

A FOCUS ON

YOUTH

COUNTERING ISLAMIC,
RIGHT-WING AND
LEFT-WING EXTREMISM
IN EUROPE MEANS
STARTING AT AN
EARLY AGE

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Like most countries, members of the European Union struggle with a growing number of citizens who turn to extremism, some engaging in violent extremism. The different heritage of various nations leads to different kinds of problems with all types of extremists, from left-wing, to Islamist to right-wing. The main target group for recruitment to violent extremism is young people between the ages of 13 and 30. Despite a variety of cultural backgrounds, young people are vulnerable to radicalization in similar ways.

Older theories that link lack of education to radicalization are not adequate. It is true that many violent extremists come from poor, uneducated communities with few prospects for social advancement. But there is a second kind of radical, of both the political and Islamist variety, who is highly educated and integrated into society. Both types play a role within extremist circles, with the educated being the leaders and plotters.

But even among their different intellectual backgrounds, most of the youngsters susceptible to radicalization have one thing in common: They struggle with their identity. With the various kinds of multiculturalism in Europe, it can be hard for young people to find a solid place in society. Not only are they often alienated from “mainstream society,” but in some cases they are not integrated within their “own” communities represented by their parents’ or grandparents’ generation. Regarding ethnic minorities, the differences between first generation immigrants and their offspring born in Europe increase the sense of nonattachment. The majority of Muslims in Europe come from small towns in their country of origin. Their conservative or orthodox beliefs are challenged in the large cities of their own country, as bigger cities tend to be more liberal, no matter where on the planet. Therefore, the cultural shock for first generation immigrants is even greater. Their children, though, born in the West, are lost somewhere in between their liberal western home and the conservative views of their parents.

Regarding right-wing extremists, the main factor is their inability to reach the social status of the parents’ generation. Studies have shown that this leads to a loss of economic and social identity, which is replaced by a peer identity within radical groups. Adding to this is the uncertain economic future many young people face and their desire for strong leadership. Without visible means of climbing the social and economic ladder, young people can fall prey to a talented demagogue

Semiya Simsek, right, and Gamze Kubasik, daughters of victims of far-right violence, present a candle during a commemoration for victims of neo-Nazi violence in Berlin in February 2012.

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who addresses these problems and shows them a way into a “microsociety” in which the individual actually can do something for himself and find a useful place within his new peer group. As we will see, all prevention programs in Europe address both immediate economic issues and questions of integration into mainstream society.

Preventing left-wing extremism

The European left wingers addressed in this article are more or less a homogenous group. While the experiences of right wingers and Muslim extremists vary by locale, left-wing extremists are united by a common ideal all across Europe. And most violent left-wing extremists in Europe are not motivated by poor economic circumstances, but are part of the middle class.

Compared to the number of dangerous left-wing terror groups that operated in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s – including Germany’s Red Army Faction, Italy’s Red Brigades and Direct Action in France – there are very few left-wing terrorists today. Only the “17th November” group in Greece is still active; however, the Greek government does not have a special prevention program in place, but rather, treats them like any other organized crime group.

Left-wing extremist ideologies have their origin in the longstanding revolutionary Communist, Socialist and anarchist tradition of politically motivated violence and vandalism. It is an activist tradition that aims to overthrow the existing social order. The overall vision is a collectively controlled society without social and economic classes. Left-wing extremists see themselves as defenders of participatory democracy and human rights. They view current representative democracy in European states as a fake democracy without any real influence by the citizen, and their goal is to give power back to “the people.”

In the leftist narrative, “the elite” use the police to suppress the common man and the media to manipulate him. Global inequality and problems imposed on poorer countries by climate change are described as the results of “Western imperialism” and “multinational companies’ greed for profit.” The EU, the World Bank and other international organizations are viewed as “tools of big business,” and a widespread hostility toward Israel as “the extended arm of the U.S.” is widely shared. There is a high level of international cooperation, and the emergence in recent years of various global anti-Capitalist movements has given leftist activists a greater sense of legitimacy and motivation.

