

Violent extremism and youth radicalization: vectors, manifestations and action strategies.

**STUDY OF THE PHENOMENON IN ITALY WITH A FIELD SURVEY
IN LOMBARDY, EMILIA-ROMAGNA AND LAZIO**



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In the life of organized societies, social movements, whatever their nature, are never pure chance: they know processes of formation, growth and adaptation that have specific causes.

In recent years, the growth of polarization in public discourse has had and continues to have a strong effect on society as a whole and on some groups in particular.

The research presented is more than appropriate for the approach used and the methodology used to investigate the territory with reference to the Plan of Action of the United Nations Organization to Prevent Violent Extremism.

For a project with these aims, considering the global and local perspective together is a necessary condition, since certain phenomena cannot be confined at a national level but go beyond the borders of states and continents. However, the local expression of a global phenomenon must be investigated, analyzed and understood in order to produce useful tools for decision-makers and those who work daily on the area.

Studying young people and social marginality is an ambitious and never postponable topic that needs a careful and continuous analysis to provide all social players with a systemic approach that is not aroused only by the sensitivity or goodwill of some.

The final recommendations remind us that all social behaviours have an environment in which they develop and we must act effectively on that, working together to prevent social polarization and violent radicalization.

The promotion of human rights, the work that involves communities and their professionalism without forgetting civil society, are some of the factors that can turn a local social landscape from a place of polarization and violence into a factor of integration and coexistence



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Presentation

The increase in the occurrence of violent extremism in Europe poses a serious threat to the values we promote through our actions every day. Indeed, extremist movements cynically manipulate and exploit religious beliefs, cultural differences and political ideologies to achieve a supremacy that is opposed to the promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms, social justice and human dignity.

Violent extremism means all ideologies that aspire to political hegemony through the use of violence, i.e. "violent extremist ideologies" bearing totalitarian, intolerant, patriarchal, anti-democratic values, wheth-

er promoted by individuals or groups, corporations, parties or states.

For sure we cannot justify the forms of violent extremism, but we have a duty to conduct a careful reflection on their causes and triggering factors, in order to stop the social recognition and legitimacy that movements carrying these forms are gaining in many of the countries where we operate, as well as in Europe and Italy, taking advantage of the opportunities for mass communication represented by digital social media.

In 2016, as part of an action to counter the violent radicalization that leads to terrorism, the European Union launched a series of new measures that, in addition to the European Agenda on Security, aim to strengthen the role of Member States in law enforcement and prevention. Among them, there are those supporting inclusive

education, an open and resilient society and international cooperation practices based on the promotion of human rights and civic participation, and involving civil society players in the effort.

In line with the conclusions that emerged from the work of the "High Commission Policy Group on Radicalization" that supported the European Commission in 2017-2018, we consider as strategic the promotion of educational methodologies that focus on the role of teachers, educators, social workers in promoting social inclusion and democratic values, but also the potential of resources and skills of young people. The latter are in fact considered important agents of change, in WeWorld's vision and methodology of action in the 29 countries where it operates, as well as in the national territory. At the same time, we are also attentive to the work of the RAN - Radicalization Awareness Network - which, since 2011, has been bringing togeth-

er experts and professionals from EU countries with the aim of promoting knowledge and action practices on the phenomenon, under the guidance of the Migration and Home Affairs Unit of the European Commission. RAN publications are very useful tools to understand and explore the phenomenon and its complexity.

Therefore, as supported by the many initiatives of the European Commission, a civil society committed to safeguarding democratic values with an attentive eye to the needs of young people is the best deterrent against hate and fear speeches; at the same time, to effectively tackle the multidimensional phenomenon of violent extremism, we need a common, coordinated and holistic response. This is only possible through dialogue and shared planning among all institutions, organizations and entities working directly or indirectly in the prevention of violent extremism at all levels.

In this regard, the recommendations outlined in this research (aimed at civil society players as well as public authorities) are not to be understood as absolute and definitive. On the contrary, they represent an attempt to make a contribution to the start of a debate between different players, with the aim of identifying shared strategies for cross-cutting and multi-level action on the phenomenon. These needs to be linked as well to actions against intolerance and xenophobia, in a global approach capable of acting at the national as well as at the transnational level. With a view to the constant integration between the local and global levels - which also characterizes the mission of our organization - in 2017, we joined the Observatory to prevent extremist violence (OPEV), established to address the fight against forms of violent extremism through the strengthening of democratic initiatives of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

With its approach based on the promotion of human rights, active participation and community work, the RaP - Rhizome Against Polarization project offers us new opportunities to open spaces for dialogue and understanding with networks such as OPEV, RAN, and all the stakeholders involved in this challenge.

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WeWorld-GVC*





Introduction: objectives and methodology

The need to understand and combat the increasing levels of aggressiveness and violence that emerge in contemporary societies can no longer be postponed: this report, in particular, aims to focus on the factors that can lead the youth population to act violently towards some of the most vulnerable groups.

In order to analyze the forms of conflict, intolerance and discrimination, and, consequently, to promote practices to combat the phenomena of polarization, radicalization and violent extremism that have come to light in recent years, the first part of the report contains a review of academic litera-

ture on the subject, referred both to the international context and to the Italian one, with a focus on the current violent extremist movements in Italy. This interpretation makes use of a multi-dimensional perspective able to concisely combine the different factors (individual, situational and socio/cultural) that act on different levels, in order to isolate recurring patterns and mechanisms.

The second part of the research, which concerns the empirical section of the project, had as its initial objective the development of a comprehensive mapping of the major institutional and organized civil society

initiatives in terms of prevention of polarization in three Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy. → 1

The final objective was the drafting of *policy recommendations* for civil society, institutions and Italian decision makers aimed at preventing and contrasting all forms of polarization and violent extremism, with a special focus on the dynamics through which these phenomena arise in young people and create, at the same time, points of contact with patterns of discrimination and gender-based violence.

The approach used is characterized by two crucial and closely related characteristics. The first characteristic was the choice to overcome the perspective of mere securitization through which the phenomena in question are often addressed. The second feature is the choice to implement the above-mentioned policy recommendations

considering the theoretical thoughts and the experience with the bodies involved in the dynamics of polarization in the three regions under analysis.

The heterogeneous group of stakeholders with whom we had the opportunity to talk during the focus groups and semi-structured interviews provided crucial insights from their own experiences, the subjects with whom they come into contact during their work and their training.

In this regard, from the methodological point of view, the preliminary mapping allowed us to identify the stakeholders for the focus groups in possession of some of the most significant experiences for the purposes of our survey on polarization in the three sample regions. We decided to contact civil society players and institutional stakeholders with backgrounds as heterogeneous as possible, with experienc-

es of contact with polarization and radicalization acquired in different contexts and through varied professionalism.

Therefore, in many parts, we have chosen to leave room for the declarations of the stakeholders, valuing the recurring issues, the reasons for optimism and the difficulties they chose to talk to us about, often using the same keywords in different contexts and regions. Thus, the research as a whole offers a picture of what can be learned from the recent past, the dialogue with the players in the field and the persistent shortcomings that it is imperative to heal today.

At the same time, the interviews and focus groups closely followed the Action Plan of the United Nations Organization for the Prevention of Violent Extremism, in particular in the process of identification and analysis of Addressing factors – Drivers of Violent Extremism in the three regions, → 2

in order to understand the presence of factors that can promote polarization and radicalization in different contexts. Similarly, in the phase of work dedicated to the drafting of recommendations for policy makers and decision-makers, the approach has respected the thematic focal points of the UN Plan of Action, inviting each stakeholder to identify priority areas and crucial actions in the short future for the prevention and fight against polarization.

1 *The reasons for the choice of these three regions will be explained in detail in the first part of Chapter III of this Report.*

2 *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, United Nations, available at the **link**. Lastaccess: 14 August 2020.*





The causes of violent extremism in the Italian society: youth population and drivers of extremism

- 1.1 Radicalization and polarization as the basis of violent extremism
 - 1.2 A multidimensional interpretation
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between socio-demographic variables and search for identity
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1

Radicalization and polarization as the basis of violent extremism

In order to analyze the so-called *drivers* or factors of extremism, it is necessary to start from a conceptualization of the terms used which, although mentioned in the academic literature of reference, do not allow to reach universal definitions, since they can have different meanings over time and are linked to the context in which they are used. Understanding the differences between terms such as “radicalization”, “extremism” and “polarization” allows us to better understand the factors underlying violent forms of extremism and, consequently, the possible actions to be taken.

Before delving into the various defining aspects, we want to clearly express an assumption: conflict is an inevitable aspect of human relations, as it expresses a contrast between opposing forces, positions, beliefs or needs. It is “a struggle between at least two independent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference by others in achieving their goals” (Wilmot and Hocker 2011).

Therefore, the differences, whether of ideas, values, goals or needs, are the constitutive elements of conflicts, which can occur not only on an interpersonal level, but can also be an expression of social conflict.

The emotional aspects that emerge in case of conflict are not necessarily violent and aggressive, but can also be expressed in feelings of sadness, anxiety and distrust. Similarly, they can result in tensions that, if not addressed, risk seeing the role of extremist groups emerge, taking on the demands of one of the parties involved and resorting to radical and violent actions.

The phenomenon of radicalization is interpreted in literature as a process leading to the adoption of an extremist value system, either individually or by a group, involving the willingness to use, support or facilitate violence as a method for social change (Allen 2007).

The individual or collective process, the

reference to a radical system of values and the recourse to violence (meant as promoted and/or potentially adopted) with the aim of achieving the desired socio-political change are, therefore, the three key dimensions to be taken into account.

In any case, it is a complex, multifaceted and variable concept depending on the context of use (Brzuszkiewicz 2019). Some definitions focus on the political objectives that would underlie it, the source of ideological and religious activism aimed at introducing a radical change in society, leading an individual or group to use, promote or claim the need for violence. Therefore, it would be a process leading the person to be increasingly inclined to accept the use of undemocratic and violent means - including terrorism - in an attempt to achieve political and/or ideological goals (Schmid 2013). However, not all the literature seems to agree in considering the use of violence

as intrinsically linked to the process of radicalization: the profound transformation of the system would not present any direct connection with the use of violent methods (OPEV 2019).

In terms of methodology, one should also pay attention to the excessive emphasis that the concept of radicalization risks placing on the individual dimension and on the ideological issue, instead than focusing on the root causes.

On the contrary, talking about extremism means referring to a political agenda or to actions aimed at a profound transformation of the world at the expense of the freedom of other social groups. Extremism, therefore, whether it is understood as the landing

point of an individual or collective process of radicalization, or as the implementation of autonomous practices and ideologies, is inextricably linked to the concept of violence, be it direct (physical or psychological), structural or symbolic (Galtung 2003). Violent extremism occurs when an individual or group aspires to achieve this change at the expense of one or more social entities designated as enemies, through the physical aggression of its members or through actions that more generally affect the population of one or more states. Armed groups (underground or not), *foreign fighters* (people who join a conflict that takes place in a State different from the one in which they live, due to ideological and/or religious affinity) and *lone wolf* (or *lone actor terrorists*, individuals who act in a solitary way, inspired by a more or less widespread ideology) are three of the main forms in which extremist actions can take place. Thus, the

idea of “the Other” becomes crucial: the “Other-different” is presented as inferior, an obstacle and an enemy to be defeated; the “Other-equal” is meant as the subject to be identified with and build extremism with. Violent extremism is not an isolated expression of violence against a single individual: it is a type of violence perpetuated by a group (or by individuals having a common idea), with a shared identity and ideology that identifies a common enemy, which justifies the existence of the group, and with the idea of the submission of the Other-different from us. Talking about violent extremism ultimately means referring to those ***ideologies that aspire to obtain political power using violent methods instead of persuasion. Violent extremist ideologies are based on totalitarian, fanatical, intolerant, patriarchal, anti-democratic and anti-pluralist values perpetrated by groups, companies or countries*** (OPEV 2017).

However, it is clear that the spread of ideologies such as racism, sexism and xenophobia among different players, actions and attitudes shows how the boundaries between what can be considered violent extremism and what is not are sometimes blurred, making it difficult to implement preventive and contrasting actions. The latter usually refer to conceptual de-radicalizing and counter-radicalizing frames.

The term de-radicalization refers to the process of abandoning a radical worldview, accompanied by the awareness of the inadmissibility of the use of violence to promote or impose political and social change.

Therefore, there is a reference to an ideological and ethical change, and not to a behavioral change, which is instead contained in the concept of *disengagement* (Horgan 2008; Brzuszkiewicz 2019).

This process of de-radicalization can be individual or collective, including all those initiatives aimed at radicalised individuals with the aim of re-integrating them into society and distancing them from violence, through diversified methods and strategies (Vidino and Brandon 2012).

