



Evidence Briefing

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Youth Extremisms

Paths to radicalism and extremism

Following significant electoral successes for populist radical right parties and several instances of extraordinary extremist violence, perpetrated by both jihadist and extreme right actors, the attention of scholars, journalists and politicians has understandably focussed upon extremist and radical growth in Europe and, in particular, the role of youth in domestic and foreign extremist movements and violence.

In the first of our six seminars on 'Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts', speakers and participants considered the relative importance of contextual (structural, discursive) and personal ('turning points') factors in trajectories into extremism. This reflects a longstanding scholarly shift away from trying to detect offender 'profiles' and the 'roots' of extremism towards a more profitable exploration of the 'pathways' and 'routes' into, through and out of extremist activity. Seminar speakers and participants were drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines (including psychology, sociology, social anthropology, criminology, political science) and from European and North American NGOs and government agencies working in the areas of countering-violent-extremism and fundamental human rights. The discussion focussed upon how critical cross-disciplinary approaches and cross-sectoral exchange of experience can move us further beyond the search for personality 'types' to a more nuanced understanding of the interaction of structural, discursive and peer and family contexts in marking paths to radicalism and extremism across ideological and religious contexts.

Key Discussion Points

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- Radicalisation is an individual, psychological process but it takes place in specific geo-political contexts and, often, within social networks or movements. It is thus also a collective or interactional process.
- Many academic and practitioner approaches are rooted in life history based interactions with 'formers'. Such approaches may fail to capture motivations or drivers that individuals themselves are not conscious of or that emerge only from structural analysis.
- Macro politics, including foreign policy and other external conflict, must be recognised as a key driver for violent domestic extremism(s).
- There are marked national differences in trajectories into both extreme right and jihadi violent extremism. For instance, since 2013 France has seen a shift towards younger, more female and middle-class people, as well as more converts leaving for Syria.
- Routes into violent extremism vary in process and speed. 'They may involve social media driven 'self-radicalisation', be linked to authoritative figures or embedded in tangible networks or peer groups.
- Narratives of trajectories into violent extremism often contain experiences of humiliation (especially for men).
- Narratives of trajectories out of violent extremism often hinge on turning points involving moments of cognitive dissonance (i.e. kindness/compassion from 'opponents').
- Exit strategies may be too simple and focused on a single motivational pattern only. Research on extreme right activists shows distinct groups and patterns of movement in and out of groups rather than linear trajectories in followed by exit out.
- Research into extreme right activism suggests that on-line and offline activism is increasingly inseparable though our understanding of the threshold at which 'takers' become 'doers' and whether that threshold is fixed or formed situationally (as a result of online or offline interaction with others) remains an area for further research.

Implications for Policy

- The sheer diversity of trajectories into extremism and complex constellation of factors at work in each pathway means there is no one-size-fits-all solution; policies and interventions must be multiple and complex.
- A core challenge is how to individualise policy and practice whilst at the same time making it scale-able. Individualised programmes work, for example, because they seek a cognitive opening at a personal level; the challenge is to transform this into tools that work for more than a single person.
- The individualisation of policy is characteristic of a range of social policy initiatives (around long term unemployment, drug and alcohol addictions, gang cultures etc.); lessons might be drawn from other policy areas.
- It is essential to distinguish between radical or even extremist ideas and behaviours. CVE programmes must be clear whether their aim is to change violent or anti-social behaviours or the beliefs that lie behind them.
- Tackling radicalisation through cutting the 'supply' of harmful messages and supplying alternative 'counter narratives' will not work if the counter narrative is counterfactual. Counter narratives must start from an understanding of genuine grievances.
- Political rhetoric around radicalisation and violent extremism can be counterproductive by alienating 'suspect' communities and encouraging a sense of disenfranchisement and non-belonging.
- Policies are often made based on too generic or inaccurate indicators of extremism or radicalisation.
- Trajectories into violent extremism are nationally and temporally diverse; drawing lessons from other countries and other periods must be accompanied by attention to emergent, new patterns.

About the Project

Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts seminars are funded under the ESRC Research Seminar Series (Grant Reference: ES/N008812/1). The seminar series runs January 2016-December 2017 and consists of six thematically focused one-day seminars on issues concerning youth engagement in radicalism and extremism across ideological and religious contexts. The seminars bring together academic researchers, civil society actors, policy-makers, government and community actors from across Europe and North America and facilitate constructive dialogue on some of the most serious challenges facing society today.

The seminar series is co-organised by Hilary Pilkington (hilary.pilkington@manchester.ac.uk), Cynthia Miller Idriss (cynthia@american.edu), Graham Macklin (G.Macklin@tees.ac.uk) and Fabian Virchow (fabian.virchow@hs-duesseldorf.de).

Further information can be found at:

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/sociology/research/projects/youth-extremisms/>.

Registration for future seminar events can be obtained from the Seminar Series administrator, Stephanie Rinaldi (Stephanie.Rinaldi@manchester.ac.uk).

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

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The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the author and not necessarily those of the ESRC.