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D *Virtual and Very Real: Radicalization as a Social Process*

Radicalization

Radicalization in the virtual and real world

The team understands radicalization as an increasing tendency to question the legitimacy of a normative order and/or a growing willingness to combat its institutional structures. The fact that radicalism today—the intention to »grasp political problems at their root«—is primarily associated with left- and right-wing extremist positions, religious fanaticism, and violence, says a lot about the crisis perception of our time: liberal societies are witnessing a variety of threats to order and sometimes react by closing themselves off. In both political discourse and research, the model of »radicalization into violence,« or the escalation of an attitude into violence, dominates; however, too much concentration on the propensity to violence as a characteristic of radicalization masks two points.

First, many processes of radicalization do not end in violence. Neither do they proceed in a linear fashion. Instead, they simply frizzle out. The fact that an individual's attitudes can intensify during a particular life phase does not necessarily mean that this is a biographical »one-way street.« Rather, such processes are an important part of the development of personality, in differentiation and in approximation to certain groups and world views. The PANDORA project group, therefore, understands radicalization as a process that also includes reversibility towards de-radicalization.

Second, in pluralistic democracies a certain level of radicalism is necessary for innovation and change, though it is not always easy to determine when radicalization becomes problematic. An excessive focus on radicalization's violent potential can stigmatize segments of the population and tends to prioritize security policy measures over comprehensive prevention. Thus, this project adopts a broad definition of radicalization that encompasses the phenomenon of »non-violent radicalization,« which intersects with political activism.

An important insight from the research project is that in the process of radicalization virtual and real-world environments are always linked. Social media often provides an environment for initial contact with radicalized ideologies, a platform for mutual exchange in usually private chat groups, in which actors tend to use aliases. For the process of radicalization, however, the connection to real-world radical milieus, groups, or key persons is usually decisive. Preventive measures must do justice to this complex interaction between online and offline dynamics by incorporating a wide range of measures.

Political and religious radicalization has become a permanent concern within the media, in politics, and among the public. Social media become a place of sometimes aggressive social conflict and of mobilization and propaganda. The research project PANDORA investigates violent forms of discourse in social media and their effects on processes of radicalization within extreme right-wing and Salafist-Jihadist milieus. The project team of the Peace Research Institut Frankfurt focuses on the Salafist-Jihadist milieu, analyzing Facebook accounts and telegram channels to trace dynamics of online radicalization. By studying groups in Berlin and Braunschweig, it also seeks to identify the social and political contexts that promote or even prevent radicalization.