Conversely, counter-radicalization activities would not focus so much on already-radicalized individuals, but would consist of preventive actions on individuals considered vulnerable, or aimed at the society as

a whole. In this case, the concept of narrative is strategically important: the individual becomes radicalized and the group recruits new supporters and organizes its propaganda on the basis of a series of narrations of the world. On the contrary, the concept of counter-narrative today in rapid evolution and expansion, aims to oppose an existing narration, offering a positive alternative to radical propaganda or deconstructing the radical narrative itself. The literature on violent extremism questions numerous methodological and defining questions. Talking about “violent extremism” means talking about very broad categories, and research often aggregates different phenomena (guerilla warfare movements, militias, terrorist organizations): research that focuses on a manifestation of violent extremism should not be considered applicable to other types of extremism (Allan *et al.* 2015).

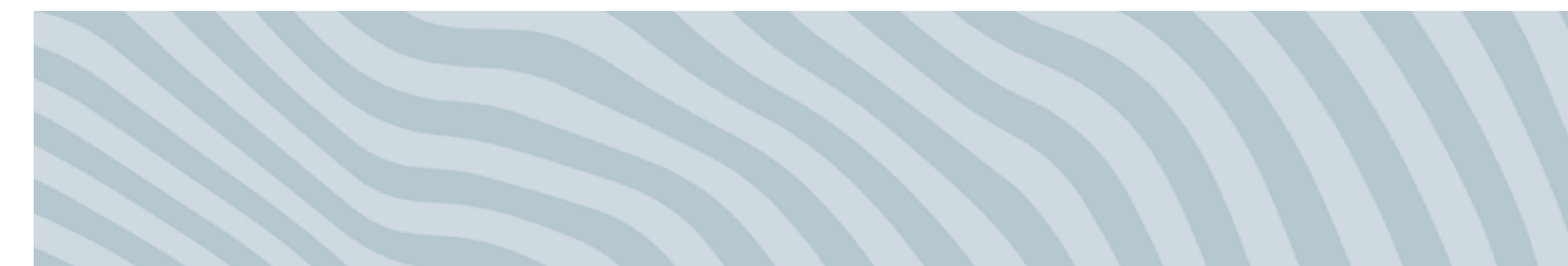
Even the concept of polarization is quite complex: it is a cause of conflict that, generating tensions, unrest and riots, prevents social and political advancement (Karatrantos 2018) and it is linked to the concept of economic polarization. Political crises, populism, social exclusion and identity crises are just some of the risk factors of polarization called into question by the literature (*ibid.*).

Polarization would be a group attribute resulting from a strong degree of homogeneity within the group itself which would be counterbalanced by a high rate of heterogeneity between different groups within society.

The identification with other subjects within one's own reference group and the simultaneous distancing from one or more other competing groups would, therefore, give rise to tensions within society, which will be higher if the number of groups and/or poles able to catalyze opposing objectives is lower (Esteban and Ray 1994). When tensions become exacerbated, each party is obsessed over his/her/its opinions, creating a narrative focused on the perceived differences (that are often magnified) and based on simplistic narratives: it is then that polarization is created around one's own opinions, considered the absolute truth.

This report, as well as most literature on the subject, will focus on the youth population: if the dynamics of radicalization escape any rigid demographic framework, it is equally clear that there is a greater vulnerability related to the youth. A first example is represented by second-generation young people and their perception of identity between double presence and double absence; another example is the high percentage of young NEETS (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), who are potential target of radicalization and recruitment. To confirm further what asserted, the average age of *foreign terrorist fighters* who left Italy for Syria and Iraq is 30 years, highlighting a process of radicalization occurred in the previous years (Marone and Vidino 2018).

In providing a critical review of the academic literature on the topic, the multi-dimensional interpretation presented below will be followed.





.2

A multidimensional interpretation

There are several ways to analyze the factors that can influence the appearance of violent extremism. Some people focus on individual evolutionary aspects, others on the influence of social groups; still others focus on the analysis of the context (structural factors); several analyses focus on the *push e pull factors* towards violent extremism or on conditions of vulnerability and resilience. The analysis, along the lines of that carried out by Novact, OPEV and CMDOH (2017), both on the factors that promote radicalization and on the actions of prevention and contrast, will try to combine the different points of view, based on the strong interdependence between the different dimensions investigated.

The reference document in the analysis of the so-called *drivers* of violent extremism is the *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* drawn up by the United Nations (2015). This Plan has the undoubted merit of referring both to structural aspects of the context - lack of socio-economic opportunities; marginalization and discrimination; poor *governance* and violation of human rights; unresolved conflicts; radicalization in prisons - and to specific processes of radicalization - individual contexts and motivations; collective grievances and motivations; distortion and abuse of beliefs, political ideologies, ethnic-cultural differences; leadership and social networks.

The academic literature points out that violent extremism has many causes and cannot be predicted by a single variable: that is why a more suitable term, instead of “drivers”, could be “factors”, suggesting the need for a plurality to produce a result (Allan et al. 2015).

These factors, be they political, economic, social, cultural or psychological, can be divided into three dimensions (micro/meso/macro) interconnected with each other, referring to different actors (individuals, groups/communities, policies) and to different contexts, physical and virtual places of vulnerability that in turn recall different push and containment factors to violent extremism. Therefore, it is a multi-factorial concept, in which individual, situational (acting on small communities or identity

groups) and socio-cultural aspects and dimensions act on different levels. Although not exhaustive, Table 1 allows to combine factors able to isolate patterns and recurrent mechanisms synthetically, specifying that each factor is necessary but probably not enough for an individual to join a violent extremist cause or for a movement to become violent.

At the micro level, psychological research suggests the possibility that individuals who join violent extremist groups or movements may have a vulnerability or a particular cognitive state of mind, for example, having learned to think in a strongly dualistic way. Identity research and the need to find one's place in the world are other aspects that will be analyzed. On the contrary, at the meso level, there is a predominance of social and cultural factors (especially those related to religious, ethnic or group identity), factors of attraction capable of influenc-

ing small and/or well-defined communities and identity groups. Finally, at the macro level, there are situational factors that can influence a large number of people (large communities or even entire countries) and that, in the influential “*push-pull*” model by USAID, are described as “push factors”.

A multi-disciplinary approach is linked to this multi-dimensional interpretation: psychology, sociology and law are subjects that contribute, among others, to investigate these dynamics.

DIMENSIONS	FOCUS	FACTORS PROMOTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM	PREVENTION and CONTRAST ACTIONS
MICRO	Individual	E.G: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Individual background;- Motivations;- Distorted beliefs (ideologies);- Identity search;- Psychological aspects (trauma);- Failure of individual targets.	E.g: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Individual-oriented actions of counter-radicalization (prevention) and de-radicalization (giving up radical worldview);- Individual involvement/participation (dialogue)
MESO	Ecological dimension: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- peer group- community Physical places: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- places of worship- prison	E.G: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Family background- Ethnic-cultural differences;- Limited social cohesion;- Stigmatization of certain communities;- Urban decay of a neighbourhood;- Agents of radicalization active in a physical place;- Failure to respect the rights of certain categories	E.G: Actions on the group/community: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Interdenominational and multi-ethnic meetings;- Counter-radicalization (prevention);- Community leadership role;- Community mobilization Ad hoc actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Educational projects;- Neighbourhood activities
MACRO	Society National / supranational context Role of the Internet	E.G: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Exclusion policies and legislations;- Violation of universal human rights;- Marginalization and discrimination;- Lack of socio-economic opportunities;- Collective motivations;- Prolonged and unsolved conflicts;- Great social inequalities;- Economic crisis;- Migratory crisis;- Increase in neo-fascist/nationalist movements;- Fake news dissemination	E.g: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Offline and online counter-narrative activities;- Awareness campaigns;- Measures to create social cohesion.

DIMENSIONS, FACTORS AND ACTIONS TO PREVENT AND COMBAT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The purpose of the model is to combine prevention and contrast actions at each level, with specific actions to be implemented at the micro level, mostly preventive actions at the meso level and development and humanitarian actions at the macro level.

The same counter-radicalization activities refer to the three different levels (Silverman *et al.* 2016): micro (de-radicalization actions are, in this case, more frequent than preventive ones); meso (on a group considered vulnerable or on a specific reality, for example pre-adolescents, a school pole, a town); macro (on the society as a whole that hosts potential subjects at risk).

In particular, we will focus not so much on repressive measures (*hard*), but on the *soft* ones: the aim is to overcome the securitarian approach that has become increasingly central over the years, causing new insecurities, mostly subjective (not so much related to real risks but rather to perceived threats depending on the information provided by the media and political narration), and inequalities. Defining social problems in terms of (in)security instead than inequality, poverty or justice has also allowed the implementation of securitarian actions aimed at keeping certain populations on the sidelines, making poverty invisible through the establishment of ghettos (Wacquant 2009) and enclaves (Stavrides 2015) from which to exclude certain sections of the population. It also allowed the creation

of ghettos inside a country and between countries (i.e. physical barriers, detention and expulsion centers, closure of public spaces), which only increase the forms of inequality between countries and within city contexts. It also increases the militarization of the management of social issues, with practices that end up fuelling violent extremism, as they go against universally recognized human rights. These measures often focus on a particular social group, making it suspicious and promoting social segregation and exclusion, instead of acting on the structural causes of inequality: this is a useful way to maintain social order by perpetuating a situation of structural violence in which the basic needs of the majority of the population are not met.





.3

The micro dimension: between socio-demographic variables and search for identity

The micro dimension focuses specifically on the psychological evolution of the individual, on the search and definition of contextual and situated personal identity, on the individual background. The development of processes of violent extremism would in fact be linked to emotional reactions to difficult living conditions (i.e. lack of resources, employment, educational options, future prospects, violation of human rights, violence, exclusion), to the impact of direct or indirect traumatic experiences (i.e. abuse of power, arrests, crimes and violence), to the difficulty of finding “positive” ways to deal with such experiences (i.e. lack of community support, resources,

opportunities). A context of violence, vulnerability and exclusion can cause serious psychosocial and emotional problems, such as fears, anxieties, low self-esteem, guilt, shame, frustration, which paralyze, block, demotivate and cause emotional imbalances if not effectively addressed.

The presence of feelings such as anger or desire for revenge, on the contrary, stimulate and mobilize the subject who, through inadequate responses, can put into action aggressive and violent behavior (OPEV 2019).

Adolescence brings significant changes at the psychological level, involving, if not a crisis, at least a reorganization of the mental structures of the young person. The greater level of vulnerability experienced by adolescents would be related both to a different speed of maturity of intellectual, emotional and behavioral skills, and to the gradually weakened role played by adults, with the consequent need for greater emotional and behavioral adjustment by the adolescent himself/herself. The acquisition of one's own autonomy, the construction and definition of one's own identity are evolutionary tasks that can lead to conflictual and problematic situations both in the confrontation with otherness and personal self-esteem, linked in particular to the recognition and enhancement of one's social role, also on the basis of parental expectations (Knauer and Palacio Espasa 2012). The presence of risk factors such as poor control of impulses, dysfunctional educa-

tional styles, the existence of oppositional attitudes associated with negative interactions with parents, teachers and peers, with the related risk of school failure and affiliation to deviant groups, are indicators of risk in the evolutionary development of adolescents (Loeber and Dishion 1983; Ladd *et al.* 1990).

Violent extremism can be a way to satisfy that need for identity.

Over the years, several models have been developed in the psychological sphere. Some models are based on forms of increasing resentment that respond to real or perceived frustrations, both at the individual and community level (Borum 2003). Other models can be traced back to the concept of cognitive openness that recall adherence to a new vision or ideology to give meaning

to one's identity (Wiktorowicz 2005). Last but not least, the model proposed by Dalggaard-Nielsen (2010) organized fundamental psychological nuclei of violence in six different stages: i) identification of a problem as injustice; ii) construction of the moral justification for the use of violence; iii) development and use of a narrative that blames the victims; iv) de-humanization of the victims; v) substitution or instrumental distribution of responsibility; vi) minimization of the negative effects of violent action.

The implementation of dysfunctional behaviour would represent, in other words, a badly formulated demand for social identity, frequently found in adolescents and young adults. The search for an individual identity (but also, as we will see, a group identity) in a context recognized as unfair can increase young people's vulnerability to radicalization. Adherence to extremist groups would seem to be partly linked to

young people's search for a meaning for their lives in an attempt to respond to an unsatisfied need to define themselves, to understand their role in the world (Crenshaw 1983; Venhaus 2010).

When identity is still being formed or is particularly complex, it can be highly vulnerable.

The case of second-generation migrants is emblematic in this regard, as they are suspended between a feeling of double belonging, even for issues related to legal citizenship (particularly clear in Italy, as shown by the debate on the *ius soli*): “citizens of a State in which they do not feel part of and legally alien to the country where they feel they are citizens” (Cerauolo and Molina 2013, 21), and a feeling of double absence (Sayad 2004), a possi-

ble cause of alienation resulting from the difficulty to relate one's own culture of origin with the most widespread one in the target society.

Analyzing the individual background, one can wonder what may be the factors that can lead to a radicalization of the subjects.