Efforts to counter this narrative – usually adhering to a one-on-one approach – resemble one another across Europe. Denmark uses the following steps in its successful program:

First, vulnerable young people are identified. Government programs and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work together with local community groups such as churches, schools and sport clubs to find kids, some as young as 12, who show openness to extreme ideas. Second, instead of lecturing the individual, police, schools, parents and other institutions engage young people collaboratively. By showing them how their behavior is seen by others using the “mirror” method (“If I witnessed the following situation, what would I think?”), community leaders try to gain their trust.

Third, the collaboration leads to a more open discussion about motives and identities. Problems with family, friends, school or elsewhere can be addressed, and young people are shown multiple ways to solve problems. The last step is strengthening the individual’s skills. Persuading a young person to leave an extremist environment is not always a realistic goal. An initial goal may be to strengthen the young person’s social skills to function in society at large and handle problems and challenges in the extremist environment. If achieved, it might subsequently be possible to motivate and challenge the young person to leave the dangerous environment and find new interests. This leads to a working method that supports the efforts of the individual without condemning him (or her) from the outside. The goal is to bring the coachee to a point where he reaches the conclusion to quit on his own. Psychologists try to correct the faulty narrative that drew the person into the group, replacing his former values with an in-depth understanding of tolerance,

freedom of thought and equality. The process sometimes takes half a year or longer, and includes supervision and support as the extremist withdraws gradually from the group. The concept is similar to the EXIT initiative described later in the right-wing chapter of this article.

In the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the state Ministry of Interior, in cooperation with the Ministry of School and Education, publishes the comic series “Andi,” which aims to prevent extremism by helping teachers illustrate how extremist thoughts can lead to terrible consequences. It is directed at students in the particularly sensitive age group of 12 to 18. Young people of this age are building their values and their identity. In their struggle to do so, some are misled by false idols. The “Andi” comic strip campaign, started in 2006, is a success story in Germany’s efforts to counter violent radicalization among youth. Three “Andi” comics address separate topics: Right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and radical Islamist ideology. North Rhine-Westphalia developed the “Andi” comics, and afterward Hamburg and Lower Saxony adopted the curriculum, in 2009 and 2010 respectively. More than 1 million copies of “Andi” comics have been printed in Germany and demand is increasing. The comic strips are also available as free app-downloads for Apple, Android and WindowsMobile. Overall, German examples of youth counter radicalization could serve as a model for other nations with similar challenges.

In “Andi 3,” the protagonist notices a friend falling under the influence of left-wing extremists and together they learn that radicalization, extremism and violence are not the solution to existing social problems. The series, with a volume each for left-wing, right-wing and Islamic extremism, enhances the ability of young people to argue in favor of democratic values.

Right-wing extremism in Germany

Since Germany’s first democracy was torn apart by left- and right-wing extremists in the 1930s, German officials have been alert when it comes to these threats. Since the end of World War II, Germany has established a stable and reliable democracy under the rule of law and has learned to defend those achievements against attacks from extremists of all kinds. But a series of racially motivated murders conducted by the neo-Nazi underground group NSU (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund) in the past 12 years have shown there still are frictions in combating extremist groups. Luckily, the NSU terrorists were a solitary case. Nevertheless, right-wing extremism became popular with young people in economically weak northeast Germany in the past two decades.

The “Andi” comic strip, published by the German government and distributed in schools, aims to promote democratic values and tolerance. It’s one of the tools to combat youth radicalization.

MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR OF THE GERMAN STATE OF NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA



In modern society, schools are the center of gravity for teaching values, especially when the parents fail to provide them. Right-wing groups, for example, provide strict rules and demand discipline, which leads to strong group cohesion. Missing this in their family or school, youngsters experience a sense of belonging. The same pattern is seen in Islamist groups, especially with German converts. Many share troubled biographies.

