

# *Introduction to The Virus of Radicalization: In Poland, that is, everywhere*

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! Collegium Civitas

# C O L L E G I U M   C I V I T A S

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Introduction to  
*The Virus of Radicalization:*  
In Poland, that is, everywhere

Paweł Kuczyński

Abstract

In Poland, like everywhere radicalization process begins in the heads but also begins online. It is like a viral disease which finds growth conditions in places affected by severe consequences of inflation, pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In our book we document the rapid growth of extreme attitudes. We pay attention to small, noisy, visible or hidden, dangerous groups that appear in many countries and threaten democracy. The majority of authors of the articles are interested in the process of radicalization, and therefore the sources of its dynamics, not radicalism as such. We understand the latter notion in the simplest possible way, as the use of symbolic and physical violence against other citizens and in public space. Most of the texts in this book are case studies, although the reader will also find theoretical concepts. The authors of several articles participated in the Dialogue on Radicalization and Equality project, coordinated by the University of Manchester.

Keywords

far-right, populism, retropia, nationalism, fascism, neo-fascism, social movements, radicalization, violence

Radicalization begins in the head. This trivial statement needs to be supplemented: radicalization begins online.

In our book, we want to document the rapid growth and dissemination of extreme attitudes. There are many examples of this phenomenon in history but the twenty-first century “is a completely different story,” as we are dealing with a network society.

Most of the articles collected here are based on the results of empirical research on groups that are being rapidly radicalized. The authors ask similar questions, wishing to understand what conditions are conducive to the rapid development of moods and behaviors referred to as radical. The two goals of our joint work are to describe and contextually explain radicalization. We put the main emphasis on understanding this phenomenon in a dynamic, *milleus* way. We pay far less attention to radicalism in a political or philosophical context. This is an important topic for consideration that we have included in the last section of this book to provide a conceptual reference point for empirical sociological analysis.

The authors of the articles mark the territory of their analyses but they are aware that the geographical location of the phenomenon in which they are interested does not prevent its cross-border nature and drawing conclusions that go far beyond the “place of birth.” Radicalization is like a viral disease that starts anywhere to reach different corners of the world. Many countries are shaken by crises that cross their borders in both directions. Radicalizing groups find growth conditions in places affected by the severe effects of inflation, the war in Ukraine, and the emergence of new COVID-19 mutations.

It must be strongly emphasized that the disease of progressive radicalization begins in groups that until recently seemed devoid of much political significance. Meanwhile, small but noisy environments affect the close and distant surroundings with unexpected power. The internet is a new public space, whose dubious value is that it allows people to influence others without taking account of anyone and anything. Social media, along with politics, provide publicity to radicalized groups. The door

opens to symbolic violence and hate speech, which are the last steps before physical violence. Both threaten the foundations of social order.

Our analysis is well served by an organicistic metaphor that some may consider out-of-date since it goes back to the beginnings of functionalism, that is, the oldest paradigm of sociology. Referring to Durkheim, one can talk today about anomie and the disintegration of social bonds, realizing that this time they are once again about discontinuity (breaking), that is, abrupt social change. If we say that this or that society is plagued by disease,<sup>1</sup> it is to draw attention to important social problems, not to formulate a claim for scientific verification. Into such a broad framework, which is a kind of metaphor, we place the authors' attempts to build grounded theories, based on data collected by various methods, such as observation, analysis of content published on the internet, statistical analysis, in-depth interviews, and standardized surveys.

In our book, there is also a place for the view that a crisis can be a turning point, a new opening, or a breakthrough. It may mean a desire to return to the roots, to the bygone "better world," which allows researchers to refer to Bauman's concept of *retrotopia*. Will tectonic movements of unprecedented force, such as war and the climate crisis, lead to a breakthrough in the production and consumption of energy, will the habits of the rich world change, and will nature breathe a sigh of relief? We do not know but it is difficult to defend the thesis that the radicalization processes we are observing will lead to positive breakthroughs.

