Participation

Two-day Workshop "Understanding Different Extremism and Radicalisation Pathways and Trends"

Deliverable D2.4

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1 DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA

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Summary of the Project

The overarching objective of **PARTICIPATION** is to identify future perspectives and trends of polarisation, extremism and radicalisation as well as the social composition of the group at risk in Europe by a participatory and provisional methodological strategy, that enables us to co-create effective strategies for prevention with social actors, stakeholders and policy-makers. The specific objectives of **PARTICIPATION** are:

1. **Multidimensional modelling to understand current and future trends of extremism, polarisation and radicalisation**: to develop a holistic multidimensional model based on participatory fieldwork and mixed-method approaches, in order to better understand the different drivers of violent radical ideologies, how these are organised in different pathways and, complementary to that, which mechanisms, factors and strategies contribute to supporting non-radical attitudes and behaviours nowadays and in the future.
Sub-objective (a): Targets: analysing and discussing – using a strategy based on the principles of action research involving young people in different parts of Europe – the socio-psychological mechanisms, such as social marginalisation, alienation, and polarisation, that lead to radicalisation, with a special focus on gender, sexuality and regional differences.
These objectives will be achieved by milestones M2 ("Requirement of analysis and methodologies") [month 6], and by M6 ("Models on radicalisation and extremism") [month 35].

2. **Communication dynamics**: to develop an analysis of the online dynamics of extremism, polarisation and radicalisation by ICT tools (such as semantic analysis) and to co-create strategies to counter and prevent these phenomena with the involvement of civil society. This goal will be achieved by milestone M3 ("Communication analysis") [month 9] and D.4.5. ("Analysing different communication strategies against extremism and radicalisation") [month 25], D.4.6. ("Projecting counter-narrative campaigns involving young people") [month 33], and D.4.7 ("Methodological tools for evaluating counter-narrative campaigns and validation") [month 35].

3. **Co-creation:** fieldwork to analyse and generate strategies to counter polarisation, radicalisation and extremism with the involvement of the social actors in different social spheres. Thus, the research processes support the achievement of the following sub-objectives:
Sub-objective (b): Resilience: developing communicative tools, education approaches and community-based strategies, with the involvement and cooperation of practitioners, stakeholders and young people (with particular attention to gender balance), in order to improve the resilience of the communities and people at risk.
Sub-objective (c): Empowerment: to improve the awareness of young people and communities, as well as the society at a whole, towards the risks of extremism, hate discourses and radical ideologies, countering the processes of marginalisation, self-marginalisation, and alienation of ethnic, religious, gender and sexualities minorities.

4. **Tools:** to develop methodologies and policy recommendations to improve the action of policymakers also on the basis of the previous fieldwork.
Sub-objective (d): Methodologies for supporting decision-makers: to create databases and a systematic set of indexes and early-warnings, based on previous holistic multidimensional model and fieldworks as well as a testing phase on its practical usability involving decision-makers, in order to support them in decisions, improving effectiveness and social acceptability.
Sub-objective (e): Policy recommendations: developing a set of policy recommendations and targets with the participation of stakeholders and policymakers in order to optimise strategies and interventions against extremism, hate cultures and radicalisation, at micro, meso, and macro level of the governance process.

5. **Dissemination**: to disseminate the results step-by-step among civil society, stakeholders, policymakers, social groups, schools, experts, and scientific communities through their active involvement in discussions and forums, both on-line and off-line, as well as workshops and focus-group discussions. These objectives will be achieved by the whole work in WP7.

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List of abbreviations

Acronym	Description
CeSI	Centre for International Studies
CESIE	European Centre of Studies and Initiatives
CHAMPIONS	COOPERATIVE HARMONISED ACTION MODEL TO STOP POLARISATION IN OUR NATIONS
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LWE	Left-wing extremism
KMOP	Social Action and Innovation Centre
LGBTQ+/ LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, asexual
PATRIR	Peace Action, Training and Research Institute of Romania
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RWE	Right-wing extremism

Executive summary

The workshop aims to address a discussion starting from the first findings achieved on WP2: UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION PATHWAYS AND TRENDS of the PARTICIPATION Project “Analysing and Preventing Extremism Via Participation”.
The aim is to validate and enrich the findings gathered in the already developed tasks in order to focus on the different dimensions of extremism and radicalisation drivers and pathways.
In this workshop, the following results were presented:

- **D2.1 - Far right and far left separatism and religious extremism. A comparative research study on drivers;**
- **D2.2 - Social polarisation, extremism and radicalism: a quantitative survey;**
- **D2.3 - Gender, extremism and radicalisation: a qualitative research study.**

The workshop involved experts and coordinators of European Projects on extremism, polarisation and radicalisation. The two-day workshop was coordinated by a facilitator with the aim of sharing experiences and results to apply a system and, in this way, enrich our findings as a basis for other tasks both in WP2 and the whole project.

participation-in.eu

Participation

Understanding different extremism and radicalisation pathways and trends

10 – 11 November 2022

Department of Education, University of Catania
Via Biblioteca 4, Catania (Italy)

10 November

Aula 2, Palazzo Ingrassia, via Biblioteca, 4

10.30 **WELCOME GREETINGS**
Rosa Loredana Cardullo – *Director, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Catania*
Liana Maria Daher – *Local Coordinator, PARTICIPATION*

Far right far left separatism and religious extremism. A comparative research on drivers
Speaker: Lorenzo Marinone, *European Foundation for Democracy, Bruxelles*
Discussant: Marco Lombardi, *University of Catholic Heart, Milan*
Chair: Liana Maria Daher

11.30 *Coffee break*

12.00 Open discussion with participants, experts, and stakeholders

13.00 *Lunch break*

15.00 **Social polarization, extremism, and radicalism: a quantitative survey**
Speaker: Necla Acik, *Middlesex University, London*
Discussants: Fahrad Khosrokhavar, *CADIS, EHESS-CNRS, Paris*
Bulcsú Hunyadi, *Political Capital Institute, Budapest*
Chair: Augusto Gamuzza

17.00 Open discussion with participants, experts, and stakeholders

18.00 End of the first day of the Workshop

11 November

Aula 2, Palazzo Ingrassia, via Biblioteca, 4

10.30 **Gender, extremism and radicalisation: a qualitative research**
Speaker: Kevin McDonald, *Middlesex University, London*
Discussants: Dana Dolghin, *University of Amsterdam*
Marilena Macaluso, *University of Palermo*
Chair: Anna Maria Leonora

11.30 *Coffee break*

12.00 Open discussion with participants, experts, and stakeholders

13.00 *Lunch break*

14.30 **Roundtable on Radicalisation project in Europe**
Santina Musolino, *PARTICIPATION*
Valeria Rosato, PARTICIPATION
Davide Lauretta, *Euroguide*
Dana Dolghin, *CHAMPION*
Guido Savasta, *CEAR*
Giuseppe Dentice, *TRUST*
Chair: Robert Gianni

16.30 Concluding remarks

17.00 End of the second day of the Workshop

Introduction

The workshop *Understanding Different Extremism and Radicalisation Pathways and Trends* was held at the Department of Education (University of Catania) on Thursday November 10, 2022, and Friday, November 11, 2022.

The main purpose of the workshop was to validate and enrich the results collected by WP2 (T2.1, T2.2 and T2.3) which focuses on analysing the various dimensions of extremism and the factors and pathways of radicalisation. According to the research project, the workshop involved academic experts and coordinators of European Projects on extremism, polarisation and radicalisation.

The choice to involve mainly academic speakers/discussants stemmed from the evidence that the other WP and tasks of the project actively include stakeholders and members of civil society at various stages, and thus the comparison with contributions from other roles was lacking. Also, we thought it would be useful to create a dialectical comparison with other coordinators of similar European projects on the same topic.

The workshop was intended as a laboratory for discussing and validating the findings obtained by the three first tasks of WP2, but it also aimed at: hypothesising new visions and strategies as well as searching together for answers to the several questions that emerged from the research steps already concluded, sharing thoughts and finding common conclusions, albeit not necessarily final ones. This is why little importance was given to participants from outside the discussion, even if the audience included teachers, students, a few administrators and some members of associations in the area; however, spaces for open discussion were envisaged.

Each session of the two-day workshop was coordinated by a facilitator with the aim of sharing experiences and results, but mainly to enrich and validate findings in order to focus better on the next WP2 tasks and indeed the whole project.

The report presents the deliverables to be validated: D2.1 *Far right, far left separatism and religious extremism. A comparative research on drivers,* D2.2 *Social polarisation, extremism and radicalism: a quantitative survey,* and D2.3 *Gender, extremism and radicalisation: a qualitative research study* – highlighting the most recurring and important issues and themes discussed during the workshop.

The contents are divided into three parts in order to highlight the issues and themes stemming from the results of each deliverable, and the more relevant issues emerged from the discussion that contributed to enriching and validating the findings. The concluding remarks aim, in short, to focus on the most important outcomes of the Workshop.

