



## The Place of Populism in the Conflict Cycle

### The impact of changes on identity

The world changes from day to day. Change is a constant phenomenon that must not be over or underestimated. It is almost impossible to forecast the intensity and length of emerging trends. The process may take years, even decades. Changes automatically impact the development and evolution of the identity of individuals and societies.

One of the fundamental questions, however, is always how these changes affect social peace and cohesion, as these are important prerequisites of economic and societal development. Numerous studies<sup>1</sup> illustrate that the fragmentation of society and lack of cohesion are barriers for the optimal use of external and internal resources dedicated to development and economic growth.

Changes imply the modification of needs for public goods, that inevitably creates a conflict situation between the emerging new needs and opportunities for meeting them. The conflict situation is a positive phenomenon in itself, because it enables the stakeholders to recognize diverging interests, needs, and agree on a peaceful settlement of conflicting ideas on public goods. However, when the conflict situation is not handled skillfully, it can undermine social harmony, radicalize social actors, lead to violent acts and sometimes to extremism. However, the process leading to extremism is relatively long, and this time-span provides an opportunity to prevent tragedies.

Evidently, major changes, such as the evolution of globalization, are having an extensive influence on identities, increasing the inclination to turn from "old" to "new" and forcing individuals to revisit their views and values. Clearly, that is a complicated process which is not free of disorder and confusions. It impacts the identity of the entire society. In such situations, the comprehensive and taboo-free assessment of phenomena, trends, causes, risks, and the unbiased self-assessment of the actors are of significance. Therefore, the challenges should be addressed in a sober and reasonable manner with the view of maintaining social cohesion and harmony.

The process of globalization and its implications have fundamentally challenged and modified the values and identities of both individuals and societies. The adverse societal impacts of globalization and the 2008-2009 international financial and debt crisis, which the governments responded to through radical austerity policies as well as cutbacks in the welfare systems, have brought to the surface both the changes in needs and the demand of reforms to meet the emerged needs.

In the mid-2010s, the intensification of the wave of refugees and migrants and the rise of Islamic terrorism posed new challenges to individual and social identities. Cosmopolitan and pluralist identities collided with nationalist awareness and sentiments.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1458830335-3.Social\\_Cohesion\\_for\\_Economic\\_Growth.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1458830335-3.Social_Cohesion_for_Economic_Growth.pdf)

Similarly, divergent views on national sovereignty and the so-called sovereignty transfer have come into the limelight, since the expansion of the multilateral system and progress of integration processes as products of globalization have led to new division of labor and responsibilities between national and international actors. That has also generated a new conflict situation between those willing to partly abandon national sovereignty and the supporters of ensuring absolute priority to sovereignty.

The conflict situations mentioned above have posed unusual challenge for communal and individual identities, and generated divisions and tension at both national and international levels.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize these phenomena and tendencies through the lens of radicalization and extremism, and from the perspective of social cohesion with a focus on European states.

### **Populism as driver of social polarization**

The causes of changes which have taken place in the Western welfare societies since the 1970s can be classified as either economic-social or value-related ones, whereas evidently, the significance of each factor may vary from country to country:

- a. Economic-social factors: globalism and development of post-industrial society have amplified social inequalities and divisions; the camps of "winners" and "losers" as well as stagnation of the middle class welfare have become clear-cut; at the same time, the reform of the welfare society being able to reduce the social injustices and inequalities and ensure the subsistence of individuals as well as the adaption of the welfare society to the new circumstances lagged behind; the sentiments of vulnerability of both employers and employees, and the public's sense of insecurity have increased.
- b. Value-related factors: there have been substantial changes in the approach towards sexuality, gender, religion, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and solidarity that has eroded the traditional sets of values and customs.

The 2008 financial crisis and the wave of refugees and migrants in 2015, the increase of terrorist activities, along with the growth of disappointment and frustration due to inadequate and absent responses from European institutions include both groups of factors, so their social impact is multiplied.

The new phenomena and changes led to confusion in the public's awareness and behavior. Conservatives sticking to traditional values and the status quo sought to establish some orientation points which would be in line with their value system whilst responding to new challenges. Leftists and liberals who traditionally are more open to changes sought better protection against the new threats jeopardizing their subsistence. The traditional political actors have been unable thus far to meet expectations either nationally or internationally. Thus, much frustration, anger and fury have accumulated particularly against the mainstream parties.

