

## Introduction Issue 1/2021: Polarisation, radicalisation and discrimination with focus on Central and Eastern Europe

(translated from the German original into English by Ariane Olek)

The polarisation of society has now become a buzzword that is omnipresent in any political analysis. Whether discussing Trump, Brexit, migration — and the mobility from the South to Europe, which has almost been pushed into the background again — as well as globalisation, climate change, and the corona pandemic, which has been going on for a year now ... all these diverse topics have found within them fundamental polarisations of positioning, a positioning which overshadows intermediate shades. It is remarkable how clearly the positioning on these topics overlap — those individuals who are against immigration and advocate against accepting refugees are also more likely to be in favour of national unilateral action as well as also more likely to question the reality of climate change. The positioning on these specific issues then also depends on the fundamental attitude towards the following question: What kind of world do we want to live in — an open, liberal, diverse one or a nationally-oriented one that is at least supposedly homogeneous and authoritarian? This brings into focus the critical question of equality, a concept fundamental to democracy, and closely linked to the question of pluralism, not only of interests, but also of population groups that differ in their characteristics, affiliations, and identities.

The answer to this question is reflected in basic democratic or anti-democratic attitudes, in ideas on engaging or not with minorities, and in preferences for political parties. In everyday life, it manifests itself in the devaluation and exclusion of all those who are perceived as somehow different, abnormal, foreign or unequal — perhaps because they immigrated from another country; are Jewish, Muslim, or black; are same-sex lovers or female; or have these characteristics attributed to them by others. Right-wing populism is responsive to this and therefore unerringly caters to inequality; serves dormant resentments; drives feelings of threat; and links these issues to its stance "against the system" and "against the elites" — meaning here the liberal and plural constitutionality.

Right-wing populism also addresses all those 'between the poles' of polarisation who are not quite sure what they want to say about all these issues, who sometimes share the old, outdated resentments against "others" and perhaps ask themselves whether we have not gone too far on the way to an open society. Meanwhile, other groups demonstrate for diversity and equality under the motto of "Black lives matter", cultivate a post-colonial perspective critical of racism and apply a high standard to the right terminology and language, but without necessarily critically examining their own resentments in the same way, which may also include anti-Semitism.

The polarisation along these issues divides Western-oriented societies across national borders and continents. But it also divides Europe according to majority opinion and governments. In particular, some of the young democracies and members of the European Union in Eastern Europe, countries of the former Eastern Bloc, are conspicuous for their loudly-expressed claim to national hegemony — whereby with Covid19, which in its capacity as a pandemic in effect requires coordinated action across national borders — old nationalisms are also re-emerging elsewhere, with governments or political parties that present the EU as a purely economic community rather than also as a community of values and oppose the idea of a liberal democracy and diverse society.

The Visegrád Group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) are united in their opposition to binding quotas for the distribution of asylum seekers in Europe and also reject the UN migration pact. In all four countries, conservative-right populist parties or figures are in government. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán publicly propagates the preservation of an "ethnic homogeneity"; in Poland the ruling national conservative PiS under its leader Jarosław Kaczyński fights for a "Polish and Christian" identity and refuses to accept Muslims. Poland and Hungary advocate a "Europe of fatherlands" and wish to push back the influence of the EU, actions which are clearly demonstrated by their manipulation of democracy. The EU Commission has initiated infringement proceedings against both countries due to the developments against the rule of law. In these countries, civil society organisations that advocate for an open society are also under pressure.

Media that are too "liberal" have their broadcasting licences revoked (as in Hungary); cultural offerings that are not "national" enough and are too self-critical have their funding cut (in Poland, among others); campaigns against LGBTQ\* rights are conducted and gay pride demonstrations (including parades on Christopher Street Day and demonstrations for equal rights and against discrimination) are banned or even result in violence led by right-wing extremist groups with the connivance of the police. The same is true for right-wing extremist groups who threaten to withdraw from the international convention for the protection of women against domestic violence and cut state support for women's shelters (also in Poland), and refuse to accept refugees altogether.

All this is underpinned, supported and legitimised by the mood in the population, which is sometimes more, sometimes less polarised between those who want to continue on the path towards open and liberal societies linked to a European Union that promotes these values, and those who demand a national to nationalist-folkish return or are already in the process of turning back the achievements of a liberal democracy. In Germany, too, the old dividing line between East and West is becoming apparent in the general mood and the elections. In East Germany, more people can be identified as right-wing populists, and more often represent an illiberal idea of democracy and more often vote for a far-right party such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, previously also the National

Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) at the municipal level. From a West German perspective, however, it also seems a little bit unjust to denounce the anti-democratic conditions in the East. For in West Germany, too, there has and continues to be a hesitancy to acknowledge National Socialism within institutions and in one's own family, and the smouldering resentment against various discriminated groups are not always named and addressed with the necessary clarity.