Participation

Two-day Workshop

Understanding different extremism and radicalisation pathways and trends

Speakers and discussants

Lorenzo Marinone, European Foundation for Democracy, Bruxelles
Marco Lombardi, University of Catholic Heart, Milan
Necla Acik, Middlesex University, London
Kevin McDonald, Middlesex University, London
Fahrad Khosrokhavar, CADIS, EHESS - CNRS, Paris
Bulcsú Hunyadi, Political Capital Institute, Budapest
Dana Dolghin, University of Amsterdam
Marilena Macaluso, University of Palermo

Roundtable on Radicalisation Project in Europe

Santina Musolino, University Roma Tre - PARTICIPATION
Valeria Rosato, University Roma Tre - PARTICIPATION
Davide Lauretta, European Foundation for Democracy - Euroguide
Dana Dolghin, Patrir Romanian Peace Institute - CHAMPION
Guido Savasta, CESIE - CEAR
Giuseppe Dentice, Centro studi internazionali - TRUST
Chair: Robert Gianni

10 - 11 November 2022

Department of Education, University of Catania
Via Biblioteca 4, Catania (Italy)

For further information or register to the workshop
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1. Radicalisation factors and implications

It is important to distinguish between radicalisation and violent extremism, but it is difficult, nevertheless, to identify the potential violent component in a subject, which may have different nuances and may be dangerous not only to others, but also to the person him/herself. There is no universally accepted definition of either term, because there is no consensus among many parties on the definition of what is seen as radicalisation or extremism; therefore, each one can mean different things to different people; however, in general, radicalisation is the process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly radical views in opposition to a political, social, or religious status quo, while extremism is when a person or group uses fear, terror or violence to try and achieve change: radicalisation refers to a process, whereas extremism refers to a person's beliefs. Studying **radical factors** is very important for understanding the characteristics of radicalisation phenomena and how to plan preventive interventions.

D2.1 analyses both academic and grey literature using mixed methodologies. The aim of this deliverable is to provide a systematic qualitative and quantitative analysis of recent advances in the literature on radicalisation. It is based on a two-step analytical framework: first, a qualitative analysis, and second, a textual-statistical (quantitative) analysis of the existing literature.

Qualitative analysis was carried out on both academic (i.e. peer-reviewed) and grey literature: it is particularly important because it provides an in-depth understanding of how a subject is radicalised and the motivations that lead individuals to join extremist groups.

Quantitative analysis was carried out exclusively on scientific literature using Natural Language Processing Analysis. The time frame considered covers the most recent literature on the subject, published from 2015 to early 2021.

The qualitative research consists of the reading of 166 articles in which we tried to analyse in depth the various types of extremism. In the quantitative research that was carried out using textual analytical tools, it was possible to identify current themes in the literature related to extremism and radicalisation. The review is structured around four distinct but also complementary forms of violent extremism: **a) Religious extremism; b) Far-Right extremism; c) Far-Left extremism and d) Separatist extremism.**

Each of these forms was examined taking into account three main drivers, namely **micro-level, meso-level and macro-level:**

- **Micro level** is broadly defined as the level of the individual. Examples of factors and drivers working at the micro level are identity formation and issues, quality of integration, perceived alienation, and relative deprivation. It basically includes personal trajectory, grievances and motivations.
- **Meso level** relates to the wider radical milieu where the individual's reference group acts. It is understood as a group/community level that identifies the enabling environment that fosters a radicalisation process.

❖ **Macro level** takes into account the role of government(s) and society at home and abroad. This level includes, for instance, the evolution of public opinion, party politics, the State's foreign agenda, and actions carried out abroad.

The results of this literature review show the main contemporary keys to interpreting the issues of violent extremism and the factors influencing radicalisation pathways. The cross-cutting reading of these results aims to provide a comparative perspective to complement the analyses on the four types of extremism. The results of this comparative perspective touch on several points such as (**a) cumulative extremism and hybridisation; (b) othering, local dimension and the places of radicalisation; and (c) gender and youth dimensions.**

1.1 Religious extremism

Throughout its millennial history, Europe has been the scene of numerous clashes between extremist groups, including **religious groups**.
In the European scenario of the last 30 years, radical Islamism has dominated the panorama of violent extremism of religious origin in its diverse ideological and operational nuances. This statement is supported by data provided both by the law enforcement agencies and by the ministries of Justice and Internal Affairs of European countries as well as by the institutions of the European Union. According to these data, almost every instance of violence perpetrated by individuals or organisations, influenced by religious beliefs, is linked to cases of violent radical Islamism.
When looking at the **micro-level**, the factors that influence the radicalisation process can consist of feelings of insignificance and personal uncertainty. At the **meso-level,** these factors can include discrimination, alienation, lack of close social ties, and a sense of injustice. Violent Islamist narratives may play a role in the violent mobilisation of extremists by providing a new framework for personal reconstruction based on rigid worldviews and approaches to reality. The most widespread narratives are those which accuse non-Muslims or Westerners of shaming Muslims who promote the use of Sharia to replace corrupt Western governments and narratives and build an ideal society under an Islamic government. This sort of narrative highlights one of the key issues in the micro-meso dimension of the radicalisation process: the "us versus them" narrative. These narratives aim at dehumanising "the others" (the hostile Western society) by producing a cognitive dissonance that justifies violence against anyone who does not conform to them. In that case, narratives can be action-oriented towards the recruitment process. Nowadays, recruitment is mostly done on social media platforms like Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, and so on by using private chats and spreading propaganda through public messages or inciting people to join the jihad (Tolis 2019: 130-134). The cluster of drivers at the **macro level** comprises various political, socioeconomic and cultural shifts that contribute to the development of violent Islamist extremism. It is evident that macro level factors that can lead to the radicalisation process could be broadly referred to the weakening of the structural elements constituting social order and social structures. This weakening is caused by

unjust policies, unpredictable social changes, and unequal social policies that exclude, label or marginalise vulnerable individuals or social groups (Ibidem: 138). Social subjects may develop the perception of not belonging when they are confronted with perceived conflict and a lack of social bonds. In this regard, feelings of powerlessness can be exacerbated by tensions and poor social ties. Some empirical studies have demonstrated a link between feelings of political powerlessness and violent extremist ideology (Schils and Pauwels 2016: 80). This means, from a socio-relational point of view, that it is possible to highlight a strong connection between macro-level structural problems, influencing biographical experiences that are shared by individuals and the micro- and group-level identity formation and reactions to these problems (Jensen and Larsen 2019).

To corroborate the T2.1 evidence, it clearly emerged from the debate that academic literature emphasises terrorism, Islam, and youth radicalisation with regard to religious radicalisation; moreover, religious extremism is mainly defined, in socio-cultural terms, as a foreign actor and radically anti-establishment. There is a close relationship between conspiracy theory and religious subjects because some beliefs can be harmful to others. It is important to explore how violence originates. We can try to build an intervention by asking extremist subjects about the kind of significance they ascribe to violence. To do so, it is important to work synergistically with local communities and institutions to understand how to identify issues linked to the origin of violent extremism phenomena. In this way, social institutions do not focus on the purpose of punishing violent extremists, but on the social recovery of these subjects. Perfect prevention is about how to act and decide what the next step should be. In this way, the process becomes more important than the result.

1.2 Far-Right extremism

Far-right violent extremism is currently the most rapidly expanding type of violent extremism in Europe. This development poses complex challenges to policy makers, practitioners and researchers. The complexity stems from the variety of this extremism, shaped by various national and regional cultures, which have distinct connections to far-right traditions, episodes of extremism, and memories of violence. While much academic literature dealing with the rise of the far-right in Europe focuses on populism and the associated dealignment of political representation evident in the rise of new populist movements and parties, research is increasingly directed to the "re-assemblage" of far-right extremism in Europe today (Forchtner and Kolvraa 2017). It is important to move away from the "recruiter-vulnerable person" paradigm that is still significant in practitioner cultures and instead understand the changes in activism that are associated with new forms of violent extremism. In particular, these changes are associated with digital cultures, involving transformations of fandom, gamification, "meme-magic", consumer cultures, conspiracy theories and identity politics, and new expressions of occultism.

Individual-level attributes play a significant role because individuals' backgrounds, pre-existing personal narratives and outlook on life make them more vulnerable to VE groups and organisations. The psychological factors that lead individuals to consider participating in violent acts or acting as a

radicalisation factor are closely linked to their participation **in certain groups and their approach to them**. There are **several macro-causes** that may lead individuals towards forms of right-wing extremism:
(1) social exclusion and marginalisation, which especially affect youth;
(2) governments that fail to remedy or address economic and cultural affairs – or which exist in a subordinate political position or in a precarious military situation – are bound to generate dissatisfaction, and with that, frustration and anger. The result will be individuals engaging in widespread actions to remedy the situations, including through extreme violence (Abushi and Nordbruch 2020).
To corroborate the T2.1 evidence, the debate highlighted other macro-causes:
(3) the systematic denial of avenues for influencing decision-making at a local/national level, while being confronted with corruption and unjust treatment based on lack of representation or lack of civil liberties, can play a major role in the decision to join VE groups or activities;
(4) social vulnerabilities can make it difficult for individuals to find a place in society, especially due to limited access to basic social conditions, such as education and housing. As a result of past and current experiences, grievances can be created, which then form a route into far-right groups.
Moreover, it emerged from the debate that the literature places a significant emphasis on the political and network drivers of far-right radicalisation/extremism. In particular, the debate highlighted that youth participation in extremist political experiences is mainly analysed in studies on religious extremism or the far-right. The scientific discourse on far-right extremism seems to explore a sort of "grey ground" between "institutionalised politics" and "non-conventional collective actions": populism, migration or the economy are not only questions present in the public discourse of far-right parties that are in democratic institutions and take part in elections, but are also discussed very frequently in scientific literature on far-right extremism; this shows that the focus of such studies is probably on the anti-establishment potential of far-right extremism actors rather than on their potential for terrorism.