Pop culture is dominated by catastrophic images, from which science is also not free. Alarming predictions and prophetic visions are not the subjects of this work. We want to follow the symptoms of the disease caused by the virus of radicalization. We pay attention primarily to its

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<sup>1</sup> In his interesting book, Michel Dobry devotes much attention to the "medical metaphor," which he tries to overcome as ubiquitous in the analysis of political crises, and writes: "Undoubtedly, the heavy patterns of sociological organicism and assumptions of a directly ideological nature have not completely disappeared from contemporary works" (Dobry 1995: 44). The question of whether he has completely succeeded returns in the conclusions to his book, cf. p. 275 *et seq.* In my opinion, if we associate the definitions of radicalization with violence, both the metaphor of the disease and the reference to democracy as an anti-violence prevention measure are most appropriate.

outbreaks and use empirical data to talk about the manner and rate of transmission of the infection and the typical phases of fever and its recurrences.

The correlate of radicalization is the decreased resilience that has been and is to be provided by institutions that have been developed over the decades to prevent violence. Stored in memory, the experiences of other generations – people who managed to survive genocide, war, ethnic cleansing, and bloody revolutions – are not a sufficient guarantee that the deepest social crises will not be repeated. Respect for differences, public debate, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, and a free media and tolerance are no longer a shield against hate speech and the use of violence, either symbolic or physical. The aggression of radicalizing groups hits not only their opponents but also completely incidental victims. The specter of retaliation penetrates the daily lives of groups and individuals, accelerating radicalization, which fuels political parties competing for every vote and those revolutionary social movements that dream of a better world right away.

An important source of data that has contributed to and inspired this book to some extent is the international research project entitled *Dialogue about Radicalization and Equality* (DARE), in which Collegium Civitas was one of the partners.<sup>2</sup>

The basic aim of this multithreaded project was to draw attention to the phenomenon referred to here as “foci of radicalization.” Researchers in the DARE project agreed that the essence of the problem is best captured by the term “milieu,” meaning a social environment. The second important distinguishing feature of this research is that it focuses on young people not exceeding 30 years of age.<sup>3</sup> Third, the process of radicalization that breaks through into the political sphere is sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> Information on this subject is available on the website: DIALOGUE ABOUT RADICALIZATION AND EQUALITY – Home, <https://www.dare-h2020.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> The data set drawn on includes interviews with just under 200 research participants, most aged between 15 and 30 years, and over 150 ethnographic observations. The analysis addresses five research questions concerning

culturally or religiously based. Namely, seemingly insignificant political circles become part of the political game. This politicization of protest movements, as exemplified by the “anti-vaxxers” in 2020 and 2021, takes place regardless of whether the participants of these movements want it or not. Even if they declare themselves distant from politics, this is no obstacle for political parties that fight each other and use any means to achieve their goals to use radicalizing groups. Political leaders send their voters a signal to attack, which is clearer for a large part of society than recovery programs or slogans in which no one believes.

Unfortunately, the figure of the “scapegoat” works best in a crisis. As Rene Girard, who devoted many of his works to this topic, writes:

“No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and “differences” that define cultural divisions” (Girard 1987: 30).

It is worth mentioning that the DARE project has shown that the representatives of the milieu surveyed mostly distanced themselves equally from violence and politics. Polish football club hooligans not only dissociated themselves from certain political teams but also defended themselves against media stigmatization, claiming that they were labelled “extremists.”

In one of the reports, summarizing a large part of the DARE project, a comparative analysis of nine selected countries was carried out. The radicalizing groups were divided, on the one hand, into those directly declaring right-wing nationalist radicalism, most pronounced in England, France, the Netherlands, Malta, and Norway, and, on the other, into circles defined as non-political interest groups examined in Greece, Germany, Poland, and Russia.

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milieu actors: (1) understandings of “radicalism,” “extremism,” and “terrorism;” (2) encounters with radical(izing) messages; (3) understandings of (in)equality and its role in radicalization; (4) narratives of their trajectories towards and away from extremism; (5) visions of a better society and how they envisage achieving change.

The general assumptions of the entire project have been briefly laid out in the introduction to this report:

“Starting from a critical approach to the concept of «radicalization» and a concern with understanding the everyday contexts of young people’s engagements with radical(izing) messages, the focus on milieus provides a new way to understand how individual trajectories towards radical or extremist positions are situated in social environments (offline and online) that sustain them” (Pilkington, Vestel 2021: 4).