The relationship between low socio-economic status and violent extremism would not be immediate: studies, mostly limited to terrorist groups and not to extremist movements in general, emphasize in most cases the absence, among them, of situations of particular financial hardship (Daugaard-Nielsen 2010). A link between extremism and income seems to emerge only in the case of civil conflicts or in countries with limited wealth. Moreover, the relation-

ship between employment and extremism seems not to be confirmed (Allan *et al.* 2015): there is limited evidence that extremist groups recruit from the ranks of the unemployed and underemployed. Therefore, the purely structural approaches seem unsatisfactory: the relationship between material deprivation and violent choice is not immediate, since the relationship between crime and poverty has no universal validity (Sen 2015). However, although socio-economic difficulties and underemployment do not provide sufficient explanations for violent extremism, they can create a favourable environment for extremist groups at the macro level: thus, young people would adhere to such movements on the basis of resentment and humiliation felt personally or by people close to them, also calling into question the meso dimension of the phenomenon.

Even the correlation between low levels of education and extremism is not so clear (Al-

lan *et al.* 2015): while limited access to education and low levels of literacy may prevent individuals from questioning highly ideologized narratives (Nwafor and Nwogu 2015), there are several cases of highly educated individuals, particularly in technical and engineering subjects, responsible for extremist behavior (Gambetta and Hertog 2009); other studies highlight a significant correlation between terrorism and *higher education* (Sageman 2004). Acting on the educational aspects, then, may not be effective in countering violent extremism in itself, but it can in any case reduce the risk of uninformed participation, constituting a response to absolutism, one of the possible drivers of extremism.

As far as the gender variable, there is no significant research showing that the ideals of masculinity and honour, frequently associated with youth gangs as an effect of

a mechanism of socialization to violence, play an effective role in causing violent extremism, although most violent extremists are young men and the implementation of aggressive attitudes is predominantly associated with the male component (Gartenstein-Ross and Gorssman 2009). Similarly, there is little documented evidence that the female component in itself has a moderating influence on possible militancy within an extremist group. The direct involvement of women in extremist acts, driven by more or less complex reasons such as, among others, the protection of their community, seems to confirm this thesis (Alison 2004; Bloom 2011).

So does the involvement in more “structured” resistance actions (think of the Kurdish fighters in Rojava, committed to fight not only the Islamic State but, more generally, a widespread patriarchal system).

While according to the OECD (2013; 2014) it is essential to include women as “policy makers, educators, community members and activists” in order to prevent extremism, it is clear that stereotyping the narratives and confining their role to mere caregivers (Carter 2013) should be avoided. Rather, given the predominantly patriarchal and sexist character of contemporary societies, it is important to pay attention to the creation of specific channels for the inclusion of women in these initiatives.

Finally, the reference to episodes of discrimination and exclusion suffered individually or in groups, is common among those who have committed violent actions, even if sometimes such retrospective justifications could be merely speculative (Post *et al.* 2003).

This perception of victimization can be exploited by the leaders of violent extremist groups: according to Crenshaw (1983) terrorist groups are extreme forms of social movements that emerge in response to collective claims, while McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) see the reaction to an individual or collective claim as the initial stage of the radicalization process. In contrast, for other scholars, claims are necessary but not sufficient to cause acts of extremist violence, most often exploited by charismatic individuals or “political entrepreneurs”, and often constitute mere propaganda (Hoffman 2006).

Such experiences, especially if shared, find in any case breeding ground in a narrative that aims to channel resentment through simple and extreme solutions, able to explain why extremist groups are able to recruit numerous followers (Schmid 2014). The narrative is crucial to justify violence

against others and provide individual members with a sense of individual importance, calling into question the transformative potential of violence and the need to address injustice or an individual or group existential threat (Saucier *et al.* 2009). These dynamics seem to be common in all extremist communications, whether they are linked to right-wing groups, nationalists, anarchists or to religious-identity aspects.

The role of the network and the Internet, the inter-dimensional aspect par excellence, exemplifying how the macro dimension acts on the micro dimension, will be analyzed in the following paragraphs.

Here, we just say that the increasing amount of time spent online can be one of the in-

dicators, obviously contextualized and accompanied by other behaviors, such as estrangement from the circle of friends and a strong ideology (be it political or religious), of a radicalization in progress.

Before moving on to the analysis of the meso dimension, we want to emphasize the importance of preventive actions aimed at the individual level.

Currently, the *soft measures* carried out almost concern exclusively de-radicalization plans, rather than prevention and counter-radicalization plans.

There is urgent need to implement counter-narrative measures and ad-hoc measures addressed to individuals who are particularly at risk of extremism through the development of plans giving priority to eco-

nomic and educational opportunities. Investigating the reasons behind aggressive behavior allows to question the individual meaning given to extremist and violent ideological affiliations, so as to provide possible alternative solutions on the basis of a comparison based on common and culturally cross-cutting emotional reasons.

Finally, there must be support for victims of violent extremism, through legal help and awareness campaigns, also to defuse the onset of possible reactive aggression. This support should also be provided to victims of hate speech, by promoting a message of tolerance and mutual understanding: victims, as well as adolescents in general, can be one of the main agents of change.





4

The meso dimension: group dynamics and vulnerable physical spaces

At first I was looking for a group that could transmit me some things I needed: confidence, belonging (...) I had a problem to overcome: the acceptance of myself. If you join the group, you are the same as the others and you don't see your differences anymore, or you see them less (Berizzi 2020, 206).

Social or collective identity arises from belonging to a group able to provide value and meaning to the lives of individual members, especially the most vulnerable who feel they are going through difficult times or have limited opportunities for personal development (Abrams and Hogg 2006).

This identity can become more important than the personal one, as the group is able to offer a precise, usually dichotomous view of the world through simple slogans that provide a utopian feeling of reassurance in those who listen to them, promising solutions to what seems uncertain. Then, belonging to an extremist group, based on a rigid system of beliefs and behavioral requirements, provides a feeling of superior status to its members, through the strengthening of prejudices and negative stereotypes against other groups, creating insurmountable boundaries capable of demonizing others.

There are many elements contributing to the formation of a personal or collective identity: when a person has the perception that one of these elements is threatened, he/she tends to synthesize the whole identity in that single aspect, through a process of meaning construction based on a cultural attribute that takes priority over others (Rothenberg and Kotarac 2015).

In situations of identity crisis, finding a dominant element to identify with gives relief. On the contrary, perceiving one's own belonging under attack can lead to fear or insecurity: the greater the perceived threat, the greater the possibilities of taking a strong stance, of making extremist positions emerge, of creating imaginary frontiers towards who we think could be the enemy. At the core of any

community that feels threatened, there is the need to respond to that threat: in order to strengthen the identity of the community, people or groups that fly the flag of that specific identity use extreme expressions to channel anger towards the other (OPEV 2019). Extremist groups can provide that sense of identity while meeting other needs, such as a sense of belonging and affiliation (Borum 2014): for this reason, radicalization itself can be considered a social process, more than a personal and ideological one. The individual, in search of a cause, is “cognitively open” (Wiktorowicz 2005), while the group is active in promoting itself as a response to the aspirations or problems of society: the correspondence of the different frames of meaning leads to the meeting between the two.

Therefore, they are mainly inter-dimensional dynamics: there is a relevant body of studies that supports the hypothesis that the social

change resulting from globalization is one of the causes of vulnerability of individuals and small groups, following the creation of populations almost devoid of civil rights (Sandbrook and Romano 2004; Neumann 2009).

Although there are the so-called “lone actors”, most people who adopt violent behavior would do so after a period of socialization in a peer group or within an organization.

This process involves well documented phenomena, especially from the literature on youth subcultures, such as the need for approval and the influence of charismatic individuals: the presence of violent extremists among relatives or within the peer group, for example, would increase the propensity to act in this way (Sageman 2004).

Religion and ethnicity are some of the most powerful expressions of individual and group identity that can be exploited by extremist or elite groups, generating insecurity through selective and distorted representations:

protests and violence between natives and migrant communities, or narratives against refugees, asylum seekers or Roma community can be interpreted in this way. One of the risks of the increase of such tensions is preventing access to certain communities, or to some members of those communities, to the places in charge of the path of socialization that is fundamental for inclusion in the target society: think of school for the youngest, the (regular) labour market and neighbourhood life for adults (Karatrantos 2018). Ultimately, the risk is that such isolation will lead such individuals to be more vulnerable to radicalization, just as

it is widely believed that institutionalized inequality and discrimination, economic, social and/or political marginalization of ethnic or religious groups, increase the risk of violent extremism (Gelfand *et al.* 2013).

The radicalization of young people, especially religious radicalization related to Islam, is often due to hatred for the injustices experienced in one's life, the search for meaning for one's life, a sense of frustration, fragility and irrelevance (Victoroff and Kruglanski 2009).

Whether it is religion, national identity or ideology, the mechanism is almost the same. Several authors have described the phases leading to the adoption of extremist behaviors, stressing that the assumption of such ideology occurs after an important

initial phase of self-identification where subjects are removed from their original identities through the perception of being victims: the use of a narrative of oppression to justify violence and recruit and motivate supporters is an almost universal technique among violent extremist groups (Allan *et al.* 2015).

The meso dimension also includes those physical spaces whose characteristics make them particularly suitable for hosting dynamics of radicalization: above all, places of worship and prison. With regard to the former, and with reference to Islamic radicalization, one may wonder whether the risks of extremism are greater inside or next to mosques. If many people, especially among converted people who become radicalized, begin their path of faith within mosques and in contact with other Muslims, it is equally true that a high percentage soon deviate from it, judging them

too moderate, and searching for online or in a small radical circle for support for the new way of life.

Although the presence of radical preachers and cells born in prayer rooms cannot be excluded a priori, it is equally true that local Islamic communities, with their visible and structured presence, often represent a set from which radicalized subjects are rejected or self-expelled (Brzuskiewicz 2019).

However, the best example of vulnerable place is the prison (Neumann 2010). The international community has developed a series of indicators of radicalization (FAIR 2016), useful to identify and understand potential alarm signals.

There are many factors of radicalization inside the prison: resentment towards society, fuelled by detention and the implementation of possible victimization narratives by the subject; the lack of respect for the rights of prisoners (de Galember *et al.* 2016) and new social relationships replacing those outside the prison, which become increasingly radicalized if the relationships of the subject in the outside world are weak.

The literature, in particular the one referring to an Islamic radicalization, substantially identifies three different idealistic paths. The first, of additional type, would see the contact of two or more already radicalized individuals in prison, with a consequent mutual strengthening of extremist ideas and visions; the second, by contact, sees the radicalization of an individual, not characterized by extremist positions, following the contact with one or more radicalized prisoners (or with radical material

and propaganda); finally, the third, provides for a real conversion of the subject, as independent from or following proselytizing actions by his companions. Such conversions, occurred in conditions of discomfort and isolation from the rest of society, against something and someone, are more likely to lead to the adoption of a radical and extremist position (Brzuskiewicz 2019). In any case, radicalization in prison remains, at least in Italy, a phenomenon characterized by extremely limited numbers: at the end of 2018, there were 66 defendants or convicted for crimes related to international terrorism of Islamic matrix (Antigone 2019).

The overestimation of this process, functional to the securitarian paradigm, would only create alarmism and strengthen simplistic and discriminating interpretations.

Among the possible prevention and counter-radicalization actions that can be implemented at a meso level, we can first of all refer to the implementation of a counter-radicalization at community level, whether politically guided or inspired by religious principles, which strengthens local skills in the prevention of violent extremism and cooperation between civil society and local authorities, or leaves room for alternative forms of social organization from the bottom up through collective and proximity actions.

This would create economic, cultural, political and social opportunities capable of ensuring the participation also of minority groups, guaranteeing the representation of their rights.

Talking about interconnected diversity and intercultural societies means referring to “eco-social” communities (OPEV 2019) capable of knowing, valuing and managing diversity, seen as a source of wealth for the group and no longer perceived as a threat to identity and values, thus weakening extremist rhetoric and facilitating the creation of constructive and non-oppositional, violent or discriminatory identities.

For this to happen, we need physical community spaces (for sport, culture, etc.), social connectors able to mobilize the youngest, fundamental players in this process.

Likewise, the use of influential communicators within the community, able to convey messages to people and groups, is relevant: local formal or religious leaders, belonging to individual communities, are key players, given their influence, in strengthening this feeling of social cohesion. There are ad hoc projects and actions aimed at protecting young people from the risk of radicalization and contact with extremist groups implemented in specific contexts such as schools or addressing the most vulnerable people (specific communities, refugees and asylum seekers, people with low schooling). These projects and actions use educational and awareness campaigns on otherness, in an inclusive and intercultural perspective, able to shift the emphasis from the simple focus on identity and differences to similarity with otherness, so as to reduce social fear, lack of trust and defensive positions of individuals and communities (Waldek and Droogan 2015).

With reference to vulnerable physical places, the implementation of monitoring, prevention and counter-radicalization programs in prisons is essential, also using some reference figures, such as imams, able to play a crucial role in a counter-radicalization and de-radicalisation perspective.

This is also stated in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Department of Prison Administration and the Union of Italy's Islamic Organizations and Communities in 20015, to guarantee Muslim prisoners greater freedom of worship, while counteracting the influence of potential agents of radicalization within the prison.