1.3 Far-left and separatist extremism

There is not a precise, widely shared definition for **far-left extremism** in the literature. The concept of "far-left" is flexible enough to include groups (and ideologies) as diverse as the following ones: radical left parties that participate in elections and claim to respect the tenets of democracy and rule of law; fringe groups with a hybrid profile of party and social movement that endorse a more radical view of politics and the use of violence, and may advocate for the choice of armed struggle; movements and organisations that – while being issue-oriented – do espouse a basic left- wing ideological framework; movements that identify themselves as "Antifa"; terrorist groups openly advocating for change through violence; and violent anarchist groups that engage in sabotage acts, vandalism, and bombings.
In spite of such a rich and diverse landscape of radical and extremist groups, far-left groups and the ideology itself receive limited attention from researchers and practitioners today. Since the fall of

the Berlin wall, the threat posed by left-wing terrorist groups has diminished in both level of attacks and quantity as far as violent acts are concerned. Most of the groups that were at their peak in the '70s were no longer active by the mid '90s, nor did they leave an enduring legacy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the relative scarcity of active terrorist groups does not necessarily mean that the far-left ideology is circulating significantly less in the wider society. On the contrary, it may be argued that precisely because of the great richness of nuances and orientations, this ideology is particularly prone to adapt to changing circumstances and evolve accordingly.

The most important **micro-level** underlined by the literature is the perception of themselves or their group (included reference group) as deprived or unfairly treated (Doojse et al. 2012; Jahnke 2020), as well as the belief that the world is ruled by injustice (Schils 2017); the **meso-level** is the most cited one within the literature: three ideological factors characterise the "push and pull" dynamics towards far-left radicalisation, namely antifascism, intellectualism, and, particularly when the far-left is hybridised with neo-populism, the rhetoric of victimisation linked to a Manichean standpoint that opposes "innocent people" and 'corrupt élites'. Such a peculiar ideological mix – which sometimes spreads by counterculture expressions, such as music and people squatting in social centres – can lead to legitimising violent action as a just reaction against the ruling-classes and, in general, "the System" (Arlow 2020; Gerodimos 2012; Koch 2018). Two research studies have been conducted to emphasise the impact of the **macro-level** on far-left radicalisation: the first, by Bruckner & Gruner (2020), points out how the economic cycle has little influence on the spread and popularity of the far-left in Europe as a whole. The second, by Koch (2019), focuses on far-left foreign fighters involved in the conflict between ISIS and Syria (for example, those enlisted in Kurdish militias). Such a study could be useful to hypothesise whether the global political and geo-political cycle also influences collective action on the far left, similar to Jihadism.

It emerged clearly from the debate that the literature on far-left extremism appears to be moving in a very traditional direction, typical for such a kind of extremism; the nexus between social movements and far-left extremism as well as terrorism, the relationships with the police (and probably, with public order troubles) or with the political system are all subjects that have characterised the action of and the reflection on far-left extremism since the 1970s, its "golden age", so to speak.

Starting from the evidence on this theme, the debate highlighted another important issue: the existing grey literature does not provide a clear nor systematic picture of the main drivers of far-left radicalisation. The most compelling analyses focus on shared features among far-left and far-right extremism (RWE), most notably, a study by RAND on LWE, RWE and nationalist-separatist extremism carried out within the EU IMPACT project. It finds that a series of key factors, besides differences in motivations, trajectories and triggers, proved significant across the entire sample analysed by RAND. This list of factors is distributed across different clusters of drivers. It includes factors at micro level linked to the subject's biography, such as inclination to violence. It also expands to facilitate factors at meso level such as violent socialisation via the use of the internet, and it includes triggers situated at macro level such as negatively perceived environmental events (van Hemert 2015).

Importantly, it should be noted that the social and political movements which focus on different **kinds of separatism** in Europe are mostly not related to any extremist movements or actions; despite this, there still remains the tendency to conflate terrorism and separatism, primarily

because of the fact that separatist movements ostensibly seek to challenge the status quo of the political power and in doing so present a direct challenge to the state.
It is difficult to produce a compelling taxonomy of factors due to the absence of sources on drivers of separatism. The information retrieved for this literature review does not provide a complete picture even for all 3 levels of analysis taken into consideration **(micro, meso, and macro):** most of the articles in this analysis are not focused on separatism, but rather on other ideological phenomena.
In addition to validating the evidence in T2.1, the debate highlights the interesting aspects of this particular form of extremism: the literature on separatism identifies it as a hybrid of the extreme left and the extreme right. The categorisation of separatism as extremism is complicated by the fact that it is viewed as a group that shows its opposition to the state and social norms. The imprecise nature of such a definition makes it difficult to determine what counts as extremism, and what does not. It becomes more clear-cut if we narrow the interpretation of extremism to include only the use of violence or the threat of violence, thus borrowing from the definition of terrorism to categorise the term. In that case, separatist extremism is defined as those who use or threaten extremist forms to achieve separatist objectives.

1.4 Cumulative extremism and hybridisation

The phenomenon of **cumulative extremism** (sometimes also referred to as **reciprocal radicalisation**) has been widely studied in the literature on radicalisation and violent extremism. Cumulative extremism generally refers to a radicalisation process that starts, or is amplified, as a reaction to exposure to, or contact with, an ideologically different kind of extremism. The triggering of a positive feedback mechanism can cause individuals or groups to assume more radical attitudes or to support more radical ideological positions. In parallel, this also triggers a similar process in the counterpart (Eatwell 2006; Larsen 2020; Martinez 2020).
A rather transversal element to the four types of extremism and one that is increasingly present in recent literature is the process of **hybridisation of "traditional" forms of extremism**. This process takes place both between "consolidated" extremisms and through the interaction with emerging phenomena such as the proliferation of conspiracy theories, new religious movements (related to the recovery of an old tradition, such as Nordic mythology, or connected to more contemporary forms of spirituality, such as the New Age) (Hernandez 2019).
It clearly emerged from the debate at the Workshop that cumulative extremism comes out in all four types of extremism considered, although quite often it is not explicitly thematised. While on the one hand the scarcity of specific studies is surprising, on the other hand it must be recognised that there are many studies that highlight the relevance of radicalisation by reaction, especially when it comes to micro level drivers. This result allows us to highlight the extent to which the radicalisation process may depend on biographical elements.
Moreover, another interesting point that was brought up in the debate is that the literature underlines how the process of broadening the narratives that are close to extremist ideologies had

already been underway for some time. Consequently, this expansion process also reverberates on the radicalisation drivers. This is particularly evident in the case of far right extremism. The literature highlights the emergence of a phase of re-assembly of the far right, which affects cultural imaginaries as well as the more complex construction of subjectivity; less frequently mentioned in the literature is the hybridisation between the extreme left and environmental extremism, which is directly connected with the higher priority given to climate policies, and to issues such as energy transition, in the political agendas of European countries.

1.5 Othering and the local dimension

Another cross-cutting issue frequently mentioned in the literature is the dynamics of othering. Othering is related to both the strengthening of group identity and polarisation. This lies at the base of the construction of a "totally other" seen as an opposite, a rival, an enemy, and more generally a threat. The threat in the most extreme cases may also have an existential dimension. During the debate, one of the invited experts**, Marco Lombardi,** claimed that the literature analysed gives particular emphasis to the role of the inner circle (friends and relatives), and the extended family unit (kinship) in the dynamics of othering. This dimension is halfway between the micro (personal, biographical level) and the meso level. The fact that it is ubiquitous in the corpus of the literature analysed indicates that for all types of extremism, the radicalisation process should be understood as an event that occurs at the intersection between a personal trajectory and a permissive, or enabling, environment. In particular, the age of globalisation is characterised by a strong divergence of social relations, in which uncertainty is widespread. This makes it hard to identify and interpret the factors that could lead a person to become radicalised. Today's societies are highly globalised and extremely complex. This complexity encourages the presence of weak signals, leading to the difficulty in pinpointing the causes of radicalisation. For this reason, there is a need to understand those dysfunctional environments that promote radicalisation. Individuals are radicalised by personal frustrations and by identity-group injustices. They are also radicalised because they are themselves members of "face-to-face" and online groups. In particular, virtual environments seem to be the places where youth are most vulnerable to the phenomenon of radicalisation. Social networks are suitable platforms for disseminating hateful or "fringe" opinions and ideologies. In fact, online interactions promote group identification, and the intragroup processes of these groups work to legitimise and amplify extreme attitudes. The successful rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders requires multi-agency cooperation between actors from several fields, including specific professions, relevant institutions and the offender's social environment (friends, family, etc.). Appropriate information-sharing and collaboration are needed to establish an uninterrupted, multifaceted rehabilitation process that starts with an arrest and ideally ends in full and stable integration into society.