All that has undermined traditional party systems, eroded the prestige of the so-called “elite”, and opened a political and psychological vacuum within societies. Particularly the elderly generation, the poor, and the low skilled, as well as those living in small rural settlements have become disillusioned. Consequently, demand has increased for new political structures and people capable of effectively responding to these new challenges to the status-quo.

This vacuum has been filled by new political actors and personalities able to offer solutions to conflict situations which crisscross the dividing lines between traditional left and right values. That created a qualitatively new, identity-based divide within the population and led to a rise of "we" - "them" groups in the societies. The public discourse has become rough.

In the economic field, by over-emphasizing national identity, the new actors proclaimed the absolute primacy of national sovereignty and national capabilities (protectionism). Against the market-oriented and multilateral solutions offered by globalism and neo-liberalism they supported the ideas of a regulated market, and social progress within the nation-state framework. Furthermore, they proclaimed economic and social equality with some utopian harmony. In international economic relations, they gave priority to bilateral agreements.

On refugee and migration issues, they emphasize the ethnic and religious homogeneity of society, spreading exclusionary nationalism, occasionally chauvinism and xenophobia, against the ideas of multiculturalism, inclusion, social diversity and cosmopolitanism.

The new actors also confronted both the European identities and the aspirations of integration by emphasizing the primacy of national awareness and the role of national governments and institutions. That approach has broken the traditional ambitions which had ensured the delicate balance between national sovereignty and international community values and interests that has been a fundamental guarantee for the progress of the European integration project from the outset.

The new actors contrasted the present with a "golden past", and opposed national identities and traditions to the new values accompanying the expansion of globalism.

All in all, they have ascended as a “new power with a new approach and awareness” who are able to give swift responses to the new challenges of the emerging new world order, and provide a "new future", as opposed to the "old elite" who represents the "declining past" and is unable to govern and introduce the necessary reforms.

They qualify themselves as the sole and exclusive representatives of the “people” whilst they only acknowledge “people” that are part of the population who support them. Only their identity is “authoritative” and “national”. There exists only one truth: theirs. Essentially, they have come into play with the battle-cry of “all power to the people”. (That is just one step away from the spirit of the “all power to the Soviets”.)

Their principal element of existence is the creation of enemies. Their goals are characterized by anti-pluralism, refusal of diversity, exclusion, monopolization and centralization of power which is expanded beyond politics to governance, media and the legal-system. The situation created by them

may not be qualified as a classical dictatorial set up but the direction of the process leads, doubtlessly, to autocracy and dictatorship.

The driving force of their behavior is open confrontation: they present each problem and conflict-situation as an antagonistic contradiction, fighting against the “other”, and part of the struggle between the "new-minded people" and the "old-minded elite".

In their approach towards challenges they simplify the problems, refer to "higher ideals" and generate conflict-situations. Their rhetoric inflames, stigmatizes, hates, and occasionally demonizes.

In the context of each issue, they strive to enhance their own group-identity and group-coherence (the fuel of “in-group”-sentiments), on the one hand, and emphasize the differences and oppositions with the “others” being out of their group (the fuel of "out-group sentiments”), on the other hand. They qualify dialogue with other political actors representing distinct views as an ineffective method of the old political elite. They envisage the implementation of their anti-elite and anti-establishment attitude through “expelling” others only.

The antagonism and identity-based group approach axiomatically promotes a charismatic and “powerful” leader who is able and willing to confront, a leadership method which, over time, tends towards autocracy.

Much of the above described features of the “new political actor” apply to the "populist" parties who since the end of the 18th century, have been playing a varying political role in both national and international political arenas.

According to a study<sup>2</sup> released by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in December 2017, between 2000 and 2017, the number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled (from 33 to 63), while populist votes have risen from 8.5% to 24.1% .

It is important to underline that it is difficult to generalize the features of populist actors. There are substantive differences between not only leftist and rightist populist movements, but they also distinct at the national level. There exist some populist movements who reject and some who support the values of liberal democracy; there are some who are xenophobic and there are some who are inclusive.

### **Polarization: an identity-based conflict**

In the public discourse, polarization means a sharp division within a community or the entire society and an unusual degree of opposition and tension between groups of people.