.5

The macro dimension: need for participation and role of the Internet

Given the context of structural crisis where basic needs of individuals are not satisfied due to poor resources available in a society where the gap in the distribution of wealth is insreasing, it is clear that possibilities of violent extremism are growing. Conflicting and tense situations occur when people begin to consider the needs of a group incompatible with the needs of other groups. Conflicts between those who have resources and those who do not, between urban and rural areas of cities, residents and *city users*, different age groups, happening in a context characterized by an increasing state of uncertainty and the reduction of social welfare services (OPEV 2019) show that. The inabil-

ity of institutional stakeholders to provide basic services (health, education, welfare) could make it possible for extremist groups to meet these needs and consequently obtain support from a large part of the population, as well as non-state players could fill the gap in the functions of security and justice (recalling the dynamics found in Mafia associations). Similarly, limiting participation can be a factor related to the increased risk of extremism (Piazza 2006): groups or organizations that are potential targets of suspicion and repression may act through violence. If we also consider the implementation of exclusionary policies and the use of “distorted” security and justice systems,

recourse to clashes and extremism is almost unavoidable. The weakness of the state can provide opportunities for uprising (Schmid 2013), excessive force and abuse of state power can encourage resistance (think of the recent actions of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially in the United States, engaged in the fight against racism). Some econometric analyses (Tilly 2003; Li 2005) state that the lack of civil liberties is the most reliable predictor of terrorism identified so far, although not all the literature seems to converge on this interpretation (Abadie 2004; Chenoweth 2010). Ultimately, it is believed that political marginalization of particular ethnic groups may increase the risk of violent extremism. Still, terrorist organizations can emerge and flourish even in highly democratic countries (think of the IRA in the UK and ETA in Spain), although there are cases of extremist groups that use political exclusion as justification for violence.

There are several factors that are putting a strain on the structure of society, particularly affecting disadvantaged people and bringing about global change.

Current migratory dynamics, whether they are linked to “economic” or environmental aspects or resulting from conflicts, are a best example. Poor populations, on the one hand, try to go to richer countries undertaking journeys marked by death and suffering and, on the other hand, they clash with the extremely restrictive and uncoordinated migration policies of the European Union, which increase inter-ethnic tensions in the target societies, and reinforce criminal groups. Therefore, we want to emphasize how international and domestic political factors can sow fertile ground on the process of radicalization

of subjects (Vidino 2014). Events that take place elsewhere (think of the Middle East area) or the violation of human rights can be read in terms of a global attack, causing widespread indignation that encourages support for extremist action and resulting in radicalizing impact on the communities of the mass exodus. The role played by the super-powers in the international scenario (United States and Europe, above all) has led them to be called “anxious dictators and shaky democracies” (Freedom House 2016): by exacerbating conflicts, generating an unprecedented number of refugees, using populist rhetoric and adopting security measures that clash with universally recognized civil liberties, they foment xenophobic feelings, creating a climate in which the construction of walls and attacks on refugees are legitimized, while preparing a fertile ground for the emergence of terrorist groups.

A further aspect that must be taken into consideration is the political polarization: populist and extreme right-wing groups, now rooted in most European countries, have gradually refined their rhetoric, using a language increasingly harsh and full of hatred, now legitimized within the public debate and mediated by the entertainment society, able to influence social life and relations with the others (Manconi and Resta 2017).

This rhetoric has gone hand in hand with a series of political responses aimed at limiting the flows of migrants and, in particular, asylum seekers.

The diversity of visions and political proposals, within the individual state and at the European level, accompanied by a strong emotional investment, has made evident a polarization that, on the one hand,

has flattened the debate towards increasingly populist positions, and, on the other hand, has allowed the growth, in terms of votes and visibility, of extreme right-wing parties that use symbolic actions targeting migrants. In today's societies, led by political entrepreneurs of fear, the foreigner has become the main scapegoat for grudge: this "progressive, questioning and dramatic petrification of words" (Bonomi and Majorino 2018, p.15) has led to intolerance, xenophobia, racism, ultimately to a real molecular war of civilization. Encouraging hatred, fear and repression is a key method to exercise social control: fear of possible evolutions of the global crisis creates high levels of anxiety, thus facilitating the willingness to support financial efforts and limitations of freedom in order to achieve (relative) reductions in insecurity. Considering the Other as a threat makes it easier to apply a repression based on double standards: more severe and exemplary

towards certain groups, so as to instill the idea of the enemy, and more selective and advocate of civil liberties in other circumstances.

These inequalities, reproduced and magnified by the securitarian paradigm mentioned above, become the seed from which the processes of radicalization grow.

Also in this case we want to refer to a specific place, the online, investigating the role played by the Internet in the dynamics of propaganda, recruitment and mobilization of radicalizing or already radicalized individuals. Within a hyper-connected society, in which real interaction is largely replaced by virtual interaction, and in which young people are very familiar with how to spread online content, but have less

critical sense of it, the search for models to identify with often passes from the mass media and the network. The processes of polarization and radicalization within the latter are favoured by the mechanism of the “filter bubble” that regulates the individual experience typical of the network (Pariser 2011) and which leads to the question of what are the risks of the transition from a violence exercised only virtually to a physical one. Online radicalization, even though it is a recent mechanism, can already count on a vast reference literature, aimed at emphasizing how the virtual world is able to promote radicalization, acting as a platform for radical instances, narratives and content and creating the conditions for radicalization to take place without the need for physical interactions between individuals (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017).

Think of the use of the net by the Islamic State or on the occasion of the attacks by supremacists in recent years.

Daesh’s propaganda, just to mention the most popular one, has been able to effectively exploit the network to reach new potential jihadists around the world (Maggiolini and Magri 2015), through the creation of videos capable of spectacularizing the “heroic” component of the project of the Islamic State and conveying narratives related to the daily life of the caliphate, so as to attract the families of aspiring jihadists (Brzuskiewicz 2019). Similarly, think about the 1.500-page manifesto posted on the web by Anders Breivik in 2009, two years before committing the double attack that caused the death of 77 people in Oslo and Utoya, Norway or the video broadcast live on Facebook by Brenton Tarrant on the

occasion of the massacre of 50 people in the two mosques of Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019. Think also about the manifesto posted on 8chan by Patrick Crusius before killing 22 people in a shopping mall in El Paso, Texas, in 2019 or about the attempted massacre broadcast live on the Twitch platform by the neo-Nazi Stephan Balliet, filmed through the GoPro camera mounted on the helmet, also in 2019, in Halle, Germany: these actions were announced or broadcast live on the web or social networks. Radicalization through the latter, in particular, would range from the simple vision of propaganda material to the sharing of increasingly extreme content (Weimann 2004), and would be more effective among younger, isolated adolescents, characterized by low self-esteem, who have suffered episodes of bullying and have complicated relationships with parental figures (Biolcati 2010).

The fundamentalist narrative mentioned several times in this work, drawing from different sources and symbolic universes, would then be co-constructed by all those who are immersed in it, in a kind of *peer-to-peer* process that finds its main medium in the net.

At the macro level, the goal is the fulfilment of the fundamental needs of individuals and the creation of a fairer and democratic society, although it may seem idealistic and difficult to achieve (OPEV 2019), as it can act as a stop and defuse the emergence of violent extremism. At the basis of every possible action of prevention and contrast, all those preventive measures able to change the situations of injustice created would emerge, acting not only on the affected person, but taking into account the interdependence of individual, social and struc-

tural levels, according to a local and global approach. From this point of view, some movements considered radical (as they are aimed at fostering the transformation of a society, such as environmentalist and feminist movements, the Arab Springs) can be considered a valid ally in the fight against violent extremism and the dominant logic that forms its basis. If the task of the State is to provide structures and systems capable of responding to the needs of citizens, the role of the so-called “Non-state institutions” cannot be neglected: to change the values at the basis of a society, a direct participation, from the bottom up, able to involve the different members of the social body, even the most antagonistic ones, is a key aspect. On the other hand, democracies would evolve thanks to the permanent challenge of power (Della Porta 2013): the role played by social movements, “watchdogs” of the systems and bearers of collective needs and feelings, forces mature democracies to face

forms of dissent, interacting with protesting agents. Thus, if civil society becomes a key player in the fight against extremism, it is necessary to encourage an active and inclusive commitment. Different roles and positions must be involved, even those of individuals or communities that usually do not participate in such paths because of the dynamics of inclusion- exclusion that often characterize these processes: ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, economic aspects are characteristics that trigger power relationships that, consciously or unconsciously, influence the possibilities of participation.

It is important to offer different individuals and groups the opportunity to occupy a position in the world (Sassen 2014): the participatory deficit marks the decline of the possibility to form common opin-

ions after meeting the other, which is fundamental to create tolerance and acceptance of diversity (Ruggiero 2017).

If some *soft measures* refer to prevention and awareness raising initiatives conducted on a large scale, not addressed to a specific target group (think of online counter-narrative activities), it is equally true that, in order to develop appropriate strategies, it is essential to focus also on the local sphere and context. Some possible actions to prevent and combat violent extremism may be the monitoring of the impact of all forms of extremism, with particular attention to the spread of hate speech, and the implementation of information campaigns about the different forms of extremism and their impact on society.

Furthermore, to ensure the protection of democratic values and access to justice for

all, especially the most vulnerable communities, it seems essential to equip law enforcement agencies and those involved in the administration of justice with specific training on civil rights, while monitoring and bringing to public debate all those policies and laws aimed at combating violent extremism and terrorism through the limitation of civil rights and individual freedoms.

Finally, as highlighted, it seems necessary to deconstruct the links between polarization and radicalization, starting from public debate.

The role of the media is extremely important in promoting the concept of inclusive societies and in deconstructing the most radical poles within the public debate.

Through the media, it is possible to generate alternative narratives able to dignify marginalized populations and to propose networks of mutual support through responsible communication, information and awareness campaigns involving public figures, which are a platform against violent extremism.

In view of the representation, including institutional one, that certain groups and movements that profess ideologies of hatred, intolerance and violence are taking on, these actions prove to be extremely fundamental, as you can see in the next chapter.





The forms and manifestations of violent extremism in Italy from the nineties to the present

When we talk about violent extremism, common thinking usually goes to well-defined communities and phenomena, and specifically, to Islamic radicalism.

In recent years, the migration crisis and terrorist attacks have created a new landscape that has brought the migration issue to the top of national (and supra-national) security agendas, due to the existence of possible connections with international terrorism, mostly jihadist (Karatrantos 2018).



At the same time, several surveys carried out nationally (but also on a continental and overseas level) highlight the increasingly worrying spread of racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic ideologies.

According to the Global Terrorism Index (2019), extreme right-wing terrorism has grown by 320% globally over the last five years. With reference to the Italian context, Borri and Caiani (2012) point out that between 2005 and 2009, there were 338 violent actions committed in Italy by the extreme right, ranging from insults and threats against social or ethnic minorities to choruses and graffiti on the walls praising fascism, to aggression against leftist militants, homosexuals and immigrants. There would be 207 fascist attacks in Italy from 2014 to today (Infoantifa Ecn 2020), which have found their climax in the action of Luca Traini who, in February 2018, injured six young people of

African origin shooting from a running car. Based on the categorization that takes into account the political groups responsible for this assaults, it is interesting to note that 70 assaults were carried out by CasaPound Italia, which, among the various organizations of the extreme right, is the one with the most rooted presence in the area.

In light of the above, in the following pages we will try to describe, without any pretension of exhaustiveness, some of the main forms of violent extremism that have emerged in Italy in recent years.

In relation to Islamic radicalism, the Italian situation appears different from that found in other European contexts. The lower levels of radicalization in Italy, compared to other

European countries, are due to many factors. Some of them could be: the smaller presence of new generations with multiple and contradictory identities and are more vulnerable to radicalization; the minor experience of Italy in colonialism compared to other European countries; an Italian army depicted as more compassionate; the absence of ghetto-neighbourhoods with high rates of urban decay, unemployment and crime; the presence of organizations and communities oriented towards dialogue and the action of intelligence, police and anti-terrorism bodies (Brzuszkiewicz 2019).

If the local form of radicalization is a phenomenon that in Italy lags behind other European countries, it is equally true that the country, already in the early nineties, has hosted jihadist networks and international branches of groups that were also very strong and advanced from an organizational point of view.

A first phase, developed throughout the nineties, saw the presence, in the top positions, of first generation migrants, who worked mainly in view of the propaganda and financing of global jihad (emblematic is the activity of the Islamic center in Viale Jenner, Milan, considered the main base of al-Qaeda in Europe by the U.S. Treasury Department). A second phase, corresponding to the years just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has seen the emergence of the first, so-called lone wolves: individuals who, acting without the support of established networks and in a rather disorganized way, even if of first generation, have seen their path of radicalization in Italy. The third phase, which starts essentially from the second decade of the new millennium and which is still going on today, features the advent of the real local jihadism. This is promoted by individuals who were born or, at least, socialized and educated in Italy, often with the crucial in-

volvement of Italians converted to Islam (think of the case of Barbara Aisha Farina and Mohammed Jarmoune, the first *totally* local jihadist criminally judged in Italy). This third stage is characterized by the use of the Internet as a privileged channel of communication between radicalized subjects and as a tool for propaganda and dissemination of doctrinal and operational materials and manuals. The almost total absence of interactions with the country of origin of the family, the increased use of the Italian language and the frequent absence of mosques and Islamic centers in the path of individual radicalization (Vidino 2014; Brzuskiewicz 2019) are other key-aspects.