The DARE project has shown that – despite the multiple definitions of radicalization and numerous theories referring either to attitudes or actions or to both components together – what unites the studied milieus is the admissibility of various forms of violence. Even though violence was verbally rejected in the surveyed communities (with a few exceptions) (*Ibidem*: 40-44), it is this factor that comes to the fore and allows us to see the line towards which radicalization is heading. There is only one step from symbolic violence to physical violence, which is practiced by English and Polish football hooligans, who organize not only “brawls” but also street fights with the police and hostile football clubs.

The violent practices, developed in the streets, stadiums, or sports clubs, are conducive to direct attacks against their “cultural” opponents, and are sometimes considered acceptable by the groups surveyed in the DARE project in Greece and Russia. Creating a space where physical and political aggression is combined is impossible without the participation of the media and politicians who build their social capital on xenophobia and ethnonationalism. In this sense, paramilitary groups that are supposed to act in the name and defense of the Greek Orthodox Church, which is the state religion, have much in common with specialized football militias that practice combat sports and transfer patterns of aggressive behavior into the public space. In Poland, most examples of this phenomenon are provided by independence marches and attacks by football fanatics on equality parades and demonstrations in defense of women’s rights.



Everyone should ask themselves whether they could be brutally attacked or beaten up simply because of their views or appearance. Radicalization that starts in people's heads and online does not necessarily lead to the use of violence in the name of one or another prejudice or ideology. However, there is a danger that each of the milieus examined as part of the DARE project may cross the invisible line between symbolic violence – which is manifested every day in hate speech – and physical violence. It suffices that the “other” appears on the horizon.

Our publication consists of three parts. The first refers to radicalization processes, which are seen from a broad perspective, not only the European one.

It opens with an article by Magda El Ghamari, who well illustrates the thesis that nowadays radicalization proliferates thanks to the internet. The author is interested in how radicalized jihadist circles use a persuasively and expertly constructed image of the world, aimed at young people and their recruitment. Magda El Ghamari has studied internet content and collected many data from sources that are difficult to access for Western sociologists, not least because of their lack of knowledge of Arabic languages.

Łukasz Jurczyszyn's text is based on three sources of data: the aforementioned DARE, a research project commissioned by the Polish Commission for Human Rights Office and Collegium Civitas Centre for Sociological Interventions, and analyses of the Polish Institute of International Affairs. The author undertakes the issue of terrorism and the “weaponization of migrants.” The phenomenon he describes also applies to the war in Ukraine, a topic in the book that cannot be missed. As he writes, “Foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine have taken part in subsequent conflicts, including fighting on the side of the Kurds against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or working as mercenaries.”

Viktor Pushkar, from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, presents scenarios for ending the war in Ukraine, realizing that peace, which is impossible to imagine today, requires going beyond the

description of the current situation. Based on his research, conducted from 2013 to 2021, that is, from the very beginning of the war, he also claims that “The sides in the conflict are large groups that have developed different cultures. Wrong estimations of the cultural distance between Ukraine and Russia were among the conflict drivers.” Although there is little indication that the war in Ukraine will bring a resolution, the author presents three possible solutions to this conflict, emphasizing that the decentralization of post-Russian territory is a necessary condition for lasting peace in post-imperial Europe.

Most of the texts in this publication have been written by Polish sociologists. They pay a lot of attention to the fractures in Polish society, that is, both the polarization of attitudes and views and progressive radicalization, which is no longer limited to small groups. There are many arguments in favor of the thesis that radicalization, most often interpreted as political action, has a cultural background.

This thesis is well illustrated by the text closing the first part of this book. It was written by two sociologists from the University of Warsaw who conducted a comparative analysis of survey results, focusing on attitudes to the European Union and Christianity. Based on the collected data, Joanna Konieczna-Salamatin and Maja Sawicka have described a phenomenon they call “traditionalization.” Its importance can hardly be overestimated when it comes to Poland’s future in the European Union, since the circles described by the authors as “the last bastion and bulwark of Christianity” are not open to public debate and leave no room to develop a political and legal compromise on issues such as the rights of non-heteronormative people or the ban on abortion. What is important is that traditionalism, as a return to the roots, fuels radicalization and is exploited politically, including in the rhetoric of the Kremlin. The aggressor justifies the crimes “historically,” creating a false myth to deny the Ukrainian nation the right to an independent state.