Bart Brandsma<sup>3</sup>, philosopher, understands polarization as “us versus them thinking” where the conflict parties, the “pushers” unlike in traditional conflict situations, instead of focusing on the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://institute.global/insight/renewing-centre/european-populism-trends-threats-and-future-prospects>

<sup>3</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. Ex-post paper. *RAN POLARISATION MANAGEMENT MANUAL*

original object of the conflict, attack the identities, the religious, ethnic, racial, national, cultural or even political affiliation of “the other”. In doing so, the original problem is simplified and put in terms of "black and white", the community and society is divided between "good" and "bad", "us" and "them". The positions are presented through demagoguery, monologues, and frequent repetitions, the dispute is fueled by adverse emotions. There is no wish for real dialogue or compromise.

In my view, the polarization theory forwarded by Brandsma could in many aspects be applied to situations characterized by intense populist activities where the populist actors assume the role of the pressing “pusher” and generate division within the given community or society.

However, polarization is not just a specific and static conflict situation. It also has its own dynamic. It is an advanced phase of the conflict process. The main features of the polarized situation are, apart from hardening of identities, labeling, stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion, hatred, demonization. This conflict stage implies a significant security risk because the above mentioned phenomena are components of the radicalization process, at the end of which lie hate speech, group violence<sup>4</sup> and the act of hate crime, and in extreme cases, mass atrocity crimes (genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes). Within the polarized community, both dialogue and mediation, that is, the possibilities of a peaceful end are narrowed.

According to Ervin Staub<sup>5</sup>, psychologist, the cause of collective violence is often the lack of basic human needs, difficult living conditions, that generate a destructive attitude and “give rise to scapegoating”. “Discrimination can change individuals and groups and lead to an evolution that ends in mass killing”. The "dominant" poles or groups generally develop a self-legitimizing ideology that subordinates the other group to their group. There develops an ideology of antagonism, which discriminates against the "other" group and then positions it as a fatal enemy. The process can last through generations. Experience shows that over time, minor discrimination focused initially on individuals gradually evolves and transforms into societal-wide discrimination, directed against groups. Staub points out that the role of the elite<sup>6</sup> is particularly important in such situations at risk.

Brandsma's polarization assessment and Staub's concept of collective violence are in line with the nine-stages model of conflict escalation developed by the philosopher Friedrich Glasl<sup>7</sup> who argues that the features of polarization are part of the second third of the conflict process. Also, these are consistent with the ten-stage processual model of genocide<sup>8</sup> put forward by Gregory Stanton who places polarization within the sixth stage of the process. The common feature of these models is that division and polarization based on group identity represent an advanced stage of a conflict cycle leading to radicalization, violence and extremism. In these situations it is very difficult, almost impossible, to find a "win-win" solution and the likelihood of the "winner-loser" and, in extreme

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<sup>4</sup> Ervin Staub: *The Origins and Prevention of Genocide, Mass Killing and Other Collective Violence* (1999)

<sup>5</sup> Ervin Staub: *The Origins and Prevention of Genocide, Mass Killing and Other Collective Violence* (1999)

<sup>6</sup> The same as above

<sup>7</sup> Nine-stage Model of Conflict Escalation,  
[cms.spinnenwerk.de/.../A%20%209%20stage%20model%20of%20co...](https://www.spinnenwerk.de/.../A%20%209%20stage%20model%20of%20co...)



cases, the "lose-lose", or that of a tragic outcome, increases.

## The Process of Group Violence

Radicalization and extremism stemming from polarization increase the risk of violent acts, so-called group violence<sup>9</sup>. One of the peculiarities of group violence is that even average, "normal" individuals are able to hurt others on behalf of their group.<sup>10</sup> For example, let us think of the fact that neither the nearly two hundred thousand Rwandan Hutus nor an educated suicide terrorist coming from the middle class may be considered a psychopathological case<sup>11</sup>.

The risks of extreme violence is even higher as some empirical studies show that an aggressive behavior due to a frustrating event encourages individuals to commit further aggression<sup>12</sup>.

In an in-group-out-group situation, the competition for power, the desire to keep attained positions or the sentiment of an increased threat may also motivate members of a group to commit violence against the "other" group in order to "protect" their own group. Discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice could also trigger aggression<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to underline that the process of radicalization leads not necessarily and only gradually to extremism and mass atrocities. In the beginning, violent acts appear in a "soft" disguise: intimidation, indirect threats through the tools of demagoguery and rhetoric, power demonstrations, processions, intimidating marches, etc.

The more evident and "hard" forms of violent acts include violence well known also in democracies, for example, street clashes between opposing parties, groups, or politically motivated terrorist acts for which some initially peaceful meetings convened in the context of state holidays, or demonstrations organized for protection of interests may also provide an opportunity.

