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What Do We Know about Radicalisation? Overview of the Structure and Key Findings of the Focus Section

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What Do We Know about Radicalisation? Overview of the Structure and Key Findings of the Focus Section

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Extremism is nothing new, since extreme views are a feature of every political system. What is new today is the simultaneous prominence of right-wing extremist violence, right-wing populist tendencies and Islamist threats; the technological advances that have made these phenomena more dynamic and interactive and their networking more intense and global; and the diversity of countermeasures, from publicly funded prevention programmes operated by civil society groups to coercive measures imposed by the state. Such diversity is vital when dealing with highly complex interactions of individual, group-related and societal causes of illiberal radicalisation in very disparate social and regulatory spaces. Understanding the complexity of radicalisation processes requires a multidisciplinary and multi-methodological approach, where knowledge is currently scattered across disciplines and the research funding landscape fragmented.

The seven contributions in this Focus Section take stock of the state of research on radicalisation and deradicalisation. They all share a broad understanding of the contested concept of radicalisation that integrates its ambivalent history. This broad perspective is elaborated in the first contribution in a manner that does justice to both the processual logic of the term and the span from non-violent to violent. At the same time, each contribution accentuates the concept to fit its specific topic. This is the pluralism that radicalisation research so urgently needs if it is to supply adequate answers to questions of great social and security relevance and generate options for action and response.

The authors represented in this Focus Section contribute wide-ranging and interdisciplinary academic and practical expertise, with an international component. The structure and recommendations of all the contributions are shaped by discussion and negotiation processes that open up new communication channels and generate inspiration for urgently needed interdisciplinary research ideas and for the interfaces between research and practice. All the contributions discuss the German and international research in their chosen field, evaluate it, and derive recommendations (for policy, prevention, security agencies and research). For reasons of space, the contributions naturally cannot seek to cover the entirety of knowledge and every single strand of research. What they do is lay open the landscape, giving an overview of what is known and what is not. As such they pave the way for systematically comparative, empirical and international research agendas. This view is also confirmed by two commentary pieces – by Knight and Keatley and by Marsden – that contextualise the findings of the contributions in relation to the international state of research.

The basic structure of the Focus Section is as follows: In the first contribution, Abay Gaspar et al. present a critical examination of the current fixation on violence in radicalisation research and propose a programmatic distinction between radicalisation into violence, radicalisation within violence and radicalisation without violence. The next three contributions re-

view the state of research on three analytical levels: radicalisation of individuals, radicalisation of groups and radicalisation tendencies affecting whole societies. The last three contributions consider three central challenges for policy and research: deradicalisation, online radicalisation and evaluation of prevention measures. In the following we provide a brief overview of the central findings of these two sections. But first, as guest editors, we would like to express our gratitude to all those whose work made this Focus Section possible: first of all the numerous peer reviewers for their openness to our synthesising approach; their comments led to valuable improvements. We are also grateful to the authors of the two commentaries, for contributing an external perspective. Thanks also to Klara Sinha, who supported us in organising the double-blind peer review. And finally, we must also thank the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, for financing the research network "Gesellschaft Extrem" that enabled the many exchanges that ultimately led to the realisation of this publication.

1 Individual, group-focussed and societal radicalisation

In the second contribution Pisoiu et al. assess the state of research on *individual radicalisation* and show that the acquisition of extremist ideas and adolescent membership of extremist peer groups generally also fulfil (socio-)biographical functions associated with coping with critical life events, undertaking development tasks and/or accomplishing status passages. Reducing insecurities and identity conflicts and satisfying general needs such as belonging and recognition are involved here. Group-focussed identities are not completely irrelevant either. They offer individuals subjectively comprehensible interpretations for and responses to specific problems, which are then relevant in the biographical context.

As the authors point out, the use of multifactorial explanatory modelling is a relatively recent development in this area. Previously the field was dominated by single-issue approaches that for various reasons failed to do justice to the complexity of radicalisation processes; they tended to focus on personality dispositions, social circumstances and societal inequality as the primary causes of radicalisation processes. Identifying the deeper roots of individual radicalisation processes means placing the findings of existing research on personality factors in the context of biographical analyses and conducting meticulous research into contextual influences.