Continuing the question of how Polish society is positioned in this European and post-Soviet landscape, we move on to the second part of our

book, which contains case studies on radicalizing groups. These milieus can be described in the language of a selected theory of social movements. Radicalizing groups very often sprout outside the sphere of politics and thus require vigilance from researchers interested in this phenomenon. This also applies to the phase of their inclusion in politics. In many countries, football fanatics have become political actors. In Poland, this process began in 2012, gaining importance after 2015, that is, after the Law and Justice (PiS) party won the elections. From 2020 to 2022, again not only in Poland, anti-vaccine movements entered the political scene.<sup>4</sup> The governments of many countries (including those outside Europe, for example, in Australia and Canada) had to take them into account.

Przemysław Witkowski describes a protest movement that is less well known than the anti-vaccination movement: he writes about a movement in Poland that protests against 5G, that is, the expansive global mobile technology standard. Its opponents consider 5G such a serious threat that they have not shied away from destroying telecommunications masts, allowing the author of the article to talk about the hallmarks of terrorism.

Religious communities described by Agnieszka Bukowska, who draws attention to the phenomenon of religious violence, form a non-political radicalized movement. The author has analyzed circles led by radical militants. She has conducted case studies of two such milieus: Soldiers of Christ and Warriors of Mary. Interestingly, one of the founders of this first formation shares the views of anti-vaxxers.

The subject of the war in Ukraine is not among the main threads in our book. Today, as far as it affects wider circles of society, radicalization is culturally based and leads to cultural aggression. It can be called “war,” although this term is too strong in the light of Russia’s military attack. Cultural aggression posed by radicalizing communities currently most often affects ethnic and national minorities and immigrants, as well as women and LGBT+ communities.

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<sup>4</sup> There is an excellent book on the subject: Hugo-Bader 2022.

Although European public opinion in 2022 was focused on military operations in Ukraine, it is still worth asking about the direction in which German, Hungarian, or Romanian societies are changing. Polish and Ukrainian public opinion is concerned with the question of whether Western societies are aware of the threat that Russian aggression poses to Europe and the world. News services look for an answer to the question of how far Russians support Putin's mad plan, driven by an ideology that Timothy Snyder (2018) has described as schizofascism. As the months pass, it becomes increasingly clear that the Kremlin's aggression was aimed directly at Ukrainian society. The image of this war at the end of 2022 was not the battlefields, but the intensifying targeted bombing of civilian targets, housing estates, and energy infrastructure.

We do not need opinion polls to state that, as a result of the war, both Russian and Ukrainian societies have become radicalized and distanced to such an extent that a return to the past and mutual understanding seems completely out of the question. The Kremlin's propaganda has been working for many years to convince the Russians of a threat from internal enemies, including the LGBT community or non-governmental organizations stigmatized as spy agencies. Using the scarecrow of external enemies, such as NATO and the United States, was not enough.

A representative of the young generation of Russian sociologists, Mariya Yakhina, has described the process of social change in Russia as radicalization, focusing on a gender-related example. The author presents a little-known movement called the Male State, reconstructing its history and ideology, which is anti-feminist, anti-Western, and leaning towards fascism. This movement was banned in Russia and, as the author shows, has gone underground. It can be described as a laboratory of radicalization. After all, it has found an audience and supporters using the arguments of the ideologues of the Russian World (*Russkij Mir*) portrayed as the only civilizational alternative to the effeminate and decadent West.

The second part of our book also includes other case studies that illustrate the general processes emerging with varying intensity across

Europe. It is worth noting that the main “heroes” of these analyses, including the Russian thread, are young men. When it comes to Poland, we devote much space to native football fanatics. Two texts, whose authors were members of the Polish DARE research team, deal with the subject of a group that became so radical that it formed an efficient reservoir of human resources for nationalists.

