extremism, radicalisation and terrorism.

Keywords

Radicalisation, Terrorism, P\CVE, Syndemia

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ✓ ✓ ✓

	1	2	3
version 1 06 May 2022	✓ view	✓ view	✓ view

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3. **Elisa Orofino**, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, we face a new scenario that influences the spread of radical and extremism attitudes: the **syndemic global society**. This is a society characterised from an increasing interaction between the biological and the social in disease burden as well as a complex set of inequalities, economic and social imbalances, risks, and threats at both local and global level (Horton, 2020; Singer *et al.*, 2017).

The transformation of the Jihad arena toward an increasing fragmentation and inner unrest after the defeat of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the spread of far-right extremism, the rekindling of the migration crisis, the increase of international tensions and, last but not least, the social-economic crisis and riots due to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, are the main challenges with which the "syndemic syndrome" occurs in Europe. These challenges directly or indirectly put into question the quality of our democracy because they focus on the crisis of integration and the crisis of participation (Antonelli, 2022).

Indeed, in this scenario, it is necessary to **re-think the approach toward extremism and radicalisation**. Such a rethinking must involve not just socio-technical systems (*e.g.* law enforcement agencies, social work, local bureaucracies and so forth) but also politics and ruling classes. In general, policy and politics towards extremism and radicalisation have been changed in recent years, after some spectacular and massive terrorist attacks occurred (Coolsaet, 2018; Githens-Mazer, 2012; Schmid, 2013). In addition, politics has delegated the task to contrast extremist to specific technical or bureaucratic agencies, depoliticising the problem. On the contrary, this open letter is based on three suggestions:

- First, countering extremism and radicalisation requires an understanding of both their socio-political meaning in each context and their main developmental trends. **Moving from a "reactive" and "limited" to an "anticipatory" and "systemic" approach**.

- Secondly, the coming crisis of our democratic societies is twofold: a crisis of participation and a crisis of integration. If we consider "extremism" as a set of mass socio-political attitudes toward a de-legitimation of the system, and "radicalisation" as a process that involves minorities pushing them to political violence, **the first one is the place where the double crisis manifests itself and the second one is the place of an abnormal and dysfunctional response to such a crisis occurs**.

- Thirdly, countering extremism and radicalisation, especially in a fragile and boiling society such as the syndemic one, requires a political and systemic response and not a simple restyling.

2. Methods

- A systematic review of the recent literature on the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism based on a mixed research design. This study analysed 350 international papers and reports published between 2015 and 2021 with the aim to identify main development trends in current extremism and violent radicalisation[1].

- Comparative research on P/CVE policies and strategies, at national and local level, in 8 European Countries: United Kingdom, France, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, Romania, Greece, Portugal. In addition, a special focus was on EU policies. Desk research and interviews involving experts were the methodologies for this study[2].

- Integrated research (systematic review on scientific literature and 16 semi-structured interviews with experts) on counter and alternative narratives communication strategies developed in Europe between 2015 and 2021[3].

- A study on the characteristics and the effectiveness of the main risk assessment methodologies such as ERG22+ and VERA-2r[4].

3. Main emerging trends in extremism and radicalisation in Europe

✓ **Extremism is more and more a cumulative phenomenon:**by cumulative extremism it is generally meant a radicalisation process that starts, or is amplified, as a reaction to exposure to, or contact with, an ideologically different kind of extremism. There is a "game of symmetry" rather recurring: Jihadism increases far-right; Regarding far-left extremism and anarchism, the literature highlights the role of confrontation/clashes with the police even more than with right-wing extremists (Marinone & Farinelli, 2021).

✓ **Digital cultures and gamification play an important role. They have a significant impact on the dynamics of imitation-emulation and on the consolidation of a group identity.** In addition, the increased online presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, has created a fertile ground for, amongst others, radicalisation and the spread of **conspiracy theories** (Marinone & Farinelli, 2021).

[1]The analysis referred to was carried out within D2.1 "Far-right, far-left, separatism and religious extremism; a comparative desk research on drivers" within the H2020 project PARTICIPATION. Task leader: Lorenzo Marinone, Francesco Farinelli, *European Foundation for Democracy*. Report retrieved from: participation-farright-farleft-separatism-religious-extremism-d2.1.pdf (participation-in.eu) (1/03/2021).

[2]The analysis referred to was carried out within D.3.1. "Comparative analysis of P/CVE policies and strategies" within the H2020 project PARTICIPATION. Task leader: Maria do Céu Pinto Arena, *Universidade do Minho*. Report retrieved from: Comparative-analysis-of-PCVE-policies-and-strategies-d3.1.pdf (participation-in.eu) (31/05/2021).

[3]The analysis referred to was carried out within D. 4.1. "Literature review on counter-narrative communication strategies" within the H2020 project PARTICIPATION. Task leader: Santina Musolino, *Università degli Studi "Roma Tre"*. Report forthcoming on the website of PARTICIPATION Project (https:\\participation-in.eu). Findings partially retrieved from: Rosato, 2021 RTSA_4_2021_Rosato.pdf (06/01/2022).