Discussing the results, it was also highlighted that:

1. **The context needs to be studied carefully to identify the risks that can lead to radicalisation.** In this regard, **the methodology adopted by the project of social labs** can

enable a deeper analysis of social contexts and necessary interventions. The concept for a social laboratory was originally presented by Zaid Hassan in 2014, and in addition to overlapping and crossing with other types of labs (media/innovation/life), social laboratories also have a number of similarities with 'action research' and the pedagogical approach of "problem-based learning". Social labs are "social", "experimental", and "systemic". They are social because they deal with highly complex social issues (e.g. poverty, sustainability, ageing and radicalisation). They are experimental because they provide a living context in which social experiments may be conducted; and they are systemic because of the level at which they seek to resolve problems, i.e. they try to focus on understanding and resolving the problems behind the identified problem. The process of a social laboratory consists of three interdependent phases: the first stage is the discussion and diagnosis of current practices and existing policies. Essentially, in the first part of the process, the idea is for participants to activate and share all the preliminary knowledge they have on a topic so that, as a group, they can identify a clear problem, statement, or a set of goals for the social lab. In the PARTICIPATION project, the problem should fall within the overall objective of preventing radicalisation and polarisation. The next step is the design and implementation of pilot actions. Having identified a problem or objective, participants then co-design pilot actions (experiments/social interventions), which, in the case of PARTICIPATION, will be conceived as strategies to address radicalisation and polarisation. The final phase is reflection and feedback. After conducting the pilot actions designed in phase two, participants reflect on the results of these interventions and the overall experience of social laboratories.

2. **Conspiracy theory develops in relation to context**: it is important to study more deeply the phenomena of radicalisation in the following ways: 1) combining qualitative and quantitative approaches; 2) implementing action research, through a constructive dialogue between sociologists, experts and institutions, where sociologists should guide institutions to develop solutions to prevent radicalisation.

Connected to environmental and contextual issues is the reflection on the **places of radicalisation**. Obviously, the literature reserves considerable space for the analysis of the radicalisation paths that take place online. This is perhaps one of the most inflated fields of research in the domain of radicalisation and violent extremism. Moreover, attention to the online dimension grew enormously in the period examined in this review of the literature due to the growth of the so-called Islamic State and the disruptive potential of its modus operandi. Indeed, a growing part of the literature focuses on the emerging places of radicalisation, both online platforms and other virtual places such as social networks where extremist propaganda material circulates and where contacts with mentors and radicalising agents are made (Stenersen 2008; Bowman-Grieve 2009; Post 2015).
It emerged clearly from the debate that digital cultures and gamification play an important role. They have a significant impact on the dynamics of imitation emulation and on the consolidation of group identity. However, the increasing influence of radicalisation dynamics can also be found in more mainstream social forms and expressions, such as fandom and the production and circulation of conspiracy theories.

1.6 Gender and youth dimensions

The gender dimension is considerably under-researched, although a more nuanced assessment is needed. From the systematic analysis of the literature, it emerges that the gender dimension is substantially absent from the study of far-left extremism and separatism. However, it has a wider space in the literature on Islamist extremism, and it is beginning to be consistently taken into consideration in the literature dedicated to far-right extremism. With regard to the latter, for instance, about one fifth of the academic articles selected for the textual-statistical analysis took into consideration the gender dimension.

Besides differences in the quantity of studies that focus on gender within the four kinds of extremism, it should be emphasised that much of the literature on extremism and radicalisation devoted entirely or partially to the gender dimension tends to identify a limited number of specific radicalisation drivers. In particular, among the most frequently identified are empowerment and emancipation (the latter obtained also via belonging to a group other than that of origin).

For instance, empowerment features prominently in the literature on Islamist extremism. Many studies find that by providing an ordered web of gender constructs (namely, mother, sister, wife and supporter) with which women can identify themselves, Islamic State propagandistic campaigns aim at responding to identity crises among Muslim women and creating a strong feeling of female empowerment to motivate them either to attack the West, or to join the organisation. Indeed, the textual-statistical analysis and the co-occurrence ratio of specific terms related to the gender dimension confirm a growing interest in the relationship between women and Islamic State ideology and organisation. Another important finding about gender and Islamist extremism in the recent literature is that female involvement is becoming a widespread phenomenon in Europe. This phenomenon raises a series of ethical and security questions, since women are generally much more involved in the radicalisation process of their children (Akkerman 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015; Pearson 2015; Orav et al. 2016; Pearson and Winterbotham 2017).

The youth dimension is analysed at length in the literature on extremism and radicalisation. While studies that focus specifically on this issue are a minority, age is still somehow considered as a factor in most of the analyses. As in the case of the gender dimension, Islamist extremism and the far right are the domains where most of the literature dealing with the youth dimension is produced.

As far as the studies on Islamist extremism are concerned, the literature consistently highlights several points. Online platforms and social networks that youngsters widely use are said to help the jihadi message to spread and reach out to troubled youth, hence increasing the likelihood of violent Islamist radicalisation. Moreover, young people are found to be traditionally more vulnerable to structural and individual pressures, and the operational shift of jihadi recruiters to online platforms, which are used first and foremost by young people, exposes the latter to Islamist narratives using or promoting violence. The literature also underlines the fact that many radicalised young people suffer from a shared lack of acceptance from the society in which they live. Thus, youths seek refuge, acceptance and understanding within social networks. These virtual places may become the hotbeds of concrete solidarity through which youngsters may consolidate their personal identity (Doosje et al. 2012; Bayer 2016; Harper 2018; Valleau et al. 2018).

The debate on the results has revealed more significant aspects about the gender dimension: women are increasingly involved in all levels of far right movements and parties, from low-level grass-root involvement to leadership positions. They constitute a growing minority with increasing agency, albeit still dominated by men within a "hyper-masculine ecosystem", in which women often have to negotiate their identity with male leaders and supporters. Gender-equality discourses have become central to far right politics and as a signifying boundary marker of one's own identity versus the immigrant and particularly the Muslim "other". At the same time, anti-feminist and anti-gender ideology, discourses and attitudes are still prevalent, suggesting that gender equality and gay rights are widely rhetorical and instrumental to their policies. Moreover, men's subjectivity is often overlooked in empirical research and researchers who focus on male involvement rarely move beyond the "toxic masculinity" lens.

In support of the T2.1 evidence on this topic, the debate revealed that radicalisation in youth is found to come about predominantly as the result of very attractive pull factors such as positive characteristics or benefits offered by a group in exchange for participation. Lately, Europe has seen an increase in youth mobilisation with groups such as Generation Identity which are starting to attract more young people across the continent. The literature highlights the fact that the youth are drawn to these groups by a sense of empowerment, vengeance, and opportunity to get out of poverty. While social and economic factors play a very important role in driving youth to violent extremism, political participation is increasingly important to them, especially when they feel they are not heard.

2. Social polarisation, extremism and radicalisation among young people

2.1 Extremism and radicalisation in the lives of young people

The survey presented in D2.2 explores attitudes towards, and encounters with, **extremism and radicalisation in the lives of young people**. It also aims at identifying factors and experiences associated with resilience towards extremism. It addresses forms of social polarisation associated with pathways to extremism, examining a wide range of socio-demographic factors, as well as other themes that have emerged as important in earlier research actions undertaken within the PARTICIPATION project. These themes include encounters with hate speech, conspiracy theories, social and cultural diversity, and the impact of online experiences and cultures.

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the completion of the survey, as schools prioritised student safety. Data collection took place over five months from November 2021 to March 2022, involving 1,243 students. With 68 questions, the survey yielded substantial data about the experiences of young Europeans regarding extremism and radicalisation. In line with European Union research policy, the data is classified as "Open Data", accessible to researchers interested in conducting further analyses

or formulating new questions. The analysis of the results showed a diverse range of responses, as indicated by the small percentage values across various categories, reflecting the varied perspectives and experiences of the respondents.

From a methodological perspective, the analysis of socio-demographic characteristics revealed key patterns within the sample. The composition was slightly skewed toward women (660) compared to men (524). In terms of age distribution, Italy and Poland had older participants, mostly 18-year-olds, while the UK and Belgium had younger cohorts aged 15 to 17. Religious affiliation varied across countries: Belgium and the UK had the largest proportion of Muslims; Greece and Romania had predominantly Christian participants; and Italy and Poland exhibited a significant share of respondents reporting "no religion". Belgium, the UK and Greece also featured the highest percentages of ethnic minorities. Parents' livelihoods also varied, with Belgium, Greece and the UK showing the highest proportion of students who have at least one parent not economically active.

The survey included questions to assess political orientation, aiming to differentiate between right-wing and left-wing extremism, providing insight into the socio-political leanings that might intersect with various forms of radicalisation. In that regard, the dependent variable Violent Extremism emerged, following the question:

Q 13: How much do you disagree or agree with the following statements?

- Q 13_1: *It's sometimes necessary to use violence to fight against things that are very unjust.*
- Q 13_2: *Sometimes people have to resort to violence to defend their values, convictions, or religious beliefs.*
- Q 13_3: *It's OK to support groups that use violence to fight injustices.*
- Q 13_4: *It's sometimes necessary to use violence, commit attacks, or kidnap people to fight for a better world.*

In order to develop a Violent Extremism Index, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to transform four key questions. Higher scores on this index suggest greater agreement with the corresponding statements, thus providing a measure of the propensity toward violent extremism.

The primary objective of the survey was to capture attitudes towards violent extremism, for which two measures were utilised. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

The survey revealed **significant gender differences in attitudes toward violence**. When participants responded to the statement that it is sometimes necessary to use violence to oppose extreme injustices, one notable finding was the stark gender variation, with women consistently less inclined to endorse violent extremism. The findings of the survey underscore the persisting relevance of the violent extremism agenda, particularly noting that **men are more likely than women to endorse violent measures**, a gender distinction supported by the wealth of sociological research. This trend highlights broader societal patterns wherein men generally display a higher inclination toward violent extremist actions.