This polarisation challenges the practice of prevention work; moreover, the "big issues" sometimes obscure the view of everyday work on-the-ground, which is active "for democracy and against enmity" entirely in the sense of this journal. Beyond the crisis mode, prevention work is a constant task, even if it is not always understood in this way as much takes place in the form of time- and area- bounded projects. This makes it all the more urgent to better position individuals active in practice who cannot always fall back on established infrastructure and experience, even if this is important and desirable. This applies to many projects as well as individual actors in both the West and East. Communicating and passing on knowledge about possibilities for prevent action through online tools is becoming increasingly important in this context and also offers the opportunity for networking.

The challenges in the Eastern European countries (and also in East Germany) are once again disproportionately higher than in the West. The countries have only just experienced stretches of functioning democracy; have gone through profound transformations after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc; and presently as well as as a result of Covid19, the economic situation has significantly deteriorated. Many people struggle with the challenges of everyday life that this brings. At the same time, a young, very modern and cosmopolitan civil society has developed in recent years, especially in some Eastern European countries, which upholds the ideas and aspirations of an open society and liberal democracy and pursues them with much energy and courage. In doing so, this group faces significantly higher barriers and personal threats than in the established democracies and at least in comparison to West Germany. What is mainstream in the West — at least as far as official pronouncements and Sunday speeches are concerned, but also in terms of broader popular support — can be considered provocation in many Eastern European countries. Thus, a small band of committed people continues to battle against the mood of the majority, has to defend itself against accusations of a lack of national pride and accusations of 'Westernisation' even from the government side, and faces more and more restrictions.

In addition to the challenges of transformation, the problematic reappraisal of post-1989 (and post-1945) history also explains this mood, as Helmut Fehr describes for the countries of the former Eastern Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe in his volume "Vergeltende Gerechtigkeit - Populismus und Vergangenheitspolitik nach 1989" (retributive justice - populism and politics of the past after 1989, published by Barbara Budrich Verlag in 2016). According to his analysis, the historical reappraisal "from

above" prevented self-reflection and open debates and national grand narratives were not abandoned, but rather instrumentalised to denounce opponents from the communist era and to reinforce the current power holders as the only legitimate ones.

Against this background, the European Union continuously promotes efforts to further develop and secure fundamental democratic values. With the 1997 Amsterdam Declaration for Equal Opportunities and Against Discrimination, it committed itself to the goal of reducing inequality along the classic dimensions of difference: gender, sexual orientation/identity, ethnic origin/identity, religion or belief, disability and age. This also includes promoting the professionalization of actors in the local space and beyond (municipalities, non-governmental organisations, etc.) through the exchange of information, best practices, and the creation of European networks for prevention and intervention against discrimination and radicalisation. While European prevent groups have made significant strides, it is bitter to note that right-wing extremists are much better networked throughout Europe, and sometimes also worldwide, as evidenced by the right-wing terrorist bomber of Christchurch's links to the Identitarian movement in Austria.

The current issue of the *Zeitschrift für Demokratie gegen Menschenfeindlichkeit 1/2021* on "Polarisation, Radicalisation and Discrimination in Europe" — coordinated and edited by Beate Küpper, Luca Váradi, and Catherine Lourdes Dy — focuses on all those who fight "on-the-ground" in practice for an open, liberal and diverse society in their countries and in the EU. The issue's focus on polarisation, radicalisation, and discrimination in Europe unpacks the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and looks at the practice of prevention and intervention in the field of democracy education, group-focused enmity, and right-wing extremism. Contributors to this issue include those who have been working on-the-ground in the countries, as members of civil society organisations with a sharp and trained eye; those who work in municipalities, schools and extracurricular education as "fighters on the front line" (first-line practitioners, FLPs for short, e.g. teachers, social workers, NGOs, police) on a daily basis in regular structures, in training courses, and workshops as well as in counselling; and have in-depth insights and experience of the challenges, barriers and attempts at solutions.

The contributions (with the exception of the one by Verena Schäfer-Nerlich) were written within the framework of an EU project that is currently running until mid-2021 [project CHAMPIONS - Cooperative Harmonized Action Model to stop Polarisation in Our Nations (3/1/2019 – 6/30/2021), funded within the framework of the EU Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs — Internal Security Fund - Police; thematic field preventing and countering violent radicalization; reference 823705, ISFP-2017-AG-RAD. Partner institutions from a total of five countries (Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, and Romania) are involved under the coordination of PATRIR [Peace Action, Training & Research Institute of Romania]; most of the authors of the priority area were involved in the project. The aim of the

CHAMPIONS project is to support on-site and online networking of the above-mentioned FLPs in the different municipalities with the goal of sparking joint-action initiatives. To support this, CHAMPIONS provides support for this networking (e.g. handouts on how to initiate and organise round tables in the local area on this topic) as well as training material to help FLPs in particular who have had little to do with the topic before or have not yet dealt with it intensively. This includes, for example, the teacher who is confronted with racist incidents in the classroom or the social worker who wants to initiate a project against racism for the first time. The compilation of already existing or newly developed material can also be used, for example, for standalone workshops [freely available online at <https://www.firstlinepractitioners.com/>]. Networking within Europe can and should also contribute to exchanging approaches, possible solutions to various obstacles, and novel approaches to prevention.