[4]The analysis referred to was carried out within D.6.1. "Methodologies for risk assessment" within the H2020 project PARTICIPATION. Task leaders: Francesca Manenti, Marco Di Liddo, *Centro Studi Internazionali*. Report forthcoming on the website of PARTICIPATION Project (https:\\participation-in.eu).

✓ **Radicalisation process should be understood as an event that occurs at the intersection between a personal trajectory and a permissive, or enabling, environment.** In this context, it is important underline that radicalisation is a **relational experience** that involves the construction of own social status: relative deprivation and perceived inequality are at the centre of the stage. Similarly, the inner circle (friends and relatives), and/or the extended family unit (kinship) are very important to increase or to decrease the influence of any extremism narrative (Marinone & Farinelli, 2021).

✓ **Many radicalised young people suffer from a shared lack of acceptance from the society which they live in**. Thus, youth seek refuge, acceptance and understanding within social networks. These virtual places may become the hotbeds of concrete solidarity through which youngsters may consolidate their personal identity. Lately, Europe has seen an increase in youth mobilisation with groups such as 'Generation Identity' which are starting to attract more young people across the continent. Literature highlights that the youth are drawn to these groups by a **sense of empowerment, vengeance, and opportunity to get out of poverty**. While social economic factors play a very important role in driving youth to violent extremism, **political participation** is increasingly important to them, especially when they feel they are not heard (Marinone & Farinelli, 2021).

✓ **Assembling new kind of extremism (hybridisation):** this process takes place both between 'consolidated' extremisms and through the interaction with emerging phenomena such as, for instance, the proliferation of **conspiracy theories** or new religious movements (related to the recovery of an old tradition, such as Nordic mythology, or connected to more contemporary forms of spirituality, such as the New Age). **The coronavirus pandemic has certainly provided a very fertile ground for the proliferation of some of these new forms of extremism.**The literature highlights the emergence of a phase of re-assembly of the far right, which affects cultural imaginaries as well as the more complex construction of subjectivity. Less frequently mentioned in the literature, but in line with what has been stated so far, is the hybridisation between the extreme left and environmental extremism (Antonelli, 2022; Marinone & Farinelli, 2021).

4. Preventing and countering violent extremism in Europe: general characteristics and criticalities

- **Islamist extremism** has remained a priority for several countries. This centrality can be found in risk assessment tools and strategies, used in prison and at local level around Europe (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2021).

- **The focus on the social environment**. All European countries have displayed at least some understanding of the need to focus on the drivers of radicalization at a societal level. This includes educational initiatives and the training of civil society to act on a local level. In Belgium, the UK, and The Netherlands, for example, programmes focused on tackling youth unemployment and social polarization. Even in Italy where there is a large prioritization of law enforcement approach, there is a focus on civil society and education in preventing terrorism (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2021).

- A key part of preventing and countering violent extremism is the **information exchange and communication** between stakeholders and the public. Several policies have focused on this dimension and have created initiatives to engage the public in decision making. However, as particularly in the case of Belgium, even where plans are established to enable this communication, **participation** does not include members of the public, with the notable exception of Muslim communities (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2021; Musolino, forthcoming).

- A major challenge for eventual policy was the need to design a **coherent approach** to preventing and countering violent extremism and to avoid fatigue caused by introducing too many initiatives on different levels (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2021).

- **Risk assessment tools and methodologies are excessively linked to the prison, to the male and the adult populations**. They are inadequate when it is necessary to analyse the pre-criminal space, young people, women or alienated and discriminated ethnic, religious, sexual, and social minorities (Manenti & Di Liddo, forthcoming).

5. Recommendations

According to the previous analysis, following recommendations can be suggested:

- **To contrast mass extremism**, in a preventive perspective, involving different actors, "civil society" and "politics society", is the best way to contrast violent radicalisation and violent minorities, because of "it removes the water where fishes swim".

- In a syndemic and post-caliphate world, re-thinking preventing and countering violent extremism systems is necessary, putting in the centre not just a single kind of extremism and radicalism, but a set of possible extremisms: it must move on from a one-dimensional approach, Jihad-centred, to **a multiple approach, centred on complexity, fragmentation, and hybridisation**.

- Put in the centre the awareness of **interrelation between different kind of extremisms**: the increase of one kind of extremism tends to increase other forms of extremism.

- Behind current extremism and radicalisation processes, there is **a demand for identity and subjectivation**. Consequently, at socio-political level, people request **more political participation and more social integration**, particularly young people living in marginal area or with low social status; extremism and radicalisation are often the result of a lack of both. All political actors must be aware on these critical issues.

Underlying data

No data are associated with this article.

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PubMed Abstract | **Publisher Full Text**

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✔ **Elisa Orofino**
The Policing Institute for the Eastern Region (PIER), Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK

This open letter sheds light on the main emerging trends in extremism and radicalisation in Europe. This paper highlights the importance of "cumulative extremism" as the result of the interaction of different ideologies that fuel extreme views both online and offline. The author stresses the role of gamification in the online eco-systems as well as the importance of personal experience in conjunction with a fertile ground for the development of radical and extreme views.

