Polarization in Europe: Positioning for and against an open and diverse society

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(translated from the German original into English by Nora Schafhausen)

Europe has democratized in many respects in recent years. This applies to the countries of Eastern Europe as young democracies, for which accession to the European Union meant a process of democratization, but also to middle-aged democracies such as Germany, which have become more democratic step by step. This can be seen, among other things, in the strengthening of rights for minorities (e.g. the granting of the right of marriage to same-sex couples); efforts to reduce discrimination, which the member states of the European Union agreed on in the Amsterdam Declaration of 1997; and in many opinion polls which, overall and over the past decades, testify to greater approval of democracy, more openness and tolerance toward various minorities among the populations in many European countries.

More recently, however, a countervailing trend toward weaker democracy has also been observed in many European countries, as well as outside Europe (e.g., Foa/Mounk 2016; Norris 2017: 14). The rise of far-right parties goes hand in hand with open agitation on the Internet, and in many European countries a loud everyday racism can be felt within the population. Hate and agitation are currently being carried out primarily in connection with the issues of migration, refugees, and Muslims, but are also directed against the equality of all people, including LGBTQ* persons and women. Anti-Semitism, which has remained dormant, is also openly erupting in violent attacks against Jews in quite a few countries, and anti-Semitic conspiracy myths frame various other issues (e.g., Krekó 2018), and this is currently also true for the Corona pandemic.

At the beginning of the Covid19 crisis, there were severe outbreaks of the old stereotypes against individuals of Asian descent, ranging from suspicious looks, physical distancing in public, to violent attacks (see also the article by Dy et al. in this issue). In some countries — especially in Germany and Austria — demonstrations took place that were not only directed against the measures taken to contain the pandemic, but also questioning the pandemic as a whole. These demonstrations were seen as provocations against the so-called "system" (used as a cipher for an open society, even if democracy is ostensibly claimed for itself at the demonstrations), infiltrated or even initiated by actors from the conspiracy scene and from the far right. The attack on the German Reichstag in fall 2020 and on the Capitol in Washington in January 2020 are preliminary highlights of the demonstration of power against liberal democracy.

Polarization: more democracy or its abolition

These developments in Europe and the world are commonly described by the term 'polarization'. This terminology is not without problems in that it may be (conditionally) accurate purely at the level of describing moods, but this is without any evaluation of democratic quality. It is easy to derive from this the assumption that polarization in itself is something negative because it endangers social cohesion, and that it is therefore primarily necessary to work against polarization and for cohesion. What is central, however, is the democratic quality of social cohesion, which includes not only the rule of law and the separation of powers but also the equal participation of social minorities. What is at stake, then, is the character of polarization —- democratic on the one hand, anti-democratic on the other. We use the term polarization in this booklet and article with this understanding.

This article provides a brief overview of phenomena that, summarized under the term "polarization", outline political developments in Europe (and beyond) and run counter to the European Union's shared self-image of a pluralistic democracy.

"Right-wing" Phenomenon area

Anti-democratic polarization and right-wing radicalization encompass a broad spectrum of interrelated phenomena ranging from everyday racism to right-wing populism, to right-wing extremism or even right-wing terrorism. They are manifested in attitudes and everyday actions among the population and through laws; are recognizable through explicit or implicit regulations in institutions; and extend to visible electoral successes of right-wing extremist parties, the actions of extremist groups, and the occurrence of hate crimes or even right-wing terrorist attacks. In our understanding, they can be identified as anti-democratic "right-wing" because they question or even reject the essential fundamental idea of democracy — the dignity and equality of all, regardless of their origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation or identity, etc. (and not because those parties or individuals who share this position necessarily locate themselves on the right-wing political spectrum).

The boundaries between the various phenomena are fluid. Thus, everyday racism can become political action when it is enacted by political parties and provides the basis or legitimation for acts of violence. The interaction can be understood as an escalation spiral, as Gordon Allport (1954) already described it for prejudice: it starts with small remarks that may even seem funny at first glance, continues with insults, via social distance — moving away and keeping away — to discrimination, and in the worst case ends in violence against individuals or even in genocide, the annihilation of entire ethnic groups and peoples. In addition, entire groups of people and their needs are ignored, simply overlooked, not consulted, and not included in decisions.