Especially for the FLPs engaged in Eastern Europe, such networking can be a valuable reinforcement of their work, for which they unfortunately do not always find the necessary support locally. For this reason, this issue will be fully open-access in English online, and the German edition will also be available in print.

Personally, the above-mentioned project and this focus on Central and Eastern Europe is very important to us. The joint work across national borders in a mixed team has repeatedly opened our own eyes to what is going well and what is going badly in our countries, and has given us ideas about what could be improved. From a Western European point of view, we have learned above all to have respect and humility for the work of our colleagues who have to live and work under much worse conditions. From an Eastern European perspective, the work was also accompanied by a certain amount of shame, sadness, and sometimes despair. As a lecturer at the Central European University, Luca Váradi had to directly experience last year how a highly renowned institution was forced to move from Budapest to Vienna because, as a representative of a liberal and cosmopolitan value system, it could no longer withstand the fire of right-wing populists, and Váradi was banned from teaching. She emphasises: "As a researcher of prejudice, I never thought that I would experience political agitation and the creation of hate images first-hand in the centre of Europe. Even though the university had to leave the country, our work for an open society doesn't stop there."

The contributions in this issue's focus on "Polarisation, Radicalisation and Discrimination in Europe" begin with a brief introduction by Beate Küpper and Luca Váradi, that contains a classification of the phenomena and terminology surrounding the focal points of the issue as well as an overview of the mood in the population of the European Union in this regard. They do this on the basis of empirical findings on the voting preference of far-right parties and on (anti-)democratic attitudes with recourse to current opinion polls. The article is supplemented by short country profiles on the situation in

Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania, summarised by authors who are all involved as partners in the aforementioned CHAMPIONS project.

Verena Schäfer-Nerlich will then give an overview of the party landscape in Europe with a special focus on EU-critical voices in the context of the 2019 European elections.

Catherine Lourdes Dy has extensive experience as a migration researcher and as coordinator of the CHAMPIONS project, with close links to the EU context. Together with Max Mühlhäuser and Andrea Tundis, she focuses on the perspectives of those who, as members of minorities, are directly affected by devaluation and discrimination both on-the-ground and in the online sphere. For readers from Germany, the particularly difficult and endangered situation in which Roma in Romania find themselves, for example, is impressive here. The two co-authors are working on an online platform for networking FLPs as part of the project.

Luca Váradi invited partners from the CHAMPIONS project to an expert discussion on the situation of prevention work in their countries. Several of them work in civil society institutions in their countries that are under pressure because of their work for an open society; some are also affected as individuals. The interviews offer an in-depth insight into the challenges associated with the commitment to democracy and enmity in the respective countries, as well as strategies for dealing with them.

Kata Bálint, Dominik Istrate, and Bulcsú Hunyadi, researchers at the well-known Hungarian think tank Political Capital, add to this with a report on a qualitative and quantitative study conducted within the CHAMPIONS project in four of the participating countries. FLPs were asked about their experiences in practice "on the ground" and about their needs for prevention work.

Gyorgy Tatar, a career diplomat and chair of the Budapest-based Foundation for International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities presents a policy brief of the Central and Eastern European Cities for Preventing Radicalisation International Policy-makers Roundtable, a flagship event of the CHAMPIONS project. This online roundtable, held in autumn 2020, brought together first line practitioners and policy makers towards an exchange of views on the CHAMPIONS collaboration model and the possibilities for further network creation.

Andrea Tundis is a Senior Researcher and his areas of expertise are infrastructure protection, Internet organized crime and human safety. Together with Catherine Lourdes Dy, Max Mühlhäuser, and Ariane Olek, he presents an innovative digital platform developed within the context of the CHAMPIONS Project. Explained in detail in the article, the online platform elements 'Alert', 'Arena', and 'Training Yard', hosted on [firstlinepractitioners.com](https://www.firstlinepractitioners.com) provides tools to improve local level multi-agency

collaboration and improved information sharing for the detection and improved response at grass-roots levels to polarization and radicalization.

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From the editorial team responsible for the special Issue on polarisation in Europe,  
Beate Küpper, Luca Váradi, and Catherine Lourdes Dy.