Individual radicalisation trajectories are almost always associated with group membership. In the third contribution Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan review the research on mechanisms of *group-focussed radicalisation*. They describe intra-group homogenisation processes leading to the emergence of a small circle of activists willing to employ increasingly excessive forms of violence in pursuit of a group ideology. These mechanisms become particular dynamic where they interact with processes outside the group. Group radicalisation processes accelerate where groups interpret subjective experiences of injustice such as discrimination, marginalisation or deprivation as part of a political (or religious) struggle. Interaction dynamics such as conflict with state authorities, repression, violent confrontation or criminalisation can also accelerate radicalisation spirals. Alongside the (more formal) interaction dynamics, cognitive, socialising and ideological processes also play a major role in group radicalisation processes. They are preconditional for understanding how the degree of homogeneity required to facilitate violent activity can be generated within a group. Especially in adolescent groups, collective patterns of interpretation arise above all through socialisation in subcultures; where these are structured as counterculture or pop culture it becomes easier for them to penetrate more middle-class milieus and mainstream discourses. In this way groups also function as catalysts for societal radicalisation tendencies.

As Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan show, the ideological elements (narratives) used by different radical groups often follow similar patterns. Shared enemies are the common denominator: modernism, universalism, "the Jews", feminism. These antagonisms generate hostility and promote hierarchical ideas about social order. Radical groups claim authority over interpretations on how society should function, what forms of coexistence are legitimate and which other interpretations must be combatted by radical means –

not least in relation to the "proper" form of family and the "correct" understanding of gender.

Meiering, Dziri and Foroutan identify narratives that bridge the ideological commonalities of the different radical groups. Bridging narratives have their own specific configurations and forms of acquisition but share substantive, structural and functional similarities and offer opportunities for coalition-building. The first bundle of narratives comprises anti-imperialism, anti-modernism and anti-universalism, all of which converge in anti-Semitism. The second bridging narrative, anti-feminism, unites ethnic nationalism, Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamist jihadism, all of which instrumentalise sexuality to connect their ethnic or religious ideas about society with the level of the individual and the family. As well as rejection of emancipatory and feminist movements, these include ideas of heroic masculinity. The third bridging narrative is the idea that acting in resistance justifies violence. This resistance dispositif is not only an ideological phenomenon, but also encompasses forms of action such as militias and sharia police. This third bridging narrative, the contribution argues, contains the largest potential for radicalisation processes. The contribution concludes with a recommendation that prevention work should pay particular heed to these bridging narratives: If political education addresses not just individual (societal) groups but also their shared ideological patterns, it will be more effective in particular contexts.

International and national radicalisation research is dominated by a focus on the level of individuals and small groups. Many of these studies treat society primarily as the social setting or environment, whose structures influence the actions and attitudes of radicalised and radicalising individuals and groups. Less common are studies focussing directly on the societal level. Yet radicalisation is not the preserve only of individuals and groups: there is also a *societal dimension*. Herschinger et al. discuss this in two dimensions: a conceptual discussion (What does radicalisation of society mean?) and an exploration of the literature on the factors promoting societal radicalisation. The latter expands the perspective to include societally radicalising factors beyond the immediate scope of radicalisation research: (problematic) trends in party politics, public opinion and media discourse, relationships between civil society groups and minorities, the handling of resistance, and the rise in (and acceptance of) violence.

Altogether the review of the state of research on the various facets of societal radicalisation shows that relevant developments – such as extremist attitudes in mainstream society, growing populism, problematic handling of migration, hostility to Islam, anti-Semitism, and exclusionary constructions of identity – have polarising effects. Political polarisation potentially promotes a radicalisation of society and leads to declining social cohesion: polarisation automatically means the othering of extremist individuals, groups, milieus and strata. What makes this problematic, the authors argue, is that radical attitudes not only reject predominant norms and bring about a norm shift towards less openness, diversity and plurality. They also increase the willingness to use violence. In this questioning of the legitimacy of the established order lies the societally radicalising effect of radicalised individuals, groups, milieus and strata. This, the contribution argues, means that it is necessary to strengthen societal resilience, above all through political and transcultural education, and to civilise the public debate.