Additionally, the survey revealed a concerning trend among younger respondents, aged 15-16, who showed a greater openness to supporting violent extremism compared to the wider survey cohort, even when accounting for variables like social class indicators. This suggests that age may play a significant role in susceptibility to extremist ideologies.

The debate validated the results of this step of research, highlighting also specific aspects related to youth radicalisation issues and prevention:

(1) the primary aim of the research that has been presented is to understand the obvious signs that can lead young people to radicalism. It is important for educational institutions to intervene and promote their social inclusion.

(2) Another interesting finding was that feeling worried and anxious appears to decrease the support for violent extremism; doing sports and going to the gym decreases the support for violent extremism; appropriate spare time activities can also prevent young people from radicalisation.

(3) In terms of prevention and the early identification of radicalisation, the survey highlighted the importance of strong, trusting relationships. It found that the more challenging it is for young people to communicate with family or friends, the more likely they are to agree with extremist ideologies.

2.2. Cultural diversity, gender equality and conspiracy theories

The survey aims, in particular, to examine attitudes towards extremism and radicalisation, as well as attitudes towards **cultural diversity, gender equality and conspiracy theories**, particularly among young people. All these attitudes are widely discussed in the literature in relation to the causes of violent extremism.
During the debate, one of the participants of the session**, Farhad Khosrokhavar** addressed key topics including conspiracy theories and gender issues as they relate to radicalisation, an issue thoroughly analysed in D2.2. The significance of quantitative data analysis emerged as a tool for illuminating various aspects of radicalisation. Khosrokhavar highlighted how such analyses are crucial for developing a deeper understanding of the patterns and trends that define this complex phenomenon. He introduced the relevance of anthropological perspectives into the discussion, suggesting that these insights could enrich the interpretation of quantitative data. By integrating anthropological viewpoints, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the social and cultural dimensions that influence radicalisation processes. Khosrokhavar also proposed directions for future quantitative studies. Farhad Khosrokhavar's advocacy for a methodological approach that integrates both quantitative data and qualitative insights reflects a growing recognition in social research of the limitations inherent in relying solely on numerical data. By blending these methodologies, researchers can more effectively examine the broader socio-cultural contexts that underpin statistical trends, thus enriching their understanding of complex social phenomena such as radicalisation. This enriched approach is particularly significant in the context of the study involving countries like Poland, Romania and Greece. Typically, the focus of radicalisation research tends to be on Western European countries like Germany and France. However, by extending the geographical focus to include these Eastern European nations, the study offers a broader, more diverse perspective on the dynamics of radicalisation. This diversity is crucial for understanding the varied cultural and social factors that influence radical processes across different European contexts. The inclusion of conspiracy theories and gender issues in the study highlights key areas that are often intertwined with radicalisation.

Conspiracy theories can play a significant role in radicalising individuals by providing a distorted lens through which they view the world, often exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement or injustice. Similarly, examining radicalisation through the lens of gender can reveal how different experiences and perceptions based on gender may influence individuals' susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Jolley et al. 2021).

Overall, Khosrokhavar's suggestions for future research underscore the need for a more holistic approach to studying radicalisation, one that not only broadens the geographical scope of research but also deepens the analytical framework to include a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach can lead to more robust, nuanced findings that better reflect the complexity of radicalisation within various socio-political and cultural contexts. According to Khosrokhavar, young people can be categorised into three main groups: 1) young people who went to Syria or tried to go to Syria and did not succeed because they were prevented from doing so; 2) converts, who have identified themselves as being Muslim, Christian and others; and 3) people with mental health problems, who went to Syria, and for whom violence operates as a kind of catharsis; indeed, by becoming violent they try to overcome their own mental problems.

Within this panorama, the scholar mainly focused on the gender issue. Two major groups went to Syria: the Jihadist Right and the female Jihadists, who were not really jihadists, but that is how they identified themselves because in most cases they were in love with a Jihadist. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the fact that most of the women who have come back from Syria and are now in France, Germany, Great Britain and so on, were not actually Jihadist women, but Jihadist brides. Khosrokhavar analysed the data of radicalised people who went to Afghanistan or Pakistan or to some other part of the Arab world. He affirms that around 1,000 people in Europe became radicalised and went to an Arab country like Afghanistan. Khosrokhavar interviewed many young men and women in French prisons who told him how they imagined ISIS to be before they became radicalised.

Khosrokhavar highlights the critical importance of considering the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of subjectivity in the study of radicalisation. These aspects touch upon the deeper, often elusive problems facing modern European societies. He emphasised the difficulty of capturing these dimensions within the confines of quantitative research, which typically focuses on measurable data and may overlook the nuanced subjective experiences that influence an individual's path toward radicalisation.

The data presented in the study, as Khosrokhavar noted, can be instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding of what he refers to as the “subjectivity issue” in radicalisation. This refers to the personal, subjective factors that contribute to an individual's radical beliefs and behaviours, which are shaped by their unique psychological, cultural and social experiences. By acknowledging these subjective dimensions, researchers and policymakers can develop more effective strategies to address radicalisation that are tailored to the specific contexts and needs of individuals.

The debate highlighted another important issue. The term *radicalisation* refers to a complex phenomenon and serves to denote different meanings in different contexts. The term is used in at least three different contexts: **security, integration and foreign policy**, evidently with a different emphasis in each of them. Radicalisation cannot be reduced to a security and “State-centric” approach and needs to be analysed from a multidimensional perspective focused on society and its members; it should be seen as a fundamental issue of sociological knowledge, questioning the different factors and contexts in which the process of radicalisation emerges. Radicalisation is not a

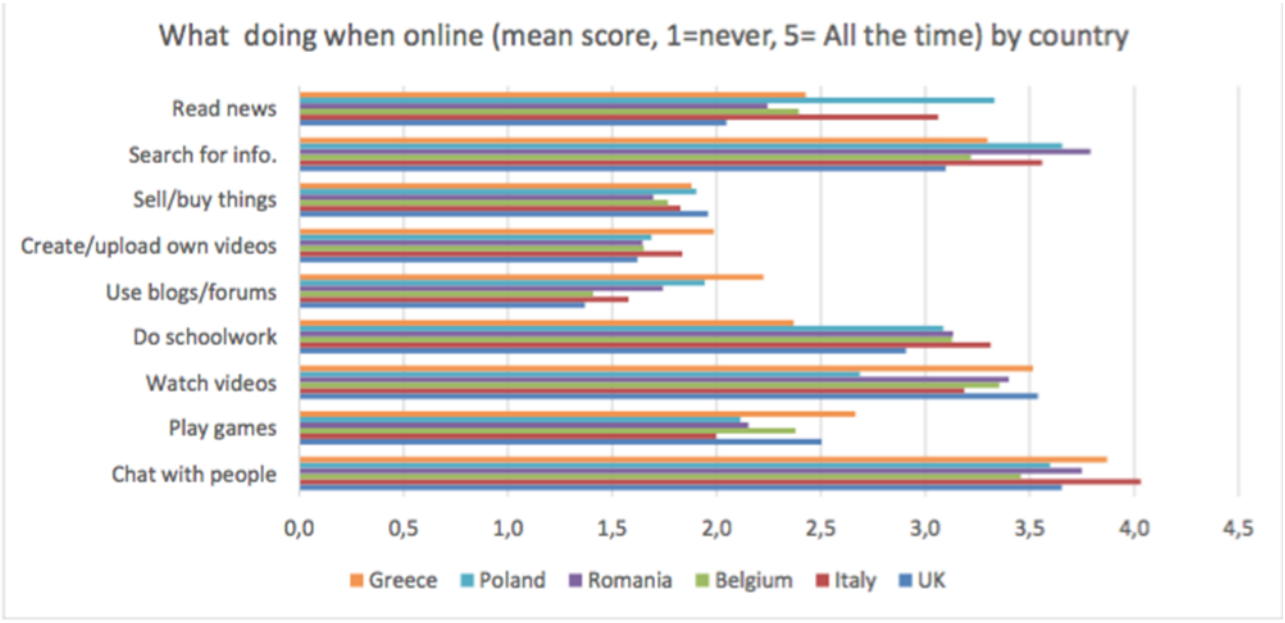
linear process; it depends on specific environments and the people who the subject meets throughout his or her everyday life. Another theme that emerged was that the narratives of countering radicalisation must be part of this social process – or even better, should begin before the process starts – and involve actors in creating and implementing integrated strategies to de-escalate the social appeal of this extreme experience. Prevention goes in the direction of improving "tolerance of ambiguity" to build resilience. In order to prevent radicalisation processes, prevention measures should focus on strengthening positive personality traits and reducing vulnerability to radicalisation, and specific actions should work to strengthen tolerance of those who are different or foreign and to illustrate the appeal of "democracy and diversity". In particular, radicalisation needs to be re-framed in a broader and more comprehensive way connecting micro, meso, and macro factors, so that any intervention strategy should be based on programmes to reduce and fight against all these situations which have led to the growth and spread of this phenomenon (Schils & Verhage 2017).

