

POLITICAL RADICALISATION IN NOWADAYS EUROPE

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Abstract: *Political radicalisation has been a growing threat in Europe in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought with it social isolation measures and economic problems, mixed with people's frustrations, dissatisfaction and lack of trust in traditional parties and state institutions, has created fertile ground for nationalist-populist discourses. By using social media, leaders of radical parties have taken advantage of this context, thus gaining popularity by promoting a demagogic and savior discourse. This article analyzes and describes, political radicalization, exemplifying the magnitude of the phenomenon at the European level through 2 case studies.*

Keywords: *populism, radicalisation, political radicalisation, extremism, far-right, Europe, politics.*

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Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought economic difficulties and social crises, Europe is currently facing a new major security challenge: political radicalisation. Political radicalisation has seen a surge during the pandemic, as people were skeptical about the virus, dissatisfied with the isolation measures adopted, which led to a change in daily life style. The activity of most people moved online, leading to social isolation, thus facilitating the radical and conspiratorial discourses that were initially spread on social media. The measures adopted by the traditional ruling parties during and after the pandemic, along with economic destabilization and people's frustrations and distrust in the current governance, have created fertile ground for the growth of populist and radical discourses among a large majority of the population.

The general context created at the european level generated an advantage for far-right parties that took advantage of the situation, thus casting a larger number of voters through populist, nationalist and “savior” narratives. Moreover, following the attraction of supporters of radical ideologies, populist political parties have gained a significant percentage in elections organized both at the states level and at the European Union level.

Thus, it is important that academic research in the field of political radicalisation maintains a constant level, and that researchers analyze current cases and the diversity and innovation through using emergent

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technologies in the way that radical political discourse is propagated in order to maintain a climate of security and well-being at the level of European society by developing strategies and policies to limit and prevent radicalisation.

The paper aims to analyze the increase in the popularity of radical political discourse in Europe in recent years in order to draw attention to the danger posed by extremist parties to collective security.

The methodology chosen for the research is the analysis of case studies that consistently use concrete examples from different European countries to demonstrate that political radicalisation is a real danger manifested at the level of the entire Europe.

Political radicalisation within Europe

Political radicalisation - general considerations

Radicalisation can manifest itself in different forms, influenced by a range of ideological, political, social and religious factors.

Political radicalisation refers to the process by which individuals or groups adopt extreme political beliefs that advocate significant changes to the existing political system, often through undemocratic or violent means. According to Peter Neumann, political radicalisation is defined as the introduction and acceptance of an ideological message that moves individuals away from conventional beliefs towards extremism. Neumann emphasizes the critical role of ideological indoctrination and the influence of charismatic leaders in this process¹.

The process of political radicalisation is complex, being influenced by personal grievances, social isolation and exposure to radical ideologies.

Political radicalisation can manifest itself in various forms, from left-wing and right-wing extremism to ethno-nationalist and separatist movements. For example, left-wing extremism includes anti-capitalist and anarchist ideologies that seek to overthrow existing power structures and establish a new social order.

Right-wing extremism often involves nationalist, racist, and xenophobic ideologies that promote authoritarian rule and the exclusion of certain groups based on ethnicity or nationality.

The rise of far-right movements in Europe and the United States is characterized by their anti-immigration rhetoric and violent actions, and highlights the dangers of this form of radicalisation.

In “Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany”, Donatella della Porta offers a comprehensive analysis of the process of political radicalisation, using two relevant case studies: Italy and Germany. The author assesses the

¹ Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2016, pp. 32-54.

mechanisms by which social movements, in the context of interaction with the state and other social structures, transform into violent movements, exploring the role of the political and social context in these trajectories. This research highlights the dynamic and contextual nature of political radicalisation, providing a solid theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon.

Della Porta identifies political radicalisation as a complex process, involving interdependent factors of a structural, organizational and ideological nature. She argues that the transformation of social movements into violent movements is the result of interactions between the state, social groups and ideology.

Della Porta highlights that political radicalisation is not an isolated phenomenon, but a dynamic social and political process, influenced by the interactions between movements, the state and society. The author also emphasizes that radical movements do not function without being influenced by a historical, cultural and political context. Donatella della Porta's work offers an essential contribution in understanding political radicalisation, demonstrating that this phenomenon can be managed more effectively through policies aimed at reducing social tensions, promoting dialogue and avoiding repressive measures. These perspectives are essential for the analysis of the typology and manifestations of political radicalisation, providing a valuable theoretical framework for exploring this phenomenon in contemporary contexts².

Case studies

France

This case study aims to analyze the rise of the far-right in France, in order to better understand the phenomenon of political radicalisation in the current context, at the European level.

The rise in popularity of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party in France, led by Marine Le Pen, in 2024, marks a turning point in the French political landscape, being supported by deep socio-economic discontent and cultural anxieties. With an electoral score of over 30%, surpassing President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party, France has become a reference point in understanding the rise of far-right populism in Europe. This political change is the result of specific historical, economic and social dynamics, in the view of the analyses of scholars such as Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy and Jean-Yves Camus.