2 Deradicalisation, online radicalisation and evaluation as current challenges

The current fields of extremism prevention and *deradicalisation* include counselling for relatives and contacts, counselling and support for (partially) radicalised persons and persons at risk of radicalisation, and exit support and stabilisation for radicalised individuals. In the fifth contribution Baaken et al. show that the terms and categories are still confused in Germany and internationally, and that this significantly hampers practical work and cooperation. Central actors from practice, research, (security) authorities and politics apply diverging definitions and disagree over what deradicalisation actually means (in practice). But, as the authors demonstrate, the consequences of this need not necessarily be purely negative. A hybrid model where state and civil society share responsibility can, with correct accentuation and constructive management of plurality, offer opportunities for extremism prevention. The same ap-

plies to the diversity of approaches and profiles in counselling. In the interests of efficient and effective deradicalisation there should, however, be agreement over objectives.

That would imply a degree of investment and programme reforms. Among others, the authors recommend expansion of regular structures (for example in education and youth work), longer project durations and clear legal frameworks for those involved in prevention work.

In the sixth contribution Winter et al. provide an overview of further current challenges in dealing with radicalisation tendencies, touching on both the general dynamics and the specifics of the tactical and strategic development of *online radicalisation*. They also illuminate the factors that lead extremist activists to continually adapt their online activities. Two core findings are derived from the literature review. Firstly, highly innovative internet strategies are very rarely found in connection with "online extremism" – although the "amateur" forms present enough challenges for politics, security agencies, civil society and researchers. Secondly, the authors largely agree that simultaneously comprehending and counteracting the corresponding offline manifestations is preconditional for successfully combatting "online extremism". Political decision-makers still tend to distinguish between online and offline spheres of extremism. However, two decades of academic research remind us that such a distinction is difficult to draw in the first place – and inadvisable if prevention strategies are actually to function. Developing meaningful prevention strategies requires a balance between positive and negative incentives, a structured form of interaction between public and private practitioners, and ongoing reflection on the legal and ethical implications of media censorship and account-blocking.

All this presupposes knowledge about the effects of prevention measures. *Evaluation* helps us to understand how the prevention of radicalisation and extremism functions in the societal context. But the expectations placed on evaluation are sometimes exaggerated, especially in relation to its effectiveness and practicability. Nehlsen et al. argue in the seventh contribution that considerable difficulties are associated with the justified interest in robust evidence of effectiveness when planning and realising evaluation studies in the sphere of deradicalisation, distancing and prevention. The idea of "evidence-based" prevention can only function if the evaluation research is also aware of the particularities, contradictions and controversies in research and practice and reflects critically on these.

The contribution weighs various approaches to evaluating the effects of prevention measures in the area of radicalisation prevention, deradicalisation and demobilisation (impact assessment). Of course there are no simple blueprints for evaluation. But the authors describe promising approaches, including realist evaluation and logical models, that appear to offer pragmatic and realistic avenues avoiding the evidence-basing dogmatism often found in evaluation research. An evaluation culture on these lines can, the authors argue, identify prevalent programme mechanisms in the project landscape and empirically investigate their context-specific effects. Finally the contribution also addresses quality and standards in evaluation research. Quality criteria help those who commission evaluation studies and those evaluated to assess the reliability and significance of the evaluation designs and findings.

The contributions all concur in their general recommendations: we know a great deal, but there is still much work to be done in the spheres of international comparison and multi-disciplinary integration. This insight has immediate consequences for the socio-political challenges facing the field: the plurality of approaches, of project funding sources and rules, and of issues should be accepted as a strength with diversity guided in sustainable directions. Given the continuity and perseverance demanded by prevention work and security policy, career paths for highly qualified experts are needed in both the practical and academic spheres. A purely project-based system built on short-termism and pilot projects is neither efficient nor effective. It can even be counterproductive if it pursues unclear or even contradictory targets via different funding programmes (or even within a single funding programme). Under these conditions it is not possible to transfer or synthesise the knowledge that is so central for developing practice and research in the field of radicalisation. Interdisciplinary, multi-methodological

long-term studies are needed. They must be capable of spanning the entire spectrum from political education through broad-based prevention to repressive security measures, and supply a comparative take on all forms of radicalisation.

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