Rafał Pankowski and Przemysław Witkowski show how the process of political radicalization of football fans appeared in many countries, and how it absorbed, openly or covertly, fascist symbols. The authors richly document the last decade’s history of right-wing extremism in Poland.

Paweł Kuczyński’s analysis of the circle of fanatical football fans is of a different nature. He draws attention to the patterns of masculinity in this community and the conditions of socialization, or rather male initiation, when an absent father is replaced by friends from the local football fan club. The materials for this analysis come from in-depth interviews with the fanatical fans of several top Polish professional league football clubs, conducted as part of the DARE project. The anthropological dimension of this analysis does not obscure the question of politics. The author shows how patterns of aggression – symbolic and physical – trained in fights with police and with fans of the opposing football club, whom they treat as their enemies – are transferred to culturally different groups, such as immigrants and gays. This is the basis for xenophobia and radical right-wing nationalism, benefiting from the support of PiS politicians.

The last part of this book contains two articles that are of a different nature and are not based on empirical research.

In the first text, Mikołaj Rakusa-Suszczewski continues his analysis of radicalism, which he has been conducting for several years. This time, he aims at characterizing a “radical man.” His text provides a counterpoint to the analyses described in this publication because it does not fit into the approach that treats radicalization as a process embedded in

the present day and animated by specific social circles. This is a completely different perspective. The emphasis is on the historically changing understanding of radicalism, which brings us to the field of the sociology of knowledge. Moreover, it is an alternative text as the author finds a common source of hope for fundamental changes in the philosophical discourse about radicalism.

Speaking of returning to the roots, it is worth paying attention to nostalgia as a state of social consciousness or social mood. This publication is perfectly summed up by a reflection on the relationship between populism and political radicalism, which – as Lech Szczegółła writes – has always been a challenge to democracy. Referring to the concept of retrotopia proposed by Zygmunt Bauman, the author shows how the career of ultranationalism progresses in various parts of the world, not only in the post-communist bloc. According to Jason Stanley, quoted by Szczegółła, this distinct construct, which refers to a mythical past, making a career nowadays, is dangerous because it uses a proto-fascist communication strategy.

The reader of this book will probably notice that the authors of the collected texts pay attention primarily to the cultural contexts of radicalization, rarely referring to structuralist explanations, especially to the issue of social inequalities. Without negating the issue of class differentiation, it is worth noting their lesser importance in explaining the part of the process of threats to the democratic order that we are interested in. After all, among the club's football fanatics we will find representatives of various social classes, as well as among the leaders of the Islamist radical milieus.

At least three factors contributing to radicalization can be identified. The first is the sense of exclusion that connects very different groups. The second is the threat to group identities caused by the processes of modernization and globalization, which deepen social inequalities. The third is the use of a new public space, i.e. the Internet, which gives previously

unknown technical possibilities of mass distribution of messages and manipulation of emotions.

The growing social unrest has spread beyond national borders and has the hallmarks of a crisis, if not global, then supranational, since Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán find themselves in it. A fertile ground has been created for the growth of populist politicians on the one hand and radicalizing social groups on the other, about which we write in our publication. Moreover, these politicians, a kind of populist-nationalist international, pretend to be implementing a task of a historical dimension, which involves saving the world from liberalism, from which they benefit abundantly. Tangled processes related to economic and political crises effectively undermine all institutions of democratic order. In this situation, ultranationalist politicians do not propose programs, but a return to the past. A common language of radicalized groups and political leaders is thus emerging.


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Paweł Kuczyński, sociologist, lecturer and researcher at Collegium Civitas. Main specialization: social movements and radicalization. Scholar of École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris and Harvard Business School in Boston. He led projects of sociological interventions accompanying macro-structural investments (revitalization, environmental protection, energy, road infrastructure).

Participant of the Polish-French study “Solidarity as a Social Movement” conducted by Alain Touraine and Jan Strzelecki. On behalf of Collegium Civitas, coordinator of the international project of the European Commission DARE (Dialogue on Radicalization and Equality), led by the University of Manchester, devoted to the extreme right and islamophobia. Publications on women's protest movements, STOP ACTA, Maidan and a global movement to help war refugees from Ukraine.

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

Jacek Lubecki, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science and International Studies, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, USA

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