The party led by Marine Le Pen has attracted significant support by exploiting the failures of traditional parties in reducing socio-economic

² Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 83-112.

inequalities. Gilles Kepel, in his book “Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West”, argues that the discontent of the working class population has been amplified by the effects of globalization and economic stagnation, especially in regions such as Hauts-de-France. These areas, formerly industrial centers, are now suffering from unemployment and social decline, providing a favorable context for the anti-globalization rhetoric promoted by the RN. Marine Le Pen has used this context to position her party as the defender of “forgotten France” against the “elites” in Paris and Brussels.

Another key factor in the rise of the RN is immigration. Olivier Roy highlights in “Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State”, France’s difficulties in integrating immigrant populations, aggravated by the perception of a cultural threat. Le Pen’s anti-immigration messages and criticism of the visibility of Islam in public space have resonated deeply with voters who perceive immigration as a challenge to national identity.

The RN’s success in 2024 was influenced by a series of events that amplified the population’s anxieties. Terrorist attacks on French soil, such as the assassination of Professor Samuel Paty in 2020 or the attack on the church in Nice in the same year, intensified fears about radical Islam and reinforced the RN’s discourse that the government is incapable of protecting its citizens. Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, in “Far-Right Politics in Europe,” argue that such events are frequently instrumentalized by far-right parties to fuel the idea of a cultural and security crisis.

In addition, the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine amplified the RN’s message. The RN’s success in the 2024 parliamentary elections has profound implications for the political and social dynamics of France. Domestically, it has allowed the RN to promote stricter immigration policies, border reinforcements, and reforms in EU governance that favor national sovereignty. Internationally, France has increased its skepticism about European integration, raising concerns about deadlocks in the Union’s decision-making process.

From a cultural perspective, the legitimization of nationalist rhetoric has normalized a similar language to groups on the periphery of the political spectrum. Gilles Kepel warns that this normalization risks deepening divisions between urban and rural populations, as well as between majority and minority communities. Moreover, the emphasis on identity politics has marginalized debates on pressing issues such as climate change and economic innovation.

The rise of the far right in France could have long-term consequences for both domestic and European policies. The National Rally’s support for reducing the EU’s authority threatens to weaken European unity at a time when collective action is essential to address global challenges. Domestically, the party’s policies could fuel social tensions, particularly among France’s immigrant and Muslim populations,

increasing the risk of societal polarization and radicalisation. Economically, Le Pen's nationalist approach could undermine France's trade relations.

Jean-Yves Camus warns that the success of the far right could inspire similar movements across Europe, creating a domino effect that could destabilize democratic norms. This aligns with Olivier Roy's argument that political polarization and the rise of identity politics pose a greater threat to social cohesion than external pressures such as immigration itself.

The rise of the Rassemblement National, as analyzed in the works of Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy and Jean-Yves Camus, reflects a convergence of economic difficulties, cultural anxieties and political disillusionment. Without appropriate interventions to address socio-economic inequalities and integration challenges, France risks long-term polarization and a decline in its influence in the European Union^{3 4 5}.

Romania

This case study examines how Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) used social media to mobilize voters, how they exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to spread their radical messages, the role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in their propaganda, and the characteristics of their voters base.

AUR's rapid rise in Romanian politics was unexpected. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the party won 9% of the vote, securing seats in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. AUR's success has been largely attributed to its ability to capitalize on public disillusionment with Romania's mainstream political parties, which many Romanians consider as corrupt and ignorant of the needs of ordinary citizens⁶.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and lately TikTok have been vital to AUR's lightning rise. Lacking traditional media support, AUR leaders have turned to social media to spread their message and reach voters disillusioned with political parties, especially younger Romanians. George Simion, one of AUR's founders, has used his large number of followers on social media to promote the party's populist message, often livestreaming on Facebook and interacting directly with potential voters. His public image as a patriotic activist who previously

³ Jean-Yves Camus, Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 211-223.

⁴ Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 135-150.

⁵ Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 33-40.

⁶ Europa Liberă Romania, *Surpriza de sub ochii tuturor. Cum a ajuns AUR în Parlament*, 2020, available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/surpriza-de-sub-ochii-tuturor-cum-a-ajuns-aur-%C3%AEn-parlament/30988592.html>, accessed on 11.06. 2025.

campaigned for the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova has helped in strengthening AUR's credibility in nationalist circles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for the AUR to advance its populist and conspiratorial agenda. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the AUR has positioned itself as a resistance party against government public health measures, including lockdowns, quarantines, mask-wearing, and mandatory vaccinations. They have frequently protested against these measures, viewing them as attacks on individual freedoms and part of a global population control plot.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has significantly influenced the rise of the AUR during the pandemic. The AUR has strategically aligned itself with the BOR, using religious symbolism and rhetoric to support its claims that government restrictions represent an attack on Romania's Christian identity. The party has used its close relationship with segments of the Orthodox clergy to spread its message, especially in rural areas where the Church holds a preponderant influence.