In all of this, it is important to include the divergence of perspectives of those directly affected, those not actively involved (bystanders), and actively acting perpetrators: those who hear derogatory remarks on a daily basis and are themselves affected by discriminatory experiences, see and evaluate the problem completely differently than those who are not directly addressed and who then often do not see problems of devaluation and discrimination or do not consider them to be as serious.

Gradually, social norms can shift in the process, which then make even violent behaviour seem legitimate. They are fed by the social context, which suggests what is "good, right, and normal", i.e., by the media, explicit and implicit regulations in institutions, as well as by the (perceived) attitudes and actions of close reference persons, e.g., the circle of relatives and acquaintances, the neighbourhood, but also role models from politics and the media. The importance of the local context also becomes apparent here, including the mood in the neighbourhood or community, the actions of relevant, influential persons (mayor, priest, police director, school director etc.) and the presence of local authorities. Additional factors include the existence of structures in the local area that make everyday discrimination more difficult or favour it (this includes, for example, "fear spaces" such as squares or street corners where people are mobbed, Nazi graffiti that has not been removed, and the like).

Here, a process of radicalization can take place. According to prominent radicalization models (summarized by Bodum 2011), this process begins with complaints about the individual and/or societal condition, continues as an experience of unfair treatment and blaming a target person or group for all these problems, and finally ends in distancing oneself from others and the "system" while simultaneously discrediting them. With each progressive step, extreme action becomes more likely. The process of radicalization is driven by propaganda, mobilization, and recruitment strategies of extremist groups. According to Zick (2017), this works best when they initially create a sense of "emptiness" in individuals interested in extremist messages, which is then filled with the extremist "meaning". The increasing interconnectedness of the online and offline worlds plays a key role in radicalization.

The relationship between the various manifestations in the "right-wing" phenomenon area can be depicted as an iceberg model (Figure 1). While manifestations of hard right-wing extremism and hate crime are usually clearly recognizable as right-wing extremist and may attract attention as such, the gray area of right-wing populism is fuzzy, blurred and difficult to grasp. Anti-democratic and misanthropic attitudes as well as racist and discriminatory everyday behaviour among the population are only addressed to a limited extent and are often discussed separately from other phenomena in the "right-wing" sphere.
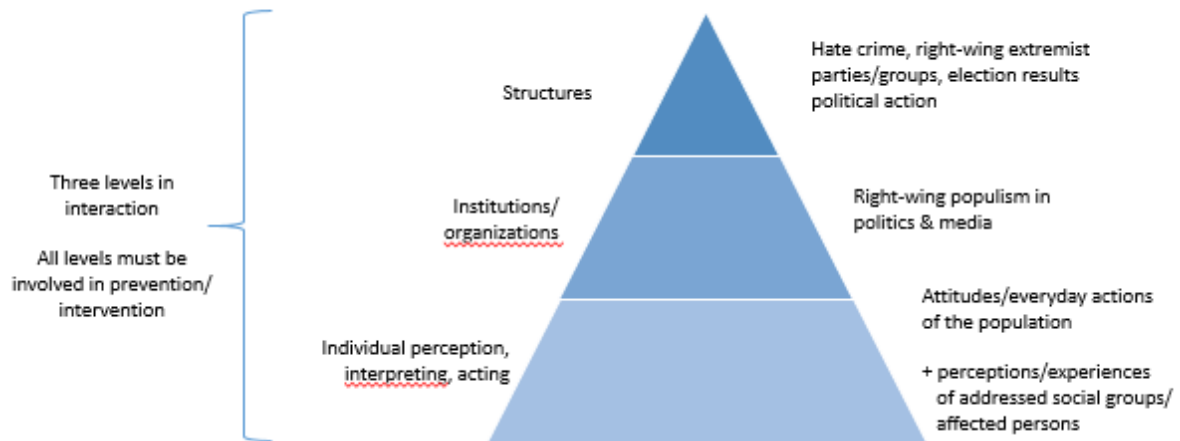
Figure 1 Iceberg model of the phenomenon area "Right" (Küpper, own development)