2.3 Social media behaviour and online activity

D2.2 has also produced results regarding **the role of the Internet** in shaping young people's attitudes towards violence. Activities such as playing video games and watching videos were linked to the endorsement of violent extremism, indicating the influence of digital media consumption. Moreover, young people's exposure to conspiracy theories and sexist, misogynistic behaviour online, often propagated through memes and social interactions, emerged as critical factors in the spread of extremist views (Mølmen & Ravndal 2021).

The literature on social media and radicalisation points out the relevance of the social media usage of young people and their risk of radicalisation. As shown by a consolidated body of literature and research, violent extremist groups use social media platforms and chatrooms to recruit and groom young people. These elements are increasingly relevant in the digital age, where the internet serves as both a conduit and a catalyst for the spread of radical ideologies. Disinformation can distort perceptions and fuel conspiracy theories, which in turn play a significant role in radicalising individuals. Online platforms often facilitate the rapid dissemination of radical and extremist content, making it easier for individuals to access and be influenced by harmful ideologies without the traditional physical boundaries of communities and networks Following this, the survey therefore also attempted to capture online activism. Respondents were asked to indicate what activities they do when they are online and how often.

The bar chart presented below (regarding question n. 9 of the survey) represents the mean score for type of activities for each country for a range of online activities. The most common types of activities are chatting with people when online, searching for information, watching videos and doing schoolwork. Reading news is also relatively popular but there are great variations between countries with Poland and Italy having the highest rates, and the UK having the lowest rates, reflecting perhaps the social-class composition of the sample. Creating videos and uploading them as well as using blogs and forums have the lowest rates across countries compared to the other activities. Playing games online is highest in Greece and the UK and Belgium, and lowest in Italy, Poland and Romania.



Q9: When you go online, what activities do you do? Being online means using websites or apps to chat, share pictures, study, play games, work... using a mobile phone, tablet or computer.

On this issue, the invited expert **Bulcsú Hunyadi** (Head of Programmes & Leader of the Radicalisation and Extremism Programme at Political Capital, Hungary) expanded the scope of the conversation to include vital topics such as disinformation and online radicalisation. The emphasis on these topics underscores the complex, multi-dimensional nature of radicalisation, which requires a comprehensive approach that integrates both the objective data provided by quantitative studies and the subjective insights offered by qualitative research. This holistic approach is crucial for developing a more complete understanding of the mechanisms of radicalisation and for crafting interventions that effectively counteract these forces in modern European societies and beyond (Fernandez et al. 2019).

In addition, the debate highlighted other aspects regarding the results produced on the internet report and the radicalisation of youth. The role of digital environments, particularly online gaming and video consumption, in the process of radicalisation has become increasingly central. These platforms not only serve as mediums for entertainment but also as potential gateways to extremist content. Furthermore, meme culture, with its capacity to transmit complex messages rapidly and subtly, plays a significant role in disseminating and normalising radical ideologies. This aspect underscores the intricate nature of contemporary radicalisation processes, where traditional and digital cultural elements intersect.

In particular, the debate highlighted that the youngest generation is particularly susceptible to radicalisation. This vulnerability is largely attributed to their engagement with online platforms where recruitment and the spread of conspiracy theories occur. Young people's frequent online interactions expose them to tailored radical content, often delivered through sophisticated algorithms that exploit their vulnerabilities. In response to these challenges, the debate emphasised the importance of social inclusion, social embeddedness, and robust social networks. These factors are crucial as they are embedded in everyday environments such as neighbourhoods, families and

circles of friends. Strong, supportive social networks can act as buffers against the isolating effects of radical online content. Recognising the protective role of these social structures, the debate suggests that they are vital components of effective prevention programmes. Incorporating these social elements into preventive strategies can enhance resilience against radicalisation by providing individuals with a sense of belonging and support, thereby countering the appeal of extremist groups that often exploit feelings of isolation and disconnection. This approach aligns with broader preventive measures that seek to strengthen community ties and promote inclusive environments as foundational strategies against radicalisation.

3. Gender, extremism and radicalisation

3.1 The association of extremism with new forms of communication: memes as narrative activators

D2.3 aims to deepen our understanding of the pathways and trends associated with radicalisation and extremism in Europe today, with a particular focus on gender and gender-related aspects, in particular in the world of young people. T2.3 involved an ambitious strategy of focus-group research[1] undertaken simultaneously in high schools and universities in five countries, namely Belgium, Greece, Italy, Romania and the United Kingdom.

This was a challenging task, with many of the schools and colleges that hosted the focus groups facing very significant pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The young people who participated gave generously of their time to support this research, in many cases underlining just how important they consider this issue to be, and the importance they attached to contributing to a European research project.

The focus groups were organised by gender to capture the different dynamics of discussions between women only, men only, and mixed gender groups These topics were explored through memes and social media engagement that are commonly circulated on social media, and have become a pervasive form of communication especially among young people.

Memes are communications made up of image and text, often simple to put together, and a building block of "remix culture", one of the fundamental characteristics of the participatory basis of digital culture. Each partner identified the memes most relevant for their country (Wiggins 2017; Taylor 2022).

During all the focus groups, young people recognised memes as pathways into extremist communications. Every focus group discussed the presence of racist, anti-Islamic, anti LGBTQI+ and misogynist memes. The hybrid effect of memetic communication was widely recognised by the

[1] 13 focus groups were held, made up of school, college and university students, for a total of 58 female and 60 male participants, aged between 16-25 years, with 18 hours of discussions. 6 areas were explored: social polarisation; radicalisation and extremism; conspiracy theories as a pathway to extremism; anti-gender aspects; anti-feminist and LGBTQ+ sentiment; incels/toxic masculinity; and resilience and protective factors.

young people, with each group initiating a discussion around the tension between the affective response to an image, often humorous, and the often-derogatory text directed at certain groups associated with the image. One young woman from Romania highlights this tension as a lived experience: we see a lot on social media and it affects us and it is so untrue.

They take the audience on an emotional journey that often involves humour, horror, and violence because, within their framework, nothing is seen as definitively real. Memes are not interpreted as conveying a singular message but instead embody a form of liberation that is crucial for contemporary extremist ideologies (Holland 2020).

Online participatory and remix cultures contribute to the "democratisation" of extremism, as radicalisation no longer requires membership in a formal organisation. Instead, it is about entering and contributing to a communicative field that allows individuals to actively participate in constructing a multi-author, multi-platform narrative. This approach shifts traditional radicalisation pathways from hierarchical organisational structures to collaborative and distributed forms of content creation.

Moreover, a convergence has been noted between post-ISIS jihadism and far-right imaginaries, which is not rooted in traditional forms of "alpha-male" toxic masculinity. Instead, it adopts an ironic stance toward this ideal, blending humour and critique into its ideological messaging. This adaptation reflects broader changes in how individuals engage with and reinterpret the ideological structure of emotion, where the understanding of text and image, and the relationship between the two, is both cognitive and affective. Often, an image may evoke an affective or emotional state associated with a memory, and this is linked through the meme to the cognitive or informative dimension of the text associated with the image. The text may be derogatory or negative but associated with a humorous image; the meme may produce a response of laughter that may be experienced as destabilising or unsettling by the person who responds in this way – in particular if the response is framed in terms of a personal experience or memory (Greene 2019). When this happens, there is an experience of heightened subjectivity, as the person responding to the meme may not understand their response, just as we do not necessarily understand our response to a work of art, where we need to understand both our thoughts and our feelings: in other words, the language within which this generation captures the world. Memes have some interesting features like participatory culture because they are constantly being remixed. With memes, one can share humour and a message at the same time. They have literal and implied meanings achieved by irony and satire and a mix of humour and earnestness, to produce a hybrid structure of effect. In this regard, it emerged that the previous forms of political communication were, instead, the product of organisations. Today, extremist communications increasingly rely upon humour, parody and memes, and are the product of a participatory "remix" culture. This kind of culture is fundamental to the mainstreaming of extremist communications, and to their transformation (Petrova 2021).

A central theme in this context is the importance of visual and aesthetic coherence that is generally obtained by remixing two different historical ideologies, images, a text, and visual effects that are a derivative aesthetic of synth-wave. The results are often memes extending beyond the far-right to Islamist communications. Memes work as art because they capture the attention and highlight the tensions in the hybrid effects experienced when they are encountered. The hybrid effect involves a highly interconnected digital environment.

According to Reddit, one of the most important social communities with 22 million active members, memes serve as a form of cultural information exchange. They represent a cultural or behavioural

element that serves as a form of cultural information exchange. They represent a cultural product that is transferred between individuals through imitation or other non-genetic means. By combining images and text to convey distinct ideas or emotions, memes become widely generated and disseminated, embedding themselves within popular culture. In an international study involving focus groups organised by research teams from various countries, diverse memes and themes were identified (Holland 2020).

In Greece, memes focused on concepts like family, community, and masculinity. Belgian memes predominantly explored gender themes, while in the United Kingdom, the avatar Pepe the Frog emerged as a notable symbol appropriated by far-right groups within youth culture. Across age groups and countries, the focus groups unanimously emphasised the integral role of social media in young people's lives and the pervasive presence of memes as a mode of communication. This phenomenon illustrates how digital platforms have transformed cultural transmission. Memes enable a rapid exchange of symbolic content that reflects societal norms, ideologies and emotions while fostering a shared, participatory culture that transcends traditional geographic boundaries.