AUR's voter base is diverse and composed mainly of rural, low-income voters and disillusioned citizens frustrated with the current way of governing. The party's populist message resonated particularly well with voters in rural Romania, where economic opportunities are limited and traditional values and religious conservatism are fundamental. Through its ultra-nationalist discourse based on values such as homeland, family, and faith, AUR also attracted urban voters, especially young people who spend a lot of time on social media. They saw AUR's proposed program as an alternative to the corruption and inefficiency of traditional political parties in Romania. AUR's ability to capitalize on these voters' frustrations is evident in its electoral success in the 2020 parliamentary elections, where the party obtained almost 9% of the vote.

After their election to the Romanian parliament, members of the AUR party have been noted for their violent acts and speeches, anti-Western rhetoric, especially criticism of the EU and NATO. Despite the fact that the AUR does not explicitly advocate close ties with Russia, its anti-EU stance and nationalist rhetoric mirror some of the messages coming from Russian political actors and media. Russia's geopolitical strategy, through which it seeks to undermine Western institutions and promote nationalism in Europe, is comparable to the AUR's claim that Romania is being "sold out" to Western interests, as well as its criticism of the EU's influence on domestic politics.

AUR is undoubtedly the most easily recognizable example of radical right-wing populism in Romania today. With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the party adapted its public stance to the need to defend the national interest by promoting forms of economic and energy protectionism, by supporting the idea that national resources should be directed primarily

to romanians, and foreign companies should have limited access to these strategic resources⁷.

Patriotic demagoguery has been particularly effective in a political climate in which public trust in government institutions is low and in which many voters consider politicians to be corrupt, incompetent and inefficient. The proof that AUR's message of offering simple solutions to complicated problems, has resonated with citizens skeptical of both the current way of governing and international organizations, is the fact that George Simion reached the second round of the presidential elections in May 2025.

Discussions

After analyzing the case studies, it can be observed that political radicalisation has serious negative effects that can affect the stability of society and democracy. Thus, based on extreme ideologies that are not adapted to reality, a division of society can be achieved. Some of the effects of political radicalization are:

- Undermining democracy - by trying to reach power, radical political leaders may resort to extreme measures such as: influencing elections, limiting the right to free speech, attempting to intimidate, control and discredit the media, attempting to have control over the executive and legislative branches of government
- Polarization and social division - this may lead to a lack of social cohesion within society because individuals that embraces radical ideologies tend to isolate and create their "reality"; this separation can produce economic difficulties at the state level, destabilization of democratic processes and can even lead to internal conflicts and institutional crises
- Increasing hate crimes and political violence - in many cases, the nationalist discourse of radical parties is in some cases directed against migrants or religious, ethnic or cultural minorities; this discourse can lead to the promotion and justification of acts of violence by already radicalized groups or individuals; thus, within society the crime rate and offenses are increased through cases of vandalism, violence, and in some extreme cases it can even lead to acts of terrorism
- Influence on EU cohesion and policies - the narrative of radical parties most often shares a nationalist and Eurosceptic speech, which creates tensions within the European Union; thus, the high-level decision-making process is hampered due to the opposition of members of radical parties in adopting proposals for common strategies and policies at the EU level.

⁷ Sorina Soare, *Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023, available at <https://www.-populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Download-Report-on-Romania.pdf>, accessed on 11.06. 2025.

- Disinformation and lack of thrust in public institutions - Nowadays, disinformation and propaganda are much easier due to technology: starting from fake news, conspiracy theories, the deliberate promotion of information intended to mislead, and ending with the use of artificial intelligence to create and alter images, videos, etc.

Addressing this problem requires comprehensive strategies that include promoting social cohesion and countering extremist discourse. By understanding the underlying causes and mechanisms of political radicalisation, societies can develop strategies and policies to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and ensure the stability and security of democratic institutions.

Understanding these dynamics, highlights the persistent threat of political radicalisation in Europe and underlines the need to develop comprehensive strategies to address the underlying socio-economic problems, promote social cohesion and protect democratic values.

Conclusions

In conclusion, political radicalization poses a major threat to the stability of society and democratic values. The insights of experts in the field help to better understand the processes and factors that lead individuals to extremist political beliefs, providing a basis for effective prevention and counter-strategies.

This paper analyzes the current phenomenon of political radicalization in Europe by researching and presenting two case studies, thus highlighting the diversity and spread of the phenomenon. Although this phenomenon is not limited to the two cases presented, eloquent examples can also be found in Germany, Italy, Poland, Austria, Hungary, etc. Thus, research in the field is not exhausted, and the phenomenon must be constantly researched and analyzed in order to prevent the destabilizing effects of security, democracy and the well-being of European citizens.



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