Besides showing an in-depth analysis of current knowledge on the phenomenon, this paper also points out the weaknesses of current risk assessment methods as being mostly related to the prison environment, to male and adult populations.

This paper stresses the need to include civil society (organisations) in the co-production of knowledge on the complexities of extremism and radicalisation pathways. The paper also insists on the importance of including social actors in the design of new risk assessment tools.

The paper is well designed and puts in evidence the main findings of the project PARTICIPATION coordinated by the same author. The paper successfully outlines the main findings and provides useful recommendations to policy and decision makers. This study is clearly and accurately presented, it cites the current relevant literature but I believe more studies could have been cited to support the author's claims, e.g. Allchorn, W. (2020) "Cumulative Extremism and the Online Space: Reciprocal Radicalisation Effects Between the Extreme Right and Radical Islamists in the UK." In: Littler, M. & Lee, B. (eds.) Digital Extremisms: Readings in Violence, Radicalisation and Extremism in the Online Space. London:Palgrave MacMillan.[1]

The study design is appropriate and the work has academic merit as it provides a snapshot of the current trends of extremism in Europe while outlining one of the main problems exacerbating it, i.e. the marginalisation of social actors.

Sufficient details on methods and analysis are provided although something seems missing. In the methods section**,** the author states: "This study analysed 350 international papers and reports

published between 2015 and 2021" but it would help to have more details on how these papers were selected, and what were the criteria for inclusion/exclusion used. Many scholars have written on the drivers of radicalisation over the years, so why and how were these specific 350 papers selected?

This paper also needs copy-editing by a professional English language editor before indexing.

Besides the minor points raised, this study is an excellent contribution to current knowledge on extremism and radicalisation within the EU context and can be used as a point of reflection for future policies and practices in the EU and beyond.

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1. Allchorn W: "Cumulative Extremism and the Online Space: Reciprocal Radicalisation Effects Between the Extreme Right and Radical Islamists in the UK." In: Littler, M., Lee, B. (eds.) Digital Extremisms: Readings in Violence, Radicalisation and Extremism in the Online Space. *Palgrave MacMillan*. 2020.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)

Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)

Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: I am currently the Academic Lead for Research on Extremism and Counter-Terrorism at the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region (PIER @ Anglia Ruskin University) and extremism and counter-terrorism have been the focus of my research since 2011. I have researched these themes in different national scenarios (e.g. Italy, Egypt, Australia, the UK) and I have published extensively on extremism, vocal extremist groups, radicalisation, Muslims in the

West and social movements. More on my publications expertise and media engagement can be found at:https://aru.ac.uk/people/elisa-orofino.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 20 July 2022

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Bartolomeo Conti
Centre d'Etudes des Mouvements Sociaux (CEMS), School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (École des hautes études en sciences sociales; EHESS), Paris, France

This open letter is clear and well structured. It presents the problem in an interesting way, clearly indicates the sources used and the general characteristics and criticism of violent extremism in Europe. The recommendations are also clear and well developed. The rationale for the open letter is provided in sufficient detail and the arguments are adequately supported by data.

We can only regret that some concepts or links are not explained further, probably due to the brevity of the document. The notion of "syndemic global society" is stimulating, but would benefit from further elaboration and clarification, as in its brief formulation it seems to be all-encompassing, at the risk of explaining nothing. As a result, the link between the syndrome and the need to rethink extremism is not so obvious.

Similarly, the idea of considering *"extremism as a set of mass socio-political attitudes toward a de-legitimation of the system, and "radicalisation" as a process that involves minorities pushing them to political violence"*, would benefit from further explanation, as this interpretation, while legitimate and interesting, is not necessarily the one retained in other studies.

The word "permissive" in this sentence is also problematic: "*Radicalisation process should be understood as an event that occurs at the intersection between a personal trajectory and a permissive, or enabling, environment*".

Beyond these considerations, which are rather an invitation to further explain certain concepts or links, the paper is clear, well written, and stimulating.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)
Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?
Partly

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?
Yes

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Prisons, radicalisation, violent extremism, violence, exit violence, integration

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 13 July 2022

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Augusto Giuseppe Gamuzza
Department of Educational Sciences, University of Catania, Catania, Italy

The open letter presents the main results of a H2020 research project highlighting the main emerging trends in radicalization studies through a multi-faceted approach (literature on the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism; comparative research on P/CVE policies and strategies; systematic review on scientific literature and 16 semi-structured interviews with experts on counter and alternative narratives; risk assessment methodologies).

The author presents the main retrieved outcomes, in comparative terms, with a good degree of clarity, unveiling relevant emerging trends (such as a multiple approaches, centred on complexity, fragmentation, and hybridisation) to design new approaches to radicalization in present times as well as stimuli for policies and P/CVE strategies. It is interesting to note the cross-validation of the main area of interest through multiple streams of information (i.e. academic and grey literature, interviews with experts). The recommendation section contains useful elements to consider as a

logic consequence of premises and the reported analytic workflow.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)
Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?
Yes

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?
Yes

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sociology of terrorism and collective action, Methodology of social research,

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.