Memes are communications made up of image and text, often simple to put together, and a building block of "remix culture", one of the fundamental characteristics of the participatory basis of digital culture. For a meme to "work", the text and image will not necessarily correspond – it is the "gap" between the image and text that allows an experience of recognition, memory or association. The text may be serious, the image may be humorous, so that meme communication is described as "wave like", where a wave consists of particles and movement. In a similar way, a meme solicits a "hybrid" of two kinds of responses experienced simultaneously: a "knowing" response that recognises the distance between two responses (irony) and an effective response to this distance (humour) (Milosavljević 2020).

The hybrid affective experience is central to contemporary extremist communications and it emerges at different points when people are talking about what sort of memes they are looking at or how they have reacted to them. Communication theorists underline the power of memetic communications today, suggesting that memes are best understood as "idea compressors" capable of communicating complex ideas and emotions in an ephemeral moment. The temporal structure of the meme, combining an instantaneous response with an experience of being unsettled that may last much longer, points to a further dimension of the hybrid nature of memes. Meanwhile, the simple architecture of a meme, combining short text and an image, means that the meme is ideally suited to the remix structure of digital communications that is more experiential than discursive (Nikil Prakash, Aloysius 2021).

One of the people who moderated the focus groups in Romania noted that there is an awareness of social media as an emerging actor or as a principal actor in the mainstream. Young people are very aware of how algorithms work and their limitations.

One of the central elements that came out of all the focus groups and the conversations was the notion of ideology and post-ideology and how it works with the online environment. There seems to be a sort of political tolerance to this, but also an increasing awareness of the pitfalls and of the fact that their responses need to be much more diversified and that they need to understand the sort of emotional nature of politics. Participants of the focus group had the feeling that they struggle with this meta-narrative that they are part of, and that they need to deal with it.

It emerged clearly from the debate that there is a growing awareness of how information is disseminated; individuals realise that the channels through which they receive information are often

focused and selective. This phenomenon contributes to social polarisation, as people are exposed to a limited range of perspectives. In addition, there is a sense of concern about the lack of dialogue and exposure to different ideologies. People are troubled by the absence of alternative sources of information, and when such sources do exist, it is difficult to discern them within the complex spectrum of information. In general, people are aware that there is extremist content circulating on social media, and that platforms can be very damaging if they are not administered correctly.

3.2 The way broad patterns of social polarisation are experienced by young people

Most of the focus groups started off with discussing participants' understanding of social polarisation leading into discussions of extremism and radicalisation. Although participants claimed that they were not sure how to define social polarisation, and some claimed that they were not familiar with the term at all, the participants were able to give many examples of social polarisation. Social polarisation across the focus groups was defined as an ideological disposition of two extremes or opposing standpoints and views. The term "opposing poles" was used by many as a tendency to categorise and label everything along this dichotomy and bipolarity. It is, as one female participant from Catania in Italy described, a "war of ideologies".

The participants of the focus group highlighted fluidity and hybridisation of extremism, particularly far right activists, racism and hate, antisemitism, misogyny, Incels, conspiracy theorists, COVID, and "chan culture". The most common example of social polarisation mentioned by the participants was the COVID-19 pandemic and the division it had created within society due to the handling of the pandemic by the government. Many could relate to that as it is "*the closest (example of social polarisation) to us now*" and the anti-vaxxers were cited as an example in many focus groups, particularly in the Italian focus groups which were carried out in Rome and Catania. Students felt very strongly about the discussions regarding vaccinations which they found very difficult to reconcile with and find common ground as both sides claim absolute truth.

The participants talked about social polarisation, and it emerged that they are not so focused on social class but on social patterns of communication. They described living in a social and political world constructed in terms of narratives. This captures a major shift in democratic politics that is increasingly moving from competition between political programmes to competition between narratives. Many participants experienced these forms of polarisation as a source of suffering, like the experience of responding to migration: "*I think society is totally divided between those who defend the rights of migrants and those who would like them to sink into the sea. We don't have a middle ground. We always come back to the argument of polarising ourselves into two extremes*".

A second most common form of polarisation relates to social cohesion and diversity. This includes issues of "segregation" as "foreigners" and native populations are accustomed to the changes brought about by immigration.

The focus group in Romania noticed the overviews of new actors that are playing in the field of extremism and radicalisation and the awareness of young people of this dynamic. Although the language has changed a great deal, there seems to be an awareness of these processes. Young

people are at the front line and there is a common ground for enhancing partnerships from their perspective on the basis of inclusivity, openness, and recognition of their contribution, despite existing mistrust in institutions. Most youths and known youth actors report that people recognise extremism as a priority in their context. Language varies very much but they also feel that somehow the presence of extremism is actually underestimated on a social level by both educational actors and politicians. It emerged that most survey respondents identified educational governmental actors as those who need to be more aware of the importance of empowering youth to actually respond to extremism. They also show somehow that disengagement should not necessarily be risk focused but should be practised on principles of inclusivity and an assumption that youth participation can enhance the impact.

Youths are very much aware that there are various manifestations of violence and extremism worldwide, and that they do not always have the instruments to actually recognise it. It is becoming so refined that they are unsure of the responses that they should have, or of the tools that should be used. They know that they have an awareness and responsibility to respond to this, and also raise awareness among their peers.

One of the participants of the session, Farhad Khosrokhavar said that in the collective imaginary of many young boys and the people he interviewed in the French prisons, ISIS was a kind of imaginary institution, before they went to Syria and Iraq. It embodied what might be called two major family figures namely the father and the mother. The father was the caliph and the mother was the new Umma. Through this communication, many young people who joined ISIS built up a kind of imaginary substitute, a family that had the relevance of the traditional family, a kind of new archaic family. This is a new type of communication that rebuilds in an imaginary manner the family in the anthropological sense, i.e. the father and mother and the family in the metaphorical sense, embodying and encompassing the entire Muslim Community with the new Umma and the caliph. In his opinion, we are observing a new type of radicalisation. It is not the traditional radicalisation process we witnessed, for instance, during the wars. However, there is continuity in terms of violence and in terms of actions that try to disconnect normal relationships with civil society.

During the debate, another participant of the session concurred with Farhad Khosrokhavar and shared some thoughts concerning the integrating process. The debate highlighted the fact that the integration process is no longer like the one Bauman writes about in his book since not everyone wants to integrate into society but only to feel safe in it. We have to ask ourselves: how can they integrate into society if we do not prove to them that we are a society? We offer a social space, which is not a relational space; we do not offer them a behaviour model. We do not offer real and concrete experiences. It is a good idea to use images in focus groups. Even if we are not digital natives, we must use images rather than words when communicating with young people because images, as McLuhan argues, are not objectively defined, but they offer discussion points about their significance.

It emerged from the debate that radicalisation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be counterbalanced with a single measure. It is a process that arises from extreme values and opinions, leading to the violent display of a political agenda. Young people are particularly susceptible to displays of radicalisation, such as those of foreign fighters, that are increasingly being spread by the mass media; they are also very deeply involved in peer groups, sharing beliefs and identity factors. It is extremely important for young people to belong to a group, even one that does not share positive values. This is why the counter-radicalisation narratives should be placed at the second step

of the socialisation process played out in schools. The school must be considered as a place for a constructive dialogue on the positive value of diversity. It has to strengthen students' resilience to radicalisation, offering a safe environment and time to discuss and examine controversial and complex issues, especially during adolescence/pre-adolescence. This is necessary in order to communicate positive values in the understanding of diversity, or foster cognitive change in beliefs and values that a process of de-radicalisation requires.

3.3 The continuing importance of gender to understand encounters with extremism

Important interactions of themes of class and gender were identified. Concerning exploring feminism and the openness of society to women, responses varied widely because some groups focused on the limits women put on themselves, the importance of ambition and higher education, while others described a world that is significantly controlled by the collective power of men, and any attempt to move beyond this is met by stigmatisation, labelling, or other forms of social control. Lastly, social media platforms were experienced as a space of control, where a young woman believed not to be behaving properly will be made the object of gossip. In other words, these platforms were experienced as a significant tool of the collective power of the young men who interact with these young women. Again, social media emerged as central to polarisation and gender relations. Social media is not "out there" but it enters the intimate personal sphere. From the different transcripts in which people talked about social media, it emerged that not only youths, but people of different ages get anxious when they cannot find their phones. Furthermore, they recognise that they spend too much time on their phones and use different kinds of apps. They are in a kind of relationship with their phones (Kaakinen et al. 2018).

The debate highlighted that another theme that emerged from the focus group was the gender theme. LGBTQI+ related comments including homophobia were all coded under extremism and the radicalisation node. Attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities and individuals were discussed in depth in the two Romanian cases who also focused on gender identities and how young people, families, the school and the wider society perceive gender equality debates which in Romania have become a contentious topic in recent years. The participants agree widely that homophobic sentiments and comments against LGBTQI+ communities are common and often perpetuated especially by the church, families and elderly people who hold traditional values on sexuality. Although teaching gender identity and sexuality is part of the school curriculum in some schools, students felt that it is not implemented without tensions. They reported, for example, that some teachers held gender conformist views, made homophobic comments and generally avoided discussing sexual and gender identities.

Despite the fact that there is a lot of awareness of issues of misogyny or hate concerning LGBTQI+ communities, there is also a lot of confusion. In the focus group in Romania, they argued that feminism is a form of extremism. She pointed out that there is a lot of depolarisation here and a sort of lack of context.