However, as an impact of instigation and accumulated hatred dominating the public discourse this type of group violence can easily turn into identity-motivated hate crimes and eventually, lead to mass atrocities.

The risk of underestimating the threats is increased by the fact that a significant number of states, particularly the developed democracies, albeit to different extent, perceive themselves legally and institutionally prepared for handling and preventing the acts of violence. However, this perception is also a source of complacency and negligence, because the prevention and handling of identity-motivated violence require specific risk assessment, preparedness, and capabilities which are

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<sup>8</sup> [https://genocideducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten\\_stages\\_of\\_genocide.pdf](https://genocideducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Rebeca Littman and Elizabeth Levy Paluck: The Cycle of Violence: Understanding Individual Participation in Collective Violence (2014) Under political collective violence the authors mean among others genocide, mass killings, insurgent movements and terrorism

<sup>10</sup> The same as above

<sup>11</sup> The same as above

<sup>12</sup> The same as above

<sup>13</sup> The same as above

distinct from the traditional tools of law enforcement.

For effective prevention, concerned social actors should constantly monitor and systematically evaluate social processes through the polarization and extremism lenses, on the one hand, and build up the legal and law enforcement and civic capabilities, conditions and attitudes, on the other. These might help prevent extreme acts and reduce the risks of even ad-hoc cooperation between extremist forces and political-terrorism, and the perpetration of crimes. Regrettably, however, the international community, even the advanced democratic states, are in infancy as concerns these requirements because, for example, despite many years of efforts, there is still no standardized approach to observing, registering, statistical recording and evaluating identity-based violent acts, that would be the basis for prevention. Similarly, societies also miss a tool for measuring polarization along political and ideological lines.

### **Handling an identity-based conflict situation**

From the perspectives of prevention and handling the polarization stage of the conflict cycle, it is vital to know that, unlike the preceding “classical” conflict stage, the target group of the “pressing” conflict actor is only apparently the “other” conflict party. As Brandsma points out, the conflict is not about the dispute of the issue. The emphasis between the “poles” is placed on winning over the un-polarized mass, the “middle”, and increase by that the number of its own group on an identity basis.

In such a situation, it is a strategic failure to reckon with any meaningful dialogue or hope for any consensus or agreement with the “pressing” pole. In order to halt the process of escalation, the “others”, the “passive” pole should focus not on the dispute with the “pressing” pole. Instead the emphasis of the activities should be placed on halting the spread of the “fire” and preventing further polarization of the “middle”. As the moving spirit of the “pressing” pole lies in its polemics, the fueling of sentiments, the expansion of polarization and the prolongation of the confrontation, the possibilities and frameworks for a dialogue or dispute are misused by the “pressing” pole. The discussion, therefore, is not only worthless and useless, but also explicitly harmful from the aspect of preventing radicalization.

Addressing the challenges of the polarization stage of the conflict cycle requires tools which differ from those used in those “classical” conflict situations. The situation demands qualitatively new reflections and actions. Although experts set out a number of options - the toolkit includes isolation, dialogue, mediation, dispute, and activities at a community level - there is no panacea or universally agreed approach. Experience has shown that, for example, exclusion or isolation are not solutions. Furthermore, mediating efforts can easily fail as the mediator or dialogue facilitator – whilst trying to find some common points - may become a sort of scapegoat. Therefore, actions on multiple fronts are needed.

It is a general rule that rational solutions must be found in line with the current legal order to address uncertainties, fears and concerns and channel them into an objective framework in order to reduce the possibilities for an identity-driven and emotionally-laden approach. The sooner the feelings of uncertainty, threat and fear cease, the sooner the fuel of polarization evaporates. In

addition, agreements on the solution of certain problems force the “pressing” poles into a “reacting” role which is less suitable for forging political benefits.

Even if the conflict cycle reaches the polarization stage it is still possible to prevent further escalation and to address the posed challenges, if attention is focused on the objective exploration of human needs and requirements. To that end, dialogue could be an effective tool but it must be conducted with the "middle" and should be initiated first and foremost in the local communities with the proclaimed aim to explore basic needs and concerns instead of pressing views on the dialogue partners. Such an approach allows for both the harmonization of solutions with the traditional values and the revision of values in light of the particular challenges. A “positive” communication, however, which does not equal persuasion and propaganda but which counteracts identity politics is still needed in the course of dialogue. The point and significance of the dialogue process is to establish a direct link between politicians, technocrats and local people, and create a “postbox” for the population where needs and wishes could be “thrown in” and responses in merits could be “taken out”.