At the actor-level, intelligence services observe cooperation and mingling of right-wing extremist groups, motorcycle gangs, and the martial arts scene with organized crime. At the level of parties and groups, right-wing populist and far-right parties and movements of the so-called New Right, such as the "Identitarian Movement", exchange actors, ideologies, and strategies. At the level of ideology, in addition to the advocacy of a right-wing dictatorship, the trivialization of National Socialism and nationalism, the emphasis on inequality between social groups is also central, as expressed in xenophobia, racism or Social Darwinism and anti-Semitism, but also in sexism, homophobia and hostility toward socially weak and disabled persons (for a definition of right-wing extremism, see, among others, Stöss 2010). These can be summarized in a syndrome of group-focused enmity (GFE)[1] (for an overview, see, among others, Zick/Küpper/Heitmeyer 2009; Küpper 2018). This ideology is then also reflected sometimes more, sometimes less consciously, openly and consistently in the attitudes of the population.

In between lies (right-wing) populism, which picks up people's resentments toward minority groups, incites them, positions the "homogeneous and morally pure people" against "the corrupt elites", and transfers them to right-wing extremism. It works with simplification, personalization, and emotionalization; advocates a friend-or-foe mindset; relies on scandals and taboo-breaking; rejects mediation by entities such as representative representation and public media in favour of a leader who senses and implements the "will of the people"; and spreads the narrative of the people betrayed by the elites (for a definition, see, among others, Diehl 2018). Conversely, right-wing extremism seeps

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[1] GFE describes the devaluation, exclusion and systematic discrimination of people solely on the basis of their assignment to a social group on the basis of categorization characteristics such as gender, ethnic or cultural origin or because they are black, religious affiliation, sexual orientation and identity, a disability, age, unemployment or homelessness; these can be mapped in an interrelated syndrome (cf. Heitmeyer 2002-2011).

into the population via right-wing populism, which appears harmless and is easier to connect with. Here, media — analogue as well as the Internet and social media — play a special mediating role.

In all of this, the affinity for violence plays an important role, whether in the form of the suggestion of accepting violence as a means of securing one's own supremacy, as a threat or actual physical attacks against people, institutions or symbols.

Times of crisis are generally regarded as accelerators of populism and right-wing extremism (on explanations for populism, see Mudde/Kaltenwasser 2017; Jörke/Selk, 2017). Crises bring to a head conditions that were already problematic before. In this case, this applies to challenges and problems at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, i.e., with regard to individuals and their perceptions and feelings, to groups and their positions within and toward each other, and to societal developments (cultural, political, and economic):

- socioeconomic conditions and developments, including those that focus on the developments of alienation triggered by neoliberalism
- socio-cultural developments, especially those subsumed under "modernization" (individualization, liberalization, pluralization, but also disorientation and isolation)
- developments of democracies, especially encrustation or lack of representation, against which protests arise, and the understanding of what "democracy" actually is or should be
- socialization (imprints); experiences (e.g., of the transformation of formerly socialist countries); world views, basic convictions, and overarching values (e.g., authoritarianism) as well as existing resentments; political education and empathy for others.

Populism picks up on problematic developments. These include, among other things, an individual and/or overall socially poor economic situation or a cultural development toward more liberality, which now also grants minorities a say or even just questions prior perceptions and thus the outdated status of the established and privileged. Populism heightens the view of this by emphasizing disadvantage and threat, points to the evil, corrupt elites who are responsible for this, and calls for "the people" to come into their own. Translated, this means safeguarding outdated privileges and accustomed or claimed status. Where appropriate, it opens the flank for right-wing extremism and allies itself with it, since the latter openly articulates its own supremacy. Populism is thus also a self-propelling phenomenon that can overheat and boil up. Violent outbreaks are a possible consequence. The main victims are all those who are regarded as "not belonging" or "not equal".

The transformation process in the countries of the former Eastern bloc encompasses all of these aspects once again in a special way and at all levels — the political constitution, economy, culture, modernization — all were subject to changes right down to the private sphere.