The second form of violent extremism found in Italy in recent years is that of the far-right: there are many groups, currently found in Italy, that attract young people

in schools, neighbourhoods, concerts, summer camps, stadiums, or organizing events and conferences.

In particular, several youth groups are rooted in Italy and are characterized by hierarchical structures, guidelines and sections: Blocco studentesco (Casa Pound), Lotta Studentesca (Forza Nuova), Azione studentesca and Azione universitaria (close to Fratelli d'Italia), Gioventù Nazionale (FdI), Generazione Identitaria, La Foresta che avanza, Oltre la Linea → 1.

The boys are fertile ground for fascist organizations. They are the public and the catchment area to which the leaders look because they are the votes of tomorrow. With the marketing of fashion, music, slogans, street politics, they make them feel like the alpha males of the new right-wing extremism. An asymmetrical, shifty extremism that spreads in the network of acronyms seemingly disconnected from the parent company (Berizzi 2020, 15).

According to Berizzi (2020), these groups act on a double level: the political one, clear and characterized by links with parties that define themselves as “moderates”, so as to legitimize and present as acceptable ideas that were not so before, and the concealed level in which, through a series of activities, they manage to transform fascination into political action.

The latter aspect deserves particular attention, as it involves more closely the youth population and its educational aspects. On the one hand, the adults are often trained to fight with their bare hands in sports clubs or in ad-hoc courses organized in the mountains through a spiritual, cultural, religious, pre-military and gymnastic-sports education, or through community lunches and

dinners, concerts and debates. On the other hand, children and adolescents attend traditional summer camps and school camps that the extreme right groups organize today, where educational and sports activities alternate with moments of sharing and prayer, similarly to those organized by the fascist regime for educational and political purposes. In the 2019 edition, the participants of the summer camp organized at Lido di Dante (Ravenna) by the Evita Perón Association - Forza Nuova's female branch - re-interpreted *Nostri Canti Assassini* (*ibid.* “Our murderous songs”), an iconic piece of neo-fascism (*E scoprimmo l'amore e scoprimmo la strada, difendemmo l'onore col sorriso e la spada - And we discovered love and we discovered the way, we defended honor with a smile and a sword*). In 2020, the final play was inspired by the life of Gabriele D'Annunzio as ‘soldier’, as witnessed on the Facebook page of the Association itself, the only fascist association of women in Italy.

Such associations and groups put in place operations of camouflage (*ibid.*) able to make them gain space within the public and political arena: on the one hand, they show themselves available to the community of reference, guarding the suburbs, distributing food parcels, putting in place struggles for the right of ownership of the house, but then return to show the always marked inclination to aggression and violence, through the continuous search for an enemy, built from a narration that feeds on people's fears.

There are different strategies implemented by these groups: the use of sports disciplines (rugby, field and ice hockey, water polo, soccer, parachuting, scuba diving, motorcycling) allows them to bring young people closer to politics and, at the same time, to make propaganda, through the organization of events often sponsored by institutional bodies. In particular, combat sports (and, in detail, mixed martial arts, Mma,

because of a basically military contemporary culture, as stressed by Dal Lago, 2018) are the main place for recruiting young people: these are sports that convey values with a high symbolic meaning, such as respect, loyalty, sacrifice and discipline, and whose fights become almost collective rites.

As pointed out by Berizzi (2020), there are tens of thousands of athletes in Italy who practice combat sports outside the reference Federations, most under 18.

It is, evidently, a very attractive target area for extremist forces, so much so that Casa Pound, Lealtà Azione and Forza Nuova have entire sections and branches that gather militants who practice combat sports: the sports magnet is in fact able to attract young people, routing them on a path of militancy.

There is the possibility for the young people to live the different passions in a single reality, becoming part of an almost totalizing militancy characterized by numerous elements: respect for the rules of the gang, the feelings experienced during the clashes, feelings of camaraderie, belonging and loyalty, the role of music and its rituals (the *wall of death* as a reproduction of the scene of a battle), the presence of area clothing with the sub-symbols of the group, the sharing of messages and narratives full of suggestion and references to mystical and pagan aspects (from the Nordic tradition of the solstices to the rituals around the fire, up to the symbolic sacredness of the runes), the presence of initiation rites (such as the serial beating of immigrants or the request to create clashes at the stadium with opposing fans or with the police).

The communication used by these groups to the outside world is particularly ambiguous: on the one hand, they usually distance themselves from Fascism, through that destructuring typical of the metapolitical message of the new right-wing (*ibid.*), but, at the same time, every stance (from riots in the suburbs to patrols, from riots against reception centers to memorial marches for the fallen, from attacks to propaganda crimes) has a strong political connotation. This ambiguity, however, sometimes disappears: think of the militants of Blocco Studentesco, the young section of the movement, who presented themselves in 2006, for the first time, at the elections of the Liceo Farnesina di Vigna Clara in Rome to the cry, printed on the flyers distributed to students, of “*sono tornati i fascisti*” (*Fascists are back*) (Berizzi 2009).

Finally, the massive use of social networks is another important feature: according to a recent survey (Baldini 2020), the approximately 5,000 Facebook pages referring to right-wing extremism surveyed between 2015 and 2018 have produced about 2 million posts.

There are just under 1,000 pages attributable to CasaPound, the organization characterized by the lowest average age → 2 and a widespread network of associations (so much so that many pages refer to sports associations, music bands, cultural centers, bookstores, magazines, publishing houses and fashion lines). The closure of hundreds of public pages and some private profiles of the militants on Facebook and Instagram, which took place in autumn 2019, made the various organizations strengthen their

presence on Twitter, opening communication channels also on Telegram (*ibid.*). Beyond the possibility of recruiting the young generation, this massive presence in the net would allow to remain active within that neo-Nazi and racist network considered by the European *intelligence* more dangerous than the one composed by extremists of Islamist matrix (Berizzi 2020). It would be especially in the virtual world that extremist groups, especially those of the extreme right, remained active during the Covid-19 pandemic, doing propaganda, proselytizing and spreading *fake news* and conspiracy theories (Cossiga 2020).

In order to try to understand concretely the dynamics that can lead young people to adhere to such forms of extremism, an empirical study was conducted focusing on three different Italian regional contexts (Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy), characterized by a particular dynamism on the side of *policies* aimed at preventing and combating such processes.

1 There are also regional groups, such as: Veneto fronte skinheads and Fortezza Europa (Veneto); Do.Ra., Lealtà Azione and Avamposto (Lombardy); Legio subalpina and Rebel Firm (Piedmont); Casaggi and Gioventù universitaria (Tuscany); Movimento

studentesco, Foro 753, Gioventù identitaria, Generazione popolare, Nes and Foedus (Lazio); Rivolta studentesca italiana (Sardinia); Audaces, Spazio libero Cervantes, Assalto studentesco, Identità tradizionale (Sicily); Spina nel fianco (Basilicata); Audere semper (Abruzzo).

2 According to a survey by L'Espresso dating back to 2017, 4.7% of the 15,000 new adults interviewed stated that they would vote for CasaPound in the following year's general election (Testi 2017).





Polarization, radicalization and security perceptions in the three regions under analysis

- 3.1** Introduction
 - 3.2** Social capital, conflicts and push and containment factors for polarization
 - 3.3** Security: real situation and perceptions
-

As analyzed above, the levels of polarization and the ways in which it appears within society are not the same in every area of a country. Areas with different socio-demographic characteristics have equally different characteristics in terms of polarization, agents of radicalization, latent and explicit tensions and, not least, dynamism in the creation and implementation of policies to counteract the phenomena of polarization itself.

Each of these reasons led us to identify three Italian regions as representative realities of the phenomena under examination and the fight against them. In particular, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy – three of the regions with the highest number of inhabitants → **1**, more densely populated regions and home to as many of the major Italian cities (Bologna, Rome and Milan respectively), → **2** are particularly interesting case studies for research purposes.

A further fundamental consideration should be added to that. In recent decades, the three selected regions have hosted a high percentage of projects and initiatives to combat polarization implemented throughout Italy, with results that, in the course of the field survey and focus groups, have offered food for thought on the good practices adopted or being developed and on the potential for further improvement.

3.1

Introduction

The analysis of the most complex social contexts in the three regions under investigation was a fundamental component both of the preliminary work and of the meetings with the different parties involved in **Emilia-Romagna, Lazio** and **Lombardy** during the different focus groups.

In accordance with the guidelines traced by the Rhizome Against Polarization project, in order to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the different contexts, we have focused in particular on some fundamental thematic areas. Among these, a primary role is played by the elements that make up the social capital of the analyz-

ed areas, the latent or explicit conflicts and the push factors or, conversely, the containment factors of the polarization present in the contexts under examination. A further fundamental concept to understand the dynamics of polarization and radicalization has been the real and perceived security on the area.

In order to achieve a greater knowledge of the phenomena under examination, both notions, “polarization” and “radicalization”, will be used and problematized. → 3

They are inseparably interrelated but do not reflect exactly the same reality.

We understand radicalization as a growing willingness to conceive, support and use violence as a tool to foster the political and social change to which one aspires. → 4

The term polarization has a broader and, if possible, even more complex meaning. It accounts not only for the more immediately tangible violence but also for the increasingly violent and “visceral” communication. Another characteristic of a polarized worldview is the systematic reduction of the other to a single trait of his/her identity: the essentialisation of the other is pervasive. → 5



3.2

Social capital, conflicts and push and containment factors for polarization

The notion of social capital, introduced extensively in the social sciences since the nineties of the last century, is fundamental to understand and analyze the dynamics in a given society.

Without going into the different theoretical definitions proposed by sociologists and social scientists throughout history, we can define social capital as the set of value systems, relationships and rules that subjects build during their existence in their society and that facilitate communication and collaboration within or between groups. A further aspect of the concept of social capital was introduced by the American politi-

cal scientist Francis Fukuyama, who states that social capital is a resource that is present where trust prevails in all or part of society. → 6

The dialogue on social capital in the areas under examination has been a fundamental part of the focus groups with institutional and civil society representatives in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy.

In particular, all stakeholders have focused on the levels of verbal and physical violence among young people and the types of polarization that can be identified, the presence of explicit or latent conflicts within society and the factors that can act as a barrier or, conversely, as a driving force to polarization. With regard to the dynamics of violence, Virginia Suigo, psychologist and psychotherapist of the Minotauro Association and collaborator of the Juvenile Justice Services of **Lombardy**, explains that today's young people are less violent than previous generations. However, those who adopt anti-social behavior are often very young and violent offenders. → 7

Physical, gender-based and verbal violence does not recognize any role or authority → 8 and we often see the systematic dehumanization of the other and anyone outside the group.

Another aspect that many people have noted with regard to youth violence is that it is poorly politicized and ideologized to date. Ideological traits that refer to a particular extreme horizon exist and are in many cases clearly visible, but are in an embryonic state in which they are usually expressed with little awareness. → 9

Psychotherapist Emanuele Melissa remembers that many of the values borrowed from radical ideologies of different kinds are actually born as pre-political and this is clear working on the area. → 10 Among the strongest values, we observe, first of all, a strong male code of protection of the group against otherness, which leads in particular to the racist and xenophobia polarization that we will deal with shortly.

During the investigation aimed at understanding which types of polarization and radicalization are now more clearly identifiable in the area, most stakeholders have provided a kind of denial of the security approach widespread in recent years in the country that sees young people of Muslim origin as the social group at higher risk of polarization. According to the participants in the focus groups and interviews, religious extremism does not seem to occupy the primary place among the forms of polarization observed in prisons, host communities and group homes.

In the case of **Lazio**, for example, Andrea Tolomelli from CEFA Onlus explains that with regard to the types of radicalization that can be observed in the field, the religious one seems to be the least, while the one inspired by extreme right-wing ideologies is much more present today. → 11

Cases of religious polarization - particularly of very young individuals with pro-Jihadist views - have occurred and should be of concern, but are not numerically important. Often these young people were second-generation individuals - universally recognized as the most vulnerable in the context of radicalization studies - and the beginnings of the polarization process closely resembled those of a simple youth gang, with a very strong group component, dedicated to small drug pushing.

However, in **Emilia-Romagna**, a further aspect of these dynamics has been noted: even without being radicalized, some of the young people, for example, within the communities of first reception and recently arrived in Italy, tend to unite around religious matters. Community workers rightly point out that this is not necessarily negative. However, it often becomes so when their union around the common religion

causes or exacerbates the lack of trust towards the outside world, even in the most trivial activities of daily life, during which, for example, they avoid eating meat because they do not trust the halal certification that the food served to them has. → 12

Another dynamic observed rather frequently in all three regions under investigation is the often ill-concealed hostility between Muslim migrants of different origins and with different ways of experiencing their own religiousness, a situation that often leads to an explicit disdain for each other.