“Andi 1,” from the comic series mentioned previously, gives teachers a simple, comprehensive tool to show pupils why tolerance, democracy and the rule of law are worth defending. It is based on an everyday story describing examples of extremism in an average German secondary school. The comic stresses the importance of the German democratic constitutional state and the rule of law on the one hand and warns students about the symbols and methods of right-wing extremists on the other. By discussing values, norms and anti-democratic and extremist thinking, students can improve their judgment and explore. Its popularity is proven by the fact that other German states have adopted this comic book in their own schools.

The Netherlands example

The Netherlands – a nation that traditionally sees itself as tolerant – approaches matters differently. In accordance with that tolerance, racism and right-wing extremist thoughts and atrocities were regarded for many years not as political or cultural problems but as socio-economic and criminal problems. Dutch society almost refused to accept that racism even existed within its borders. The nation, however, experienced different periods of ethnic related conflict rooted in former Dutch colonies like Indonesia and acknowledges that right-wing violence and political influence have spread since the 1990s. After the 9/11 attacks, there have been diverse shifts between anti-Islamic violence and violent acts against right-wing activists. Atrocities included the murders of the Islam-critical politician Pim Fortuyn in May 2002 and columnist and author Theo van Gogh, who created a short film critical of Islam, in November 2004. In the past couple of years, Dutch society recognized right-wing extremism as a severe problem and started combating it with large scale actions involving many parts of Dutch society. Projects directed at racist and right-wing extremist youths often follow German or Scandinavian examples.

A unique approach is a project called “Stompen Dan” (“stomping with the feet”). It’s a joint venture of three southern Dutch municipalities. It addresses the so-called “Lonsdale youth” (referring to the fashion brand Lonsdale, worn to flaunt the letters NSDA in its name, which resemble the German

letters for Hitler’s NSDAP) and picks 30 individuals from this scene. They get an opportunity to organize and conduct a hardcore music festival. Over one year of planning, these young people have to think about all aspects of conducting a festival of that size. They attend seminars on conflict prevention, address any drug or racism issues, negotiate with business partners, and manage a budget of 25,000 euros. Responsibility for the festival is theirs, and the young organizers have to cooperate with each other regardless of skin color and cultural or ethnic background, which is heterogeneous by design. The project is considered a big success, not only because of the 5,000-euro surplus donated to charity, but for its ability to promote responsibility and self-sufficiency among young people learning important lessons about tolerance and acceptance.

Another project, developed in the city Zoetermeer after a couple of incidents with a group of right-wing extremist youths, tried to separate the inner circle of the group from the followers. The former were shadowed by the police and could thus be controlled in an instant, while the latter were involved in discussions by social workers. This project mainly sought to prevent followers from slipping deeper into the scene and made them talk about their problems and think about solutions. Their links to their leaders should be cut off and their isolation replaced by reintegration into society.

Nevertheless, the Dutch struggle against right-wing extremism still faces problems. One of these is neglecting structural deficits. Dutch stakeholders regard right-wing extremism as a security issue and not in the broader context of education. So the symptoms of extremist thinking, like symbols and manifestations of racist and right-wing extremism, are being fought in schools, by police and many other governmental organizations and NGOs. But the underlying reasons – for example xenophobia and grievances of any kind that lead to right-wing extremism – are rarely addressed and insufficiently researched. Another problem is that the actors engaged in combating social and security problems predominantly focus on Islamic radicalization. But though right-wing and Islamic radicalization may appear similar, the circumstances that lead to extremism are in most cases very different. What’s more, right-wing extremism in Germany may stem from different problems than those in the Netherlands. Therefore, the key to combating extremism lies in local structures. The problems originate there, so the solutions must be found there.

The EXIT initiative

In addition to prevention programs, some measures to encourage extremists to leave behind their violent pasts are also successful. Two initiatives in Sweden

and one in Germany pursue the concept of helping members of the right-wing extremist scenes in those countries quit. Founded by former neo-Nazi leaders who teamed up with law enforcement, the groups EXIT Stockholm, EXIT Motala and EXIT Germany try to identify, approach, understand and change members of the violent extremist scene. To illustrate, the methods of EXIT Germany, financed by private foundations, will be explained.