European Map of Polarization and Right-Wing Radicalization

The state of democracy has a major impact on the way people interact with each other, and also provides insight into the state of institutions and mechanisms that ensure equality and fairness. Some countries in Europe have become less democratic in recent years, including Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (the so-called Visegrád countries), all of which have fallen back on the Democracy Index, while no such change is evident among the "old member states" of the EU.[2]

In the following, a brief overview of polarization and radicalization in Europe is given, based on parties of the far right (see also Schäfer-Nerlich's contribution in this issue, which differentiates between parties that are sceptical of and hostile to Europe and democracy) and attitudes in the population, as determined by opinion polls (on the perspective of those affected, see Dy et al. in this issue). Subsequently, the situation in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe is outlined again in more detail by way of example.

Parties and currents of the extreme right

Right-wing populist and far-right parties are by no means a new phenomenon in Europe. However, in the recent 2019[3] European Parliament elections, far-right parties collectively achieved greater success than ever before, garnering about a quarter of the votes cast. In France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland, right-wing parties even became the strongest party in percentage terms, even though they failed to garner a majority of all votes in each of these countries. Whereas in the past, right-wing extremist movements, groups, and parties were often ideologically distinct from one another and often acted independently, they are now increasingly converging in ideology, actors, and actions, or even joining together to form umbrella organizations that span organizations.

Antidemocratic attitudes among the population

There has been no regular, comprehensive, empirical monitoring of anti-democratic, inhuman attitudes and discrimination in the European population. However, several individual studies suggest that the vast majority of Europeans support democracy, but at the same time hold opinions that contradict the basic values of democracy. The EU-funded SIREN project (Socio-Economic Change, Individual Reactions and the Appeal of the Extreme Right; Flecker et al, 2004), which was conducted in 2004, already pointed to the widespread prevalence of right-wing populist attitudes among the

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[2]Democracy index from Freedom House: https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores [21.1.2021]

[3] Results of the 2019 European elections: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en [25.1.2021]. See also "Rise of nationalism in Europe": https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006 [22.1.2021].

population (determined for Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark and Hungary). In particular, it confirmed the reinforcing influence of a sense of social injustice and of being cheated by the working population on right-wing populist attitudes. Feelings of political powerlessness, insecurity and fear of social decline also proved explanatory.

In the Visegrád countries, the population is comparatively unconvinced about the quality of democracy in their country (about 50 out of 100 points), compared with an average of over 60 points in the countries of Western Europe. Yet people across Europe are fairly unanimous about the importance of living in a country that is governed democratically (average score of over 75 in all participating countries on a 100-point scale) (European Values Survey 2017).[4] However, the percentage of young people aged 16-26 in Europe who are convinced "democracy is, all things considered, the best form of government" is shockingly low, with particularly low scores in France (38%), Italy and Poland (46%) to the highest scores in Germany, Sweden (66% each) and Denmark (65%) and 73% in Greece.[5]

Group-focused Enmity

In a representative study in eight European countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Hungary), eight elements of group-focused enmity (GFE) were surveyed for the first time in Europe in 2008 and empirically confirmed as components of a coherent GFE syndrome for almost all countries included in the study — these elements include xenophobia, ethnic racism, anti-Semitism, Muslimophobia, sexism, homophobia, and the devaluation of the disabled and homeless (Zick/Küpper/Hövermann 2011).

Here, as in subsequent studies, the pattern in Europe from West to South to East emerges: the population of Western Europe is generally more tolerant and open toward diverse minorities and more in favour of gender equality. To a somewhat lesser extent, this is also true in Southern Europe, and only after some delay in the young democracies of Eastern Europe, which in many respects were shaped by life behind the "Iron Curtain". Only with regard to Muslims and Muslim women are Europeans more or less united in their widespread rejection.