In these dynamics, young people inevitably influence each other very intensely.

If they have the impression that some of the subjects are particularly vulnerable to reli-

gious radicalization and, above all, to possible recruitment, the operators always report the case to the relevant authorities. It was often observed a sort of “cluster” effect that fell, for example, on younger siblings not yet polarized, → 13 who soon followed the example of the older ones, further lowering the age at the beginning of the process. Many of these subjects give, in any case, rather blurred signals: some of them come from families in turn polarized, many others do not and, precisely for this reason, adequate training for operators working with them is increasingly essential.

Remaining in the populous Lombardy, a further rather worrying trend is constituted by some fringes of extreme right-wing activism closely linked to soccer and basketball fans.

The most striking case was that of Blood and Honor, a group of ultras who also developed a relatively sophisticated recruitment system compared to other groups, characterized by a markedly horizontal management. → 14 Blood and Honour of Varese is a group linked to a transnational current of clear neo-Nazi style and has always been twinned with the most extreme fringe of the North Stand (the die-hard fans) of the Inter. Among the violent activities of this type of groups, we recall the systematic racial protests against black athletes, brawls and stadium violence, but also crimes related to drug trafficking. → 15

Still on the extreme right-wing polarization, even the consulted group of social workers and officials of the Ministry of Justice stated that these are violent behaviors but often poorly ideologized, especially in their early stages, where it is common to find young people carrying objects such as

the brass knuckles but ideologically poorly equipped when asked to motivate their anti-social behavior. → 16

As discussed during the focus groups and interviews organized to prepare this report, the racist and xenophobic component of violence, is often little inspired by specific ideologies and has a very rapid growth in all three regions.

From an institutional point of view, the activity of the Observatory for Security against Acts of Discrimination (OSCAD) of the Ministry of the Interior, which deals with racist violence in terms of monitoring, research, reporting and advocacy, has represented a first-level source of data and documentation. For some years, OSCAD has also been working a lot within the po-

lice force on raising awareness of issues related to racism and xenophobia, a field of activity that some experts believe should be further developed. → 17

With regard to trends related to racism in the country, today the link between migration and crime is still often taken for granted. More generally, the rhetoric used by xenophobic forces in Italy is similar to the rhetoric used in other European countries and goes along some main guiding lines.

The **first** line is related to the economic and social unsustainability of migration and reception costs. The **second** line coincides with the narratives focused on the identity issue and the possible loss - or at least weakening - of Italian, Catholic, or Western identity, as the case may be - resulting from migration itself, described as an invasion.

The **third** area on which xenophobic rhetoric insists more strongly is the securitarian vision of social phenomena, which are represented only through the lens of security.

In this context, migrants and foreigners in general represent a threat to personal, women's and children's safety, a threat to the security of the nation, particularly when narratives focus on terrorism, as well as a threat to health security, where xenophobic events have worsened with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in its early stages. In this regard, before the lockdown, there had been a peak in episodes of racism against the Chinese and Asian population in general. During the lockdown, there has been an inevitable decrease in the number of cases of racist violence but, with the progressive reopening and the increase in freedom of movement, we have entered a new upward phase. → 18

Alongside the various dynamics of violence and conflict on the territory and, in particular, among young people, as mentioned above, the second thematic concept on which we focused during the focus groups to understand the scenarios of the regions in question was the presence of factors and realities that can act as a barrier or, vice versa, as a trigger for social polarization.

In this regard, the reflection on the role of the educational system has occupied a central position in the discussion with the stakeholders in the field.

According to many of them, schools today are the real “last bastions” against polarization, although teachers are not always adequately prepared on the topic. → 19

At the same time, workers from the Ministry of Justice warn that we have a *very frightened school*. Usually, the secondary school period in particular is the most difficult and feared by the young people. Often, there is very deep pain and suffering caused by the classmates' actions. The situation is worsened by the fact that adults are often completely *left out of these problems*, unaware. And also for this reason, if they suffer, the adolescents often see no alternative but to withdraw into themselves. → 20

Another very common problem identified in the experiences of middle and high school students is the so-called witnessed domestic violence, which also has very serious repercussions and is sometimes reproduced by children, both verbally and physically. → 21

A further type of response to witnessing violence and more generally to the discomfort in the family, is the already mentioned withdrawal, the so-called social withdrawal, which often threatens the school attendance itself.

However, if there is no network with the other educational agencies, the school is not enough; if it is left alone, it will take much more effort. → 22

According to Livia Vasile, a teacher in a high school in Lombardy, some realities can be imagined, but often the teacher does not fully understand them, so empathizing with the students is essential.

Vasile also notes that polarized behaviors, among which the deep difficulties in accepting rules, authority and peaceful dis-

cussion, represent a sort of deviation towards an extreme for young people who often live in the opposite extreme. They live in *regimented* contexts in which it is the fear and the strong hierarchical approach - for example, of the father with respect to the children - that dictate demonstrations of respect that are, above all, formal. Once out of such contexts, many young people tend to deviate to the opposite pole. Some of them find excess amusing because it is usually completely forbidden. → 23

With regard to the role of the school system in the fight against polarization, Luca Ercoli, a pedagogist working in Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, gives the Rhizome Against Polarization project a unique perspective, focusing on the teachers' side even before the students' side.

Ercoli mentions different types of polarization that can create detrimental obstacles to

the formation of the individual. First of all, it is a question of polarization between different pedagogical hypotheses, between training as a global experience and training that coincides with the didactics alone; between parents' vision as an integral part of the process and parents as subjects to be kept out of school as much as possible; between teaching methods, such as those that demand flexibility only from students and methods that also require it from teachers. → 24

Then, there is the polarization between the absolute primacy of the regulatory function, based on the principle of reality and duty, with an adult who is "in the forefront" and the approach able to incorporate the emotional function, which brings empathy into play and an adult who is "on the side".

With regard to young people and the fight against polarization, it is increasingly necessary to work on the *ABC's of Bullying Prevention*, a work that includes an in-depth understanding of the phenomena starting from the terms used to describe them.

Joke means something other than *mockery*, which in turn represents something other than bullying. The joke takes place when we laugh together, the mockery takes place when the person who makes it laughs and the other person suffers. Often, the mockery also includes the element of the audience, the gratification given by having spectators.

The school can only act on polarization, violence and bullying if it can convey the rules of the joke. Those who are mocked have the right and the duty to express the fact that they did not like it and they have the right to get angry. The other has the duty to apologize, even publicly, and not to

repeat the same behavior. → 25 The mockery finally results in bullying when the author of the mockery decides to repeat it and to continue even if he/she is aware that the other does not want it. Bullying can in fact be defined as repeated bullying.

A further bastion often able to make a difference not only in monitoring, but also in fighting different forms of polarization is the relentless work carried out on the territory by family homes, communities and reception centers, especially for children and young adults.

These realities seek social inclusion and strive to ensure that children are not only confronted with the world within the community itself. To avoid this, they try to create a flexible network between community

and territory through training, work and leisure activities. Opportunities for dialogue, meeting and exchange of experiences play an equally fundamental role, → 26 especially when they are not homogeneous or all marked by a migratory path.

A third set of places, both physical and symbolic, that has been recognized by many as a potential resource against polarization consists of churches, mosques and prayer rooms on the territory, which often reach where the state fails. → 27 Civil society stakeholders and experts heard about the situation in Lombardy further problematize the issue, emphasizing how different realities can be an obstacle or, on the contrary, an incentive to polarization. → 28 In this regard, the discussion has raised a number of issues that have yet to be resolved in the country - which will be analyzed in the final chapter on the results and the relevant *policy recommendations*.

A particularly complex issue is the lack of dialogue between society and local institutions on the one hand, and the places described above on the other hand: in the case of Muslim communities, for example, mosques, Islamic centers and Arab schools often perceive, especially outside the large residential areas, that *no one speaks to them*.

→ 29



3.3

Security: real situation and perceptions

By social security we can mean the set of benefits provided by public institutions aimed at protecting citizens from the conditions of need and certain risks.

However, when we talk about polarization and radicalization, a fundamental role is also played by the perceptions of security that individuals develop within a given society, often regardless of how much they reflect the real situation. In other words, for polarizing rhetoric to make an impression and for an increasing number of people to make it their own, it is not necessary for it to reflect the truth. Instead, it is essential that it takes root on the basis of fear and dissatisfaction of the individuals themselves.

Once the narrative about the lack of security spreads - often accused, depending on the case, of the alleged nature of uncontrolled migration flows, the presence of nomadic communities or the feared Islamization of the country - rhetorical and verbal violence is often followed by physical and tangible violence.

Some far-right organizations such as CasaPound and Forza Nuova have had a fairly wide margin of manoeuvre to instigate and guide even violent forms of popular xenophobia, systematically described as an expression of unease from the bottom up.

Another recurring reason used in this regard exploits the dangerous topic of the *war between poor people*, thus suggesting an alleged equality of rights and lack of them between natives and migrants. The use of war metaphors, moreover explicit, indirectly legitimates the protection of what are perceived by individuals as their inalienable *no matter what* rights, for example being prioritized compared to migrants as Italians.

In this discursive construction, asylum seekers are no longer conceived as people

escaping danger, but as parasites hosted without giving anything in return and often without having real need. It should be noted that there are many cases of violent attacks against public and private entities belonging to the reception network in Italy. Depending on the case, such attacks are organized, led or at least exploited by different groups of the extreme right.

In this regard, the most complex scenario among the three regions under examination is that of Lazio. In recent years, there have been emblematic cases of discomfort, distrust and polarization in the region, particularly in some suburbs of the capital. In this regard, a brief mention of the events of Tor Sapienza, Casal Bruciato and Torre Maura is a must.

In November 2014, in Tor Sapienza neighbourhood, there were scenes of urban guerrilla warfare, with clashes and stone

throwing against entities hosting migrants and police cars assaulted and damaged. The entities, located in Viale Morandi, included a System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) and a First Reception Center for minors. → 30 The Italian families involved called for “greater security in a neighbourhood invaded by immigrants”. → 31 The inhabitants of the neighbourhood attributed the lack of security to the presence of the center and a Roma community in the area. → 32

A few years later, in 2019, Casal Bruciato, on the eastern outskirts of Rome, became the epicentre of new clashes, aroused for the assignment of a council house to a Bosnian family. The protests were soon skillfully ridden by Casa Pound, a far-right political group welcomed by a part of the crowd to the cry “we want to see them all hanged, burned”. → 33

In the same year, another emblematic case was that of Torre Maura, once again marked by intolerance against Romani people. The trigger was the transfer of about one hundred people to a reception center of the municipality located in the neighbourhood. Following the protests, the decision of the institutions was to transfer them back to other centers. Also in that case the about two hundred inhabitants of the area who protested against the presence of Roma were supported by Casapound militants and explained: “give us the earthquake victims, we don’t want gypsies”. → 34

While the Roman suburbs have been a very socially complex area in recent years, one must not believe that other realities - even very different ones - are immune to this type of tensions and conflicts. In October 2016, Gorino Ferrarese, a town in the province of Ferrara (Emilia-Romagna) of about 650 inhabitants, hit the headlines for the pro-

tests by several dozen inhabitants against the decision of the Prefect in charge of requisitioning a hostel to host twenty refugees.

The citizens erected real barricades to prevent the arrival of the vehicles transporting the refugees who, following the protests, the Prefect of Ferrara decided to send elsewhere. → 35

According to a number of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center that show how Roma (or Romani), Muslim and Jewish minorities are perceived in a number of European countries, year after year, Italy is in the first place for anti-Roma hostility, with 83% respondents declared hostile according to the latest survey, published in October 2019. → 36

Also with regard to the latent anti-Semitism of ordinary citizens and the conspiracy theories linked to the Jews - the cornerstone of various radical narratives of different orientations - Italy reaches discouraging records. A recent survey conducted by the Eurispes Institute between December 2019 and January 2020 on a sample of 1,120 respondents, found that according to 23.9% respondents, the Jews would control the world’s economic and financial power and according to 22.2% respondents, they would also lead the media. → 37

In each of the four cases mentioned above, the role played by the population’s perceptions of security has been at the forefront and has brought with it some recurring patterns of xenophobic and, more generally, polarizing dynamics: the process of *scapegoating*, the narration of Us against You and the essentialisation of the security threat.

The first feature is expressed through the institutionalization of a scapegoat par excellence which, in recent years in Italy, has been identified with migrants or members of nomadic, Roma and Sinti communities.

The narration of Us against You is rather self-explanatory and manifests itself with a sort of selective solidarity towards people in need, provided that they are Italians. The third feature, the essentialisation and simplification of the threat to security, coincides with the rhetorical and ideological procedure according to which - in actually difficult and unsafe neighbourhoods - the lack of security is attributed exclusively to a social component and any more complex contextualisation is avoided as it is not instrumental to the simplistic narratives on which any kind of polarization is based.