The neo-Nazi scene in Germany operates quite openly and is supported by the National Democratic Party, which survived attempts to declare it illegal. For that reason, locating and approaching individuals are easier than they are with other extremists. EXIT begins with individualized coaching by psychologists. It should be noted that some neo-Nazis share ideology but are drawn more deeply into the extremist lifestyle through peer pressure and force. The EXIT initiative works mainly with those individuals who want to break from the circle of violence and criminal acts. The program consists mainly of individual psychological coaching, like that described in the section on left wingers, and administrative support. In extremist circles, violence against “traitors” is common, so it’s hard to withdraw slowly from these groups without endangering one’s life. In some cases, EXIT helps with relocation, finding a job and, if former colleagues threaten retaliation, a new identity is created, similar to those provided by a witness protection program. EXIT Germany has helped more than 300 individuals in the past decade. Its success has inspired similar initiatives in the future to counter left-wing or religious extremism.

Muslim extremism

Like other European countries, the Netherlands and Spain aim to promote integration, combat terrorism and counter violent extremism. Both countries have significant Muslim populations but with different histories. EU member states have come to believe that the EU should and can play a role in promoting good integration policies. Recently, the European Commission launched programs to support the national efforts of member states, but the results are yet to be seen.

Given the variety of potential social, economic and security policies that could help promote integration and counter extremism, the programs presented for each country should be considered illustrative and not exhaustive. In all European countries, the number of violent extremists and their supporters within the Muslim community is marginal. Despite the fact that the socio-economic circumstances for most Muslims are not very encouraging, the vast majority are peaceful and law abiding citizens.

The Dutch approach

As a result of a history of Dutch colonization of Muslim countries like Indonesia, more than 900,000 Muslims live in the Netherlands, compared with 54,000 in 1971. They constitute about 5.5 percent of the population. One-half of the population of Amsterdam, the national capital, is Muslim. Muslims in the country are usually much younger than the general population, and the “noncolonial” Muslims, those mostly from Turkey and Morocco, are subject to higher unemployment rates, lower incomes and poorer prospects for social uplift. However, the number of Dutch Muslims completing higher education, including women, has improved significantly in the past decade. Muslims have also successfully established a small number of primary and secondary schools in their communities.

The Netherlands adopted a policy of multiculturalism in the 1970s and some analysts say conservative Muslims generally cannot bear the socially permissive atmosphere of this most liberal society in Western Europe. Additionally, second- or third-generation Muslims, who lack roots in their parents’ culture and feel adrift in the Netherlands, may be attracted to extremism.

In its efforts to promote Muslim integration (which started as early as 1994), the Netherlands tried to improve the socio-economic position of disadvantaged ethnic minorities. Through cooperation between the government and immigrants, the objective has been to promote democratic participation, combat poverty, and prevent and counter discrimination and racism. In recent years, possibly owing to a change in society’s receptiveness to immigration, the efforts were readjusted to include a newly agreed “moral obligation” of immigrants to conform to Dutch society and contribute to it. With the political changes in the country within the past few years and a right-wing party in parliament that reflects the views of a growing number of voters, integration efforts have been challenged by the extreme right of the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, the following measures taken by the government of the Netherlands since the mid-1990s have been successful. Two Muslim broadcasting corporations and government-run television stations broadcast programs aimed at ethnic minorities. To improve law enforcement, the government has established programs aimed at increasing community trust and engagement with the police. Government money is used to fund the Moroccan “Neighborhood Fathers” project, which functions similar to the U.S. “Community Watch” program. In both, local communities take responsibility to prevent crime and also extremism. Also, the police try to recruit employees from ethnic minorities to create a force governed by

cultural diversity. Like nearly all European countries, Holland requires immigrants to take tests in the Dutch language and culture to make integration easier for the new arrivals.