The proportion of those who do not want to have an immigrant or a person with a different ethnicity as a neighbour is much higher in the countries of the former socialist bloc than in Western Europe (European Values Study 2017, as well as all the following findings). For example, in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, nearly half or more of respondents rejected having an immigrant neighbour, while in France, Germany, and Switzerland, less than 10% gave this answer. In these countries, there was comparatively little personal experience with immigration. However, attitudes toward religious minorities (such as Jews and Muslims) and toward ethnic minorities (such as Roma)

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[4] https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/ [20.1.2021]
[5] https://www.tui-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/junges-europa-die-jugendstudie-der-tui-stiftung/ [25.1.2021]

are also particularly negative in these countries. Rejection of Roma is particularly widespread throughout Europe. And a similar pattern emerges in the way women and their role in society are viewed. While in many older democracies of the West less than 20% agree with statements such as "The man's job is to earn money, the woman's job is to take care of the home and family", in the former socialist countries about half of the respondents agree with this statement. The same is true for attitudes toward LGBTQ* persons. Interestingly, the Czech Republic is closer to Western than to Eastern Europe in this respect. There (similar to Germany, Austria and Switzerland) almost half of the respondents are convinced that homosexual couples could be just as good parents as other couples. In Italy (similar to Hungary and Croatia), only between 20-30% think so, and the proportion is even lower in Poland (13%), Slovakia (17%), and Romania (12%).

In recent years, polarization in Europe has been ignited above all by the issue of migration and the treatment of refugees — one of the main topics for the parties of the far right. The results of the European Social Survey with data from 23 EU countries (including Heath/Richards 2019; Messing/Ságvári 2019), show on the one hand a generally more positive attitude toward migration, but on the other hand also a deep polarization regarding this issue in Europe. Especially in the Northern European countries (Sweden, Norway and Finland), immigration is widely accepted, to a medium extent in Western Europe, while large parts of the population in the Eastern European countries (including Hungary and the Czech Republic) are hostile to immigration. In this context, information about the actual number of immigrants can have a significant positive influence on opinions toward immigration. At the time of the first survey, many of these countries still had little experience with immigration, and at the same time many people from these countries were migrating to the West. However, after the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015/16, opposition to generous refugee policies increased even in formerly welcoming countries such as Austria, Germany, Sweden, and again Hungary, where many refugees arrived and/or transited. Findings from Germany indicate that here it is not so much the actual immigration as the public discourse about it that has influenced attitudes toward the negative. In regions where particularly large numbers of refugees arrived during the peak of the "refugee crisis" in 2015/16, attitudes toward migrants and refugees tended to be more positive (Ifop study by the Jean JourÉS Foundation 2015). This once again shows the importance of contact and real experience with immigration, which help to reduce prejudices (meta-analysis by Pettigrew/Tropp 2006).

Although almost all European countries now have anti-discrimination policies, actual implementation and monitoring in practice varies widely. This makes a direct comparison of rates of discrimination and hate crimes across Europe impossible. There is still a lack of uniform recording and police statistics of several countries do not even indicate a possible hate motivation for criminal and violent acts, or they are not specified. Reports from affected groups are often not listed at all. The available studies on

experiences of discrimination, hate and violence by affected groups, commissioned by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency among others, indicate a considerable extent of everyday discrimination in various areas of life (authorities, work, housing, health, leisure and public space), as well as personally experienced insults, threats or even physical violence.

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Polarization in Central and Eastern Europe - a look at selected countries

What is the situation in Central and Eastern Europe? The following country profiles provide a brief overview of polarization in Germany, Poland, Hungary and Romania, using facts and figures as examples. In the interview with Luca Váradi (in this issue), they report on the situation from the perspective of experts in democracy work.

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About the CHAMPIONs Project

The **CHAMPIONs** project is a 30-month initiative funded by the European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs' Internal Security Fund – Police line. CHAMPIONs' central action is to establish permanent offline working groups -— 'CHAMPIONs Roundtables' — bringing together first line practitioners (FLPs) of different disciplines, professions, institutions, and agencies, to jointly develop effective detection and response solutions to counter polarization, build resilience, and protect vulnerable groups in their local communities. The CHAMPIONs project supports these groups as well as other FLPs through the establishment of the CHAMPIONS online platform hosted on firstlinepractitioners.com.