Coming to one of the major consequences of the perceptions of social insecurity and polarization, during the focus groups there were in-depth questions about the spread of hatred crimes in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy and, more generally, in the country.

Among the most reliable official sources are the data contained in the annual reports of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For the Italian case, the reports are supported by data provided by the aforementioned Observatory for Security against Acts of Discrimination (OSCAD), law enforcement agencies and information provided by civil society organizations. Comparing the data from the latest OSCE reports - which run up to 2018 - with those that OSCAD has already provided on Italy for 2019, Lunaria notes that the number of reported crimes has registered an increasing trend from 472 in 2013 to 969

discriminatory crimes reported by OSCAD for 2019. → 38 In the subset of non-violent discrimination, an increasing percentage seems to be committed by institutional actors. → 39

What the experts note from many sides is a growing and systematic dehumanisation of language, both in face-to-face interactions and, more clearly than ever, in social networks, where anger and discomfort take precedence over mourning, breaking up every glue of social and civil contract. → 40 Operators from the organization operating in Lazio, Lunaria - which has been engaged for decades on the dynamics of polarization, in particular racism - warn that, if and when the consequences of the crisis triggered by the health emergency on several fronts will show their full extent, these dynamics will be further exacerbated. → 41

In addition to these episodes of intolerance at a group level, focus group participants

also collectively questioned the actual levels of the threat posed by young people with whom they work as community workers, in shelters, as social workers in the area or in prisons. Along with the above-mentioned thoughts about violence, all operators faced increasingly complex cases, with issues related to the management of emotionality and impulsiveness.

In addition, minors without a criminal record, especially foreigners, are often involved in drug pushing activities. They are useful to drug pushers precisely because they are minors, less punishable, according to a frequent dynamic, for example, for young Tunisian or Moroccan young people. → 42

Moreover, beyond the community of origin, often the operators surveyed have to deal with individuals belonging to more or less structured groups. In many cases, these groups do not have the characteristics of real gangs, but sometimes have similar dynamics, with fixed and satellite members and with very similar backgrounds and life experiences. If two or more members of the same group are co-involved in some kind of crime, operators try to work in synergy and discuss about the different individuals, as the weight of the group plays a key role.

Still with regard to young people from other countries, a very widespread problem in the testimonies of operators is the way in which they network with other individuals from the same country and, often, from the same city and even neighborhood. The social network, usually considered one of

the most precious resources in a migratory context, sometimes risks to become a constraint and to limit or block the possibility of the subject to look beyond and to undertake a wider socialization. Such a self-segregation mechanism will also make the exclusion from society stronger, in a vicious circle difficult to interrupt, which in turn further fuels perceptions of insecurity both within the migrant community and throughout the country.

1 As of January 1, 2020, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy had 4,467,118, 5,865,544 and 10,103,969 inhabitants respectively. ISTAT data on resident population as of January 1.

2 On the same date, Bologna, Rome and Milan had 1,017,806, 4,333,274 and 3,279,944 residents respectively. ISTAT data on resident population as of January 1.

3 There is no universally accepted definition of either term. What has been unanimously agreed upon in terrorism studies is that radicalization and polarization are processes and never unchangeable states or conditions. They are processes of variable length and intensity that do not always lead to actual violence, which in fact occurs in a small minority of cases. For a more in-depth examination, see below: A. Kundnani, *Radicalisation: the journey of a concept*, *Race & Class* 54(2), 2012, pp.

3 – 25 e P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, 2013.

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5 G. Mezzetti, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

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8 F. Traversi, testimony in focus group, 20 July 2020.

9 V. Suigo and E. Melissa, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

10 E. Melissa, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

11 A. Tolomelli, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

12 F. Traversi, testimony in focus group, 20 July 2020.

13 E. Melissa, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

14 Ibid.

15 M. Neri, *I Blood & Honour di Varese: chi sono gli ultras di Belardinelli*, *Next*, 18 dicembre 2018.

16 A. Ingegno, testimony in focus group, 17 July 2020.

17 G. Naletto, interview, 16 July 2020.

18 Ibid.

19 G. Mezzetti, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

20 A. L'Ombardi, testimony in focus group, 20 July 2020.

21 E. Garimberti, interview, 18 September 2020.

22 Ibid.

23 L. Vasile, interview, 9 September 2020.

24 Luca Ercoli, Interview, 18 September 2020.

25 Ibid.

26 M. Guerzoni, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

27 A. Tolomelli, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

28 V. Suigo, *testimony in focus group*, 25 June 2020.

29 E. Melissa, *testimony in focus group*, 25 June 2020.

30 Lunaria, *Cronache di Ordinario Razzismo. Quinto Libro Bianco sul Razzismo in Italia*, luglio 2020, p. 10.

31 M. Favale – L. Mari, *Tor Sapienza, un'altra notte di guerriglia: bombe carta e cariche della polizia*, *La Repubblica*, 11 novembre 2014.

32 *Cosa succede a Tor Sapienza*, *Internazionale*, 12 novembre 2014.

33 V. Di Benedetto Montaccini, *Casal Bruciato, barrier umana per fermare i rom. Scontri e minacce in strada*, *Tpi*, 7 maggio 2019.

34 L. Monaco – D. Tacconelli, *La rivolta di Torre Maura contro i rom: la procura di Roma indaga per odio razziale. Salvini: "We should avoid the buck passing"*, *La Repubblica*, On April 3, 2019.

35 F. Grilli, *Gorino Ferrarese builds barricades against the arrival of the refugees*, *Il Giornale*, October 24, 2016.

36 Pew Research Center, *European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism*, Chapter 6, *Minority group*.

37 Eurispes, *Risultati del Rapporto Italia 2020*, available at the [link](#). Last consulted: 13 August 2020.

38 Lunaria, *Cronache di Ordinario Razzismo. Quinto Libro Bianco sul Razzismo in Italia*, luglio 2020, p. 69.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

41 G. Naletto, *testimony in focus group*, 16 July 2020.

42 F. Traversi, *testimony in focus group*, 20 July 2020.





Field Research

- 4.1** The stakeholders consulted in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy
 - 4.2** The outcomes
 - 4.3** Virtuous examples, room for improvement and lessons learned: recommendations for decision-makers
-



The stakeholders consulted in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy

During the research, an in-depth preliminary mapping allowed us to identify the stakeholders for focus groups and interviews of some of the most significant experiences for the purposes of our survey on polarization in the three sample regions.

Precisely during this first phase of the survey, we decided to contact civil society stakeholders and institutional stakeholders with a background as heterogeneous as possible, with experiences of contact with polarization and radicalization acquired in different contexts and through varied pro-

fessions. The cooperation representatives, such as operators and leaders of non-governmental organizations, have been supported by the testimonies of social workers and prison operators belonging to the Ministry of Justice and still different roles such as those of managers of cooperatives and residential educational communities, psychotherapists and psychologists.

Below, in alphabetical order, we report the names and roles of the subjects who participated in the different focus groups with willingness and professionalism.

Paola Berbeglia, Delegate for Global Citizenship Education for the Association of Italian Non-Governmental Organizations (AOI).

Fabrizio Chirico, Director of the Youth, University and Higher Education Area of the Municipality of Milan.

Alessio Costetti, Services Coordinator for minors at Ceis Group, Modena.

Luca Ercoli, Pedagogical Consultant operating in Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna.

Emanuela Garimberti, Secondary School Teacher and Officer for Wellness and Prevention of Discomfort, Bologna.

Martina Guerzoni, Coordinator of the residential educational community for minors Casone della Barca of Open Group, Marzabotto.

Annunziata Ingegno, Pedagogical Area Assistant of the Department of Juvenile Justice of the Ministry of Justice

Anita Lombardi, Juvenile Justice Center of the Social Service Offices for Minors (U.S.S.M.), Emilia-Romagna.

Lorenza Lugli, Social Worker for the Social Service Offices for Minors (U.S.S.M.), Emilia-Romagna.

Roberto Malaguti, Head of Argonauta community of high degree of autonomy (CEIS), Modena.

Antonella Matassa, Social Service Officer, Emilia-Romagna.

Emanuele Melissa, Psychotherapist from Minotauro Association.

Giulia Mezzetti, ISMU Foundation Researcher, Multiethnicity Initiatives and Studies, Milan.

Grazia Naletto, Former President of the social promotion association Lunaria, Rome.

Virginia Suigo, and psychotherapist for the Minotauro Association and collaborator of the Juvenile Justice Services of Lombardy.

Andrea Tolomelli, Project Manager for CEFA Onlus.

Anna Tomasiello, Professional Education Officer at the jail for minors in Bologna.

Filippo Traversi, Director of the first reception of the community for minors Casa Alda, Modena.

Livia Vatile, Secondary School teacher, Vimercate, Lombardy.



.2

The outcomes

In line with the general objectives of the Rhizome Against Polarization project, the research and, in particular, the interviews and focus groups with the chosen participants, gave particular attention to identify and analyse the three regional contexts in the approach of Addressing factors - Drivers of Violent Extremism contained in the Action Plan of the United Nations Organization for the Prevention of Violent Extremism. → 1

In particular, similarly to the setting of the above mentioned Plan of Action, the various

factors that can encourage polarization and radicalization in the different contexts in which individuals live have been questioned.

The results obtained from the dialogues based on this approach are set out in the following pages. Also with regard to the recommendations received from the players in the field, the research has followed the structure of the United Nations Plan of Action, encouraging the involved realities to the identification of the crucial areas in which key actions will have to be carried out in order to prevent and fight polarization.

With regard to the factors that more than others could be *triggers* for different forms of social polarization, as already observed in previous sections of the Report, the reflection with stakeholders focused on aspects related to tangible and verbal violence, the marginalization of individuals vulnerable to polarization, the presence of latent or explicit conflict and the ideological component of polarization and radicalization.

The presence of high levels of violence, although poorly ideologized, is identified by most operators in the areas of Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy as a constant concern. This is widespread violence within society, with perpetrators often not immediately identifiable, as in the case of verbal violence and xenophobic intolerance we have dealt extensively above, but also widespread violence among young people in host communities, family homes and prisons.

One often perceives a sort of pervasive destructiveness and an extreme difficulty and frustration in understanding the context and accepting its rules. Precisely because of this difficulty, often the only scenarios in which individuals can recognize themselves are extreme or polarized. → 2

Often, the young people in question act following a sort of primitive logic like “I want it, I take it,” showing no understanding and compassion towards the others. → 3

An alarming trend identified in the field consists of the constant decrease in the average age of people having the first problems with justice, which is often 14/15 years, compared to 16/17 only a few years ago. → 4

According to the testimonies provided by the Ministry of Justice, by social workers operating in the area and in youth custody centers, violence in the family context by minors is also on the rise and is venting against parents, grandparents, siblings. Often, it is the family that chooses to report them. → 5

Guys who are somehow polarized are the majority and usually have a lack of views towards all other possible choices outside of their own, which are often extreme. → 6

This type of violence is often based on a strong underlying rigidity, whereby individuals make their own choices without ever questioning them and without looking for alternatives. This rigidity causes anger to be unleashed, in the absence of the possibility of explaining and communicating it peacefully. Many are angry for pre-ex-

isting reasons, requests and frustrations, a culture medium par excellence for polarization and radicalization, and once they come into contact with a rigid system such as juvenile justice, anger increases. Rules and prohibitions fire up desire. → 7

The phenomena of marginalization, inseparably correlated with the various forms of violence, have been central to the discussion.

The stakeholders noted a widespread trivialization of aggression, racism and offence. → 8
It is precisely the ease with which aggression often appears that leads victims to be as much increasingly marginalized as self-isolated. Even without reflecting the profile of “victim”, or even coming closer to the role of “executioners”, many young people in the communities with whom one

has come into contact tend to close in the group of friends, among individuals with similar backgrounds.

Often also the fact of belonging to a host community or the fact of receiving some form of assistance from local NGOs and non-profit organizations creates a stigma in young people that is difficult to overcome in society outside the community itself.

The levels of aggression against those who are assisted by these organizations and the organizations themselves are growing:

In every social campaign we are attacked. We also happen to be victims of polarized behavior with real boycotts, some physical threats and more generally violent ideological modes of expression. → 9

Regarding the complex question about the impact of aggression and trivialization of

the other on the various forms of marginalization, the reflections on the field reveal how it is deep, lasting and how it is possible due to the widespread indifference which, in turn, potentially leads to many forms of polarization: a violent discourse can spread through indifference.

With regard to the third thematic concept on which the most interesting considerations came out during the interviews and focus groups, it is undoubtedly the presence of latent or explicit social conflicts and the ways in which they are experienced, particularly by young people at risk of polarization.

In addition to the conflict between *Us vs. You* exploited by xenophobic and racist narratives on the ground, in individual cases, the practitioners note a further form of conflict between the young person and society in a broad sense.