In combating radicalism, the Dutch use a two-pronged approach based on prevention and watchfulness. The government tries to enable vulnerable people to resist radicalization and intervenes to identify, isolate and contain radicalization. In this, local authorities play a key role. They promote interfaith dialogue and interethnic contacts, promoting especially sports programs. The government encourages Muslim communities to develop their own religious training programs with the goal of eliminating the need for “imported” imams who do not understand the culture and values of Dutch society. So-called street coaches, mainly kick boxers and martial arts experts who tend to be respected by young males, patrol areas of possible conflict and watch out for anti-social behavior. As another pillar of prevention, the government watches the Internet for extremist websites and has introduced its own websites to counter extremists’ narratives.

The most recent problem identified by Dutch society concerns integration of minorities. The gain of momentum from right-wing parties is triggering a reaction in the form of greater Muslim extremism. The country must counter right-wing extremism more effectively to prevent this from happening.

The case of Spain

Spain has also experienced a growing wave of immigration during the past two decades, mainly from South America. The Muslim community is only one-quarter of the non-Spanish population. Ninety percent of Muslims in Spain are foreign nationals.

Despite the fact that Spain was hard hit by the Madrid terrorist attacks in 2004, Spain undertook few efforts to integrate Muslims in its society. Only recently, Spain started to adopt pieces of the Dutch and the UK approaches to foster a regulated kind of multiculturalism mixed with an assimilation-style approach like that in France. In contrast to the situation in other European countries, Spanish Muslims encounter less hostility based on their faith, but they still struggle with relative poverty.

Government steps to legalize illegal immigrants working in Spain led to an easier approach to integration. Immigration and integration policies in Spain are targeted toward all immigrants, not just the Muslim minority. The Spanish government introduced a Foundation for Pluralism and Coexistence that promotes societal dialogue and recognition of minority religious groups and funds selected integration projects.

Cooperation with Muslim communities works well on the local level but hit some obstacles at the

national level. Owing to disagreement between the two largest associations speaking for Muslims in the country, high-level dialogue at the political level could not be sustained successfully.

As in the Netherlands, Spain’s central government and autonomous regions are trying to develop “homegrown” imams, an idea widely supported by Spain’s Muslims. To close the gap in education between immigrants and native Spaniards – a deficiency that opens the door to radicalization – the government introduced “bridge” classes and tutoring for children of immigrants to replace primary education missed in the originating countries. Funding is a problem in Spain’s struggling economy. In the 2009-2010 school year, only 46 public school teachers for Islamic religious education worked in Spain, even though 300 are needed.

Similar to its European neighbors, Spain also changed law enforcement policy in two directions. It admits former foreign nationals to diversify its police forces and has enacted stricter laws against the support of violence and terrorism. While other countries need to learn how to do “anti-terror” efficiently, Spain, with its experience combating the Basque terrorist group ETA, started off at a higher level.

Conclusion

Countering violent extremism is most effective when socio-economic gaps in the society are addressed at the same time. Faced with the obvious difficulties and costs of accomplishing that task, most countries prefer to prevent radicalization with the measures mentioned above. They can be effective, too, but they need coordinated activity between schools, local communities, law enforcement and governmental organizations. The EU is on the verge of coordinating member states’ efforts and will be willing to finance programs in the very near future. Within these efforts, it’s worth reminding Europe that there is a direct connection between Muslim extremism and the hostility Muslims feel in the host country from right-wing movements.

It is reassuring that various national and local initiatives can be copied throughout Europe and adopted to fight one kind of extremism or another. Understanding reasons for radicalization is the key factor, and as we can see with the Danish approach to left-wing extremism or the EXIT initiatives, listening to vulnerable individuals and building a foundation of respect before engaging in a fruitful discussion is the most promising. But the (re-) formation of a tolerant society that includes all constituent communities is equally important. Europe’s long tradition of equality, freedom and democracy formed societies that acquired one special right and duty: A tolerant society must have the right not to tolerate intolerance! □

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