Finally, for youths, political participation does not necessarily have anything to do with national elections or with political parties but becomes a very individual act. People often seek out institutions they can relate to, and if they cannot find any, they take the initiative to create them. Generally, institutions are viewed as factors that contribute to social division rather than as responses to it, exacerbating the problem rather than alleviating it.
LGBTQI+ related comments including homophobia were all coded under extremism and radicalisation. Attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities and individuals was discussed in depth in the two Romanian cases that also focused on gender identities and how young people, families, the school and the wider society perceive gender equality debates which in Romania has become a contentious topic in recent years.

3.4 The significance of the Internet and social media in encounters with extremism

From a sociological perspective, young individuals emphasised the inescapable role of social media in daily life, portraying it as almost inextricable from their identities and routines. This integration signifies a profound shift in how reality is constructed and perceived. While seemingly external, social media platforms form part of the lived digital landscape. In a telling display of irony during a focus group in the UK, participants remained engrossed in their phones throughout the discussions, highlighting how pervasive these devices are.
Regarding the importance of social media, one of the discussants argued that a crucial challenge in preventing radicalisation is due to a radical transformation in social reality construction. Digital media, empowered by artificial intelligence and complex algorithms, now influence every facet of life. Grasping the mediatisation of social structures becomes crucial for devising strategies that can engage with evolving ideologies. This understanding also demands specific attention focused on the potential misuse and misinformation. It is vital to acknowledge that today's media environments are multifaceted ecosystems encompassing quantitative trends, media differentiation, and rising connectivity. Innovation drives these ecosystems through algorithms, digital infrastructure and computerisation, all of which constantly redefine how individuals adapt and adjust their media practices (Gunton 2022).
Interestingly, individuals reshape their media repertoires based on their evolving needs and the practices of the real and digital communities they identify with. Each media environment produces specific interpretations of circulating ideas, leading to varied perceptions shaped by media ecosystems, organisational frameworks and personal affiliations. This variance poses a significant challenge to radicalisation prevention, as individuals might struggle not just to recognise a problem but also to internalise its implications. The media also have a rapid pace of innovation represented by computerised data through media devices, underlying algorithms, and digital infrastructure. People adapt and change both their media environment and their media repertoire on the basis of the different needs to be met and the social practices of everyday life, along with the social practices of the real and digital communities to which the individuals belong. She continued by saying that we are in a situation where the ideas that circulate in social media are interpreted differently in

relation to the media environment, the specific media repertoire, and the organisations and communities in which each individual is embedded. This aspect of communication for the prevention of radicalisation takes on a central role because it highlights the difficulty we have not only in understanding or perceiving a problem but especially in making it ours.

Beyond noting prevalent keywords like *media*, *diversity*, *extremism* and *polarisation*, the analysis also revealed conspicuously absent terms. Words like *recruiter*, *organisation* and *join* were absent, and even concepts like *ideology* or *democracy* surfaced infrequently. Once-structuring processes such as the ritual of television news were also barely mentioned. This indicates a considerable linguistic and conceptual shift in how young people discuss political or extremist issues compared to a decade ago, particularly in the PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) context. During the debate, the participants commented also on the theme of the words that young people in the focus group did not use. Participants noted that the lack of traditional political vocabulary does not necessarily imply political disengagement among young people, as they often discuss politically charged themes like migration or misogyny without labelling them explicitly as political. This discrepancy suggests a communication or interpretive gap that warrants further exploration. In this regard, the changing relationship with institutions is a critical issue for prevention work, to the extent that prevention work is piloted or driven by institutions. It is important that prevention work can be driven by young people (both individuals or groups). In order to do this, it is fundamental to understand the way young people and others experience institutions today and the effect of rules and regulations associated with that.

Moreover, the changing relationship with institutions and authority remains a crucial challenge in prevention efforts, especially since institutional strategies often pilot such initiatives. However, prevention must increasingly be driven by the voices and experiences of young people. Focus groups, designed to capture specific, rather than representative, experiences, provided insights into different perspectives that might not have been visible in homogeneous group discussions. The diversity of groups underscored the urgency of reframing prevention beyond mere admonitions, instead focusing on creating spaces for individuals to actively shape their own identities and communities.

This shift is particularly evident in how extremism is framed as networked multi-author narratives rather than cohesive organisations. The prevalence of memetic culture, remix aesthetics, and storified narratives underscores this transition. The ephemeral nature of memes – combining humour and irony while compressing complex ideas into digestible formats – captures the hybrid affective experience that resonates with today's youth. These dynamics are crucial to understand how extremists leverage participatory culture to mainstream their ideas, transforming extremist communications into tools of identity formation.

This is the transformative sociological landscape in which young people now operate, and it is through this lens that prevention and engagement strategies must be reimagined, offering alternatives to the stark binaries of previous generations.

Part of the strength of contemporary extremism is that it is an exercise in building a kind of world. This is why prevention work needs to support actors who want to build a world that can demonstrate a much more human world and a world where difference is a source of life rather than a source of debt.

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Finally, the debate on the findings from D.2.3 stressed the following points:

1. Extremism is no longer about "joining an organisation" or adopting an ideology. It is an invitation to join networked multi-author narratives.

2. Extremism is less a programme, more an imaginary, increasingly the product of a "remix culture". It is increasingly gamified, storified, and aestheticised, framed by "post-truth" – evident in the importance of conspiracy theories, structures of the quest, challenge, risk, and danger.
3. The presence of such invitations can be detected in one's personal intimate world.
4. The danger of social polarisation and extremism should be highlighted not only for the integrity of other persons but for their own subjectivity, who "I am" – from the response to memes to polarised gender relations.
5. There is a strong desire to renovate this reality, to build worlds based on empathy, dignity and respect for others. Among the groups, there is less confidence in government programmes, and more importance is attached to finding ways to change relationships between people.
6. It is for young people to play a role as active respondents to the forms of extremism that they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Young people must be core actors in this socio-cultural transformation.

The above points were consistent with the T2.3 results (in particular the focus groups' findings), leading to a validation and contributing to a deeper understanding and significant enrichment of the data acquired from the task.

Concluding remarks

The debate on the results achieved by the first three steps of the WP2 *Understanding Different Extremism and Radicalisation Pathways and Trends* during the two-day Workshop highlighted the importance of finding a new model to address radicalisation and involve youths as key players in prevention pathways, i.e. change the overall mindset.

The lessons learned can be summarised in four points:

1) the need to find a new model to address radicalisation, and to change mindsets in linking macro dimensions to single factors in the social scenario. The participation proposal could accomplish the impact of this solicitation with the implementation, or the model of understanding based on the micro, meso and macro level and the mixing of these levels;
2) the importance of the digital environment in radicalisation and the youth as key categories in the prevention of extremism also because they are first actors/users in the digital environments;
3) mixed methods is an action research that is particularly useful in radicalisation studies, so social labs as a participatory approach that include both can be a good approach;
4) a new model to address and approach radicalisation is required, but also a new meaning of prevention focused on the creation of a social environment that works as an antidote for radicals, focusing on dialogical exchange on the specific role of digital communication and technology.

Moreover, the roundtable with the coordinators of the EU project on radicalisation showed that the projects presented have proven to be effective in providing training and awareness-raising to the various stakeholders in order to recognise early signs of radicalisation and prevent recruitment. Participants in these projects showed an increased awareness of extremist propaganda and radicalisation, cultural and religious diversity, and a greater respect for cultural differences.
This supports the suggestion, coming also from the PARTICIPATION findings discussed in the Workshop, that we can contribute to the fight against radicalisation by adopting a proactive attitude, by providing young people who are in difficulty with access to support services and programmes. We can help by reporting suspicious or anomalous behaviour if an individual shows signs of involvement in extremist activities. Reports should be made in a responsible manner and without discrimination against certain communities.
It emerged, therefore, that European projects represent an important strategy of cooperation between countries, to share knowledge, resources and benefits such as: international visibility of problems, and public awareness in order to create an environment conducive to the prevention of radicalisation. Even if there is no predefined recipe for addressing these issues, it is important to talk about them. One thing that we learned is the fact that we are all dealing with similar challenges, but from different angles with different tools and then probably in similar but different ways.
Finally, it is important to recognise and bear in mind the fact that radicalisation is not a one-dimensional phenomenon and there is no single solution to prevent it. The root causes of radicalisation must be addressed, for example, by improving access to education, employment and social opportunities for young people, by promoting cultural and religious diversity, but also by combating discrimination and intolerance.
Radicalisation is not just a problem for young people in some communities or countries; it is a phenomenon that can affect all young people, regardless of their cultural, religious or geographical origin. The fight against radicalisation requires a shared global commitment to build a more inclusive and peaceful future for all.

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Some pictures from the **Two-day Workshop “Understanding Different Extremism and Radicalisation Pathways and Trends”**







L. Cardullo


Memes
r/Memes the original since 2008
Memes: encountered by all participants. We explored some examples in focus groups.
What are memes? r/memes: (reddit community of 22 million members)
Memes! A way of describing cultural information being shared. An element of a culture or system of behaviour that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation. (focus on 'remix'/recombination)
Combine image and text, where the image and text convey different ide
They are shared, generated and by millions of people. They are embedd
culture


polarisation
gender
media
social
people
diversity
extremism
offensive


R. Gianni


Participation