Such a new sort of dialogue could become appropriate for filling the political and communication vacuum and narrowing the gap between the technocrats and the people which has emerged during the last decades. I wish to underline that the existing gap at the social level has been reduced by the populists superficially only, as through the exclusion of the “others” they have created new gaps within societies.

All that may be the beginning and the foundation of a new type of dialogue between the political elite and the people, where the lost confidence of the traditional value-oriented voters could be regained and an objective alternative against the identity-based approach could be offered. Such an approach, of course, requires a kind of self-review of values and their representation by mainstream parties and their adaptation to new challenges. The pre-condition for the success of local dialogue and communication is its truthfulness and credibility. That also necessitates the emergence of new, and not yet discredited structures and personalities.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize how indispensable it is to establish and maintain frameworks for dialogue between representatives of majorities and minorities and not to go over the heads of the concerned parties to explore the roots of an ethnic, religious or cultural-based conflict, to create long-term peace and to build cohesion in a social community. This type of dialogue at the community level helps to reduce the feeling of prejudice, hatred and anger, threats, prevent "in-group" and "out-group", "we" and "they" constructions, strengthen the confidence and tolerance and create long-term compromises. This sort of dialogue also strengthens the community's immunity against messages that inspire negative emotions, thereby diverting the air needed to fuel polarization. This community-level dialogue should, therefore, be supported and assisted.

In the new situation the mainstream political actors may not act in isolation. Elimination and counterbalancing of divisions created along the identity lines require formation of new alliances across traditional value systems and even across national borders.

In handling identity-based challenges, special attention must be paid to educating youth, shaping



their social behavior, tolerance, mutual respect, acceptance and inclusion of the “others”. This should be made an integrated part of the education system and these capabilities should be developed in the next generation.

In halting and preventing polarization, social media also has a major role to play as it provides an ever-broadening space for the dissemination of views and opinions. For halting the process of polarization, new algorithms need to be developed and applied to weaken the possibility of creating groups on identity or sentiment basis (weakening in-group-out-group set ups). According to current practice, the algorithms used on community platforms online, on the contrary, primarily support group formation.

## **Findings**

Change can bring about renewal, but it can also lead to catastrophe. The dilemma is whether nation states and the international community have the necessary capabilities and tools to address the challenges and risks arising from polarization and populism, to restore social cohesion and peaceful relations, and to reintegrate and harmonize societies.

The active and passive actors within society alike should be aware of the risks and responsibilities of polarization, as a polarized set up is an advanced state of the conflict cycle, the process is characterized by radicalization and its direction is extremism, along with all its damaging and tragic implications. It is important to be aware that national processes do not stop at borders. Radicalized poles hunt associates internationally, as their vital interest is to spread conflicts and increase tensions. The challenge is particularly dangerous because the perpetration of extreme crimes is considered by the public as a kind of "distant" and "theoretical" possibility, and do not find it necessary to improve extant capabilities in countering such processes in merit.

However, that is a mistake and an illusion. The continuous fueling of adverse emotions increases unnoticed the threshold of tolerance and the intensity of polarization continuously grows. Public atmosphere reaches nearly unnoticed the point to undertake violent actions.

Early response, therefore, is needed. Obviously, the challenges to be faced and the extant capabilities and measures to be taken are different in each country but preparing self-assessments and taking a series of counter-measures at each national level are indispensable.

We need to reckon with the survival and possible increase of the influence of the actors escalating polarization. Persistence of the conflict, the rhetoric, and public discourse fueling hatred will remain with us in the medium term. This is due to the fact that the reduction and elimination of economic and social injustices and inequalities, migration and inherent diversity as well as the adaptation of traditional social structures, legal order and public discourse to the new situation, the elaboration and implementation of new programs and reforms require time.

The rapid expansion of digitalization, robotization, and artificial intelligence introduces new and significant economic-social and identity-related challenges and uncertainties into the circles of voters and offers new space and opportunities for national and international polarization.

The risks of radicalization will further strengthen due to the forthcoming economic recession and possible crisis.

On the basis of all these, it is obvious that all social and international actors, especially the political elite, bears the responsibility to pay due attention to the process and risks of polarization and populism, to do everything possible to prevent escalation, and reduce the likelihood of national or even international tragedies.