According to some psychological readings of youth trends in Italy, today's adolescents are little inclined to rebellion compared to other generations as well as little inclined to activism. Rather, they tend very often to isolate themselves from the prevailing social dynamics. → 10

Take the case of Lombardy for example - which, in this regard, shows in any case dynamics very similar to those of Emilia Romagna and Lazio. In Milan, the operators interviewed worked with many young people involved in the phenomenon of Latin gangs, for example, close to Latin King circles. In this scenario, the dimension of redemption is often the predominant one, followed by the clash of "Us against You". In neighbourhoods such as San Siro, Quarto Oggiaro - among others - it is often on these cornerstones that group identity is created, as well as on the action of young people who act as bonds and that, in cases where

polarization leads to violent radicalization, it is legitimate to define agents of radicalization. These bonds often have channels on YouTube on which they catalyze the desire for redemption of the neighborhood, in a local dimension and, therefore, often very limited.

The theme of redemption in the name of one of the two parents, usually the mother, who has often had a very complex migratory path, is also strong.

For many young people, the mother's dimension is always very strong and present and, through this, resentment and conflict develop towards the world and often towards absent fathers.

In social contexts - and in particular youth contexts - where individuals are at greater

risk of polarization, bullying and abuse of power become part of the agenda. We are in the framework of complex group dynamics because they are often "forced" groups: in prison, in the community or in reception centers, the young people have not chosen each other. → 11

The attempt at bullying is often methodical, with recurring dynamics that are difficult to demolish. These are often accompanied by a widespread and pervasive conspiracy of silence: for the victims, talking about abuse would end up making things worse and triggering revenge.

This scenario of imbalance and conflict harms and wears out the victims in everyday life and, at the same time, feeds a sort of sense of omnipotence in those who adopt these antisocial behaviors. → 12 The failure to recognize the Other and its value often passes through the essentialist and polar-

ized principle that “You must be nothing for me to be worth something” and the underestimation is systematic. → 13

In line with the directives of the United Nations Plan of Action, the third area of investigation on which the dialogue with stakeholders in the field has focused concerns the ideological component of the phenomena of polarization and radicalization.

One of the most effective classifications adopted in the studies on radicalization → 14 – also used in the first sections of this Report - distinguishes the factors that can facilitate radicalization into micro, meso and macro level factors.

The **micro-level** concerns the individual factors and the so-called personal *grievances* which have to do with the path of the subject under examination. The most frequent examples are personal traumas, difficult migration paths, the loss of a loved one due to police officers or law enforcement agencies that will, therefore, become enemies, and similar mechanisms.

The **meso-level** factors occur along the intermediate axis between the individual and society in a broad sense, affecting a specific neighbourhood or a defined and clearly identifiable community. The above-mentioned xenophobic events occurred in Lazio and Emilia-Romagna, for example, were the result of distrust and intolerance at a purely local level and were fuelled by the idea of a “war between the poor” in everyday life, for the same job or the same low-income housing.

Finally, the **macro-level** factors concern the great narratives that affect the entire society. For the case of xenophobic and far-right polarization we can recall rhetorical opinions such as that of the “invasion” by migrants or the “cultural genocide” of which the natives would be victims due to uncontrolled immigration. In another ideological perspective, i.e. the religious polarization, for example of some young Muslims, macro-level factors are the discrimination - as true as alleged → 15 – of which hundreds of millions of Muslims are victims, the persecutions of Muslim communities in different regions around the world, or the political, emotional and cultural rifts connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highly exploited and ideologized by many parties precisely in order to leverage a new polarization.

The stakeholders surveyed in the field observe daily dynamics that can be traced back to all these three levels, which often add up and have extremely blurred boundaries between them.

One element that came to light during more than one focus group in all three regions under examination is the poor ability of many young people to put their moods into words in the process of polarization. This difficulty means that a pre-established ideology, although it is often more a jumble of ideological suggestions about which the subject has little awareness, can satisfy not only the search for identity in which he/she finds himself/herself, but also the need for answers that he/she is unable to give - or receive - about his/her values and beliefs.

An area of polarization and verbal - and sometimes even physical - violence that is particularly sensitive from both an ideo-

logical and relational point of view is related to gender issues. In accordance with the general vision of the Rhizome Against Polarization project and the approach it takes on the relationship between polarization and gender issues, this research and, in particular, the focus groups with different stakeholders, have focused on these issues and their evolution within civil society and among young people who are the most vulnerable to polarization.

Without ambiguity, some operators have defined gender relations “a disaster” → 16 for many young guests in communities, family homes and youth custody centers. Unanimously, the experts and the operators interviewed explained that the relationship between women and authority is often much more difficult to accept for many young people than when it is male educators and operators who exercise authority over them. The relationship with female educators is gener-

ally much more difficult. Female operators are at best seen as a group of older sisters while, in the worst cases, the lack of respect becomes systematic.

Even in cases where a form of respect exists and is put into play, the concept of gender roles that many young people show is surprisingly traditional and obscurantist: all the moments of caregiving are assigned to and often demanded by female operators and never by male operators while, at the same time, a clearly depreciative approach is widespread.

The verbally violent abuse of power - starting from the trivial but suggestive “Shut up” - is said almost only to female interloc-

utors. → 17 Even with regard to the ways of approaching women, therefore, for individuals who are polarized or at risk of polarization, the distinguishing feature is aggression and violence, at least verbal.

Often, the young people with whom the stakeholders in the field come into contact are in possession of a sort of an *old-fashioned* background of values and a rather stereotypical code of honour. The offence to the mother of a companion unleashes a lot of anger in the same young people who systematically fail to read the positions and needs of the others, especially if they are female. They proclaim that “Women shouldn’t be hit, not even with a flower!” but become *ferociously violent* against sexual identities perceived as deviant. → 18

Martina Guerzoni, coordinator of the residential educational community for minors Casone della Barca located outside Bologna, notes another worrying phenomenon. It consists of a sort of vicious circle: boys relate to girls and judge them exclusively on the basis of their physical appearance, with alarming levels of body commodification. In turn, fuelling the vicious circle, girls seek an identity recognition that they can only find through their own physical appearance and, as a consequence, they make their identity pass exclusively through the self-commodification of their body, a behavior that they feel responds to the expectations of males about them. → 19

There is often a high degree of violence, even physical violence, among very young girls, for whom brawls are commonplace and not an exclusively male trait.



.3

Virtuous examples, room for improvement and lessons learned: recommendations for decision-makers

Finalizing what we have learned from operators and experts, making a clear division between virtuous examples and resources on the one hand, and margins for improvement on the other hand, is particularly difficult. Having to do with already polarized/being polarized subjects or entire communities implies moving along fine and transient lines, without ever finding a universally winning recipe.

However, both aspects, the positive examples and the room for improvement identified in the field, represent the fundamental tools to engage in a fruitful dialogue with all the stakeholders involved. Recommen-

dations to decision-makers they provide are not limited to the theoretical approach to polarization and radicalization, but are instead a sounding board for the demands made by those working closely with these phenomena on a daily basis.

In this regard, this section of the Report will recall some initiatives that have proved successful in the fight against polarization in the three regions under examination, the numerous margins for improvement and, as a result, some recommendations on which it will be necessary to work in the short, medium and long term.

Virtuous examples

The virtuous examples and tools that have proved useful in the fight against various forms of violence and polarization are manifold.

From the institutional point of view, there are two crucial elements in particular. The first consists of the growing awareness and receptivity of the institutions to the issues under consideration. Realities such as the aforementioned OSCAD are always more attentive to hate crimes and, more generally, the Ministry of Interior today shows greater sensitivity to the issue of different forms of polarization, after having historically struggled a lot to fully understand the extent of the alarm generated by the extreme right, for example. According to Grazia Naletto from Lunaria, also the positioning of the institutional fight and awareness-raising campaigns in the media has

significantly improved in terms of quantity and quality. → 20 Important steps are being taken. Two of them are the creation of the Hate Speech Commission and later the Segre Commission.

The first Commission was created in April 2016 following the proposal made by the then President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini and which includes representatives of all parliamentary groups and has a strong presence of the organized civil society.

On the other hand, the establishment of the Segre Commission was approved in the Senate in October 2019 after having been obstructed by the center-right vote. The main task concerns the monitoring of intolerance phenomena, as well as having the role of legislative stimulus.

The second element of optimism from an institutional and, in this case, also legislative point of view, which several stakeholders reported to us, consists in the instrument of probation. In Italy, the Criminal Code sets the age limit of fourteen years at which the child is considered normally liable and, therefore, criminally punishable. In the case of probation, instead of imprisonment, the minor is entrusted to social services to carry out activities of social utility that allow him/her to “redeem himself/herself” from what he/she committed. At the end, if the probation has given positive results, the judge declares the extinction of criminal liability.

With the probation, the minor voluntarily chooses this alternative, thanks to which he/she will carry out activities of public utility,

such as voluntary work, in addition to activities that, according to the judge and the juvenile services, can be of help for his/her proper psychological development, such as the continuation of studies or professional training. There are two components of the probation mechanism that operators in the field consider crucial.

The **first** component is the fight against the stigma that minors with criminal records carry on themselves, a fight made possible by the fact that, if successfully completed, this path cancels the crime committed.

The **second** one is the twofold component - local and individual - of this instrument, which is individual in that it is developed and studied for the individual subject and local because the rehabilitation activities and training are always strongly oriented towards integration into the local area and its social fabric. → 21

In the local area, an interesting testimony for this research comes from Fabrizio Chirico, Youth, University and Higher Education Area Manager of the Municipality of Milan.

Over the years, in the various municipalities, including Milan, many arguments have been made about the service par excellence of the municipalities - Informagiovani - and how it could adapt to the changes taking place in society. Chirico explains that there has been a shift from the dynamics and systems of the 1980s to contemporary systems, in which access to information is much easier and the information itself is more widespread. → 22

Within the Informagiovani area, new services have also been developed for migrants and, in part, for second-generation young people, in particular to implement a better guidance function towards adulthood and make the system more dynamic.

From the point of view of organized civil society and cooperation in the area, the initiatives we have come into contact with in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy are numerous and varied in terms of methods and locations, timing, objectives and vision.

Among the most numerous initiatives are those dedicated to the school world, aimed in particular at the training of teaching staff and headmasters about the dynamics of polarization and radicalization and the possibility of catching the alarm bells and weak signals.

An interesting example is the path implemented in Lombardy by experts and researchers from the Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on Multi-Ethnicity (ISMU - Fondazione Iniziative Studi sulla Multi-

etnicità), → 23 whose peculiarity was that already “trained” schools in turn trained other schools, in a virtuous domino effect.

Equally important are the campaigns and programs of citizenship education, conducted for example by CEFA Onlus → 24 in Emilia-Romagna and Lazio and which will be discussed more extensively in the following, or by WeWorld Onlus itself → 25 in many Italian regions.

The various projects carried out by the individual schools in the area are virtuous examples of this. These projects come mainly from the commitment and enthusiasm of some teachers and principals and move along the lines of empowerment of children, increasing their commitment as active citizens in projects to fight bullying, discrimination, hate speech and on many other fronts.

Particularly interesting in the Italian context is the case of the Ambassadors of Legality, → 26 a five-year project that aims to spread the culture of legality in Italian civil society by creating a real figure among young people - that of “Ambassadors of the culture of legality”.

The winning feature - potentially applicable also to other projects - is the cascade system, in which a school already involved and “trained” to the values of the project becomes in turn a trainer and engine for new initiatives related to legality.

According to Livia Vasile, actively involved in the path with her students, it is fundamental that the students go to the area and not the other way around, in order to develop new skills of active listening. → 27

Still in terms of the promotion of legality, in order to fight the polarization at various levels, in 2015, the Centers for the Promotion of Legality were established in Lombardy, → 28 representing networks between schools and local areas (bodies, institutions, associations) engaged in the fight against corruption and organized crime, conducted through the tools of knowledge, awareness, commitment and cultural alliance.

Started in Lombardy, this type of initiatives is growing significantly in all Italian regions.

So far, the focus of many projects has been the fight against the Mafia in its various expressions but, according to the experts interviewed for this research, the system could be repeated on other thematic issues.

Room for improvement

The margins for improvement identified by experts, institutional figures and civil society operators are many and involve various aspects of the fight against polarization, from the skills and training of professionals to the availability of funds, from media narrative on the phenomena we are studying to the ability to identify the alarm bells. This section will include the food for thought that emerged most strongly during the focus groups and interviews.

As regards the relationship between decision-makers and the area, some insiders have defined themselves as very discouraged, stating that they often have small budgets available to implement a really planning and training work. In addition, action at the municipal level is often so insufficient that it is almost unimaginable to reach higher levels of deci-

sion-making. According to some operators, there is a real disconnection between decision makers and operators in the field and between different levels of decision-making.

With regard to the awareness of the significance of polarization dynamics and the importance of preventing them for the well-being of society as a whole and of those at risk of polarization themselves, we have seen some virtuous examples in which it seems to be growing.

However, other important lessons that could be learned from the past and from many cases of radicalization both in our country and

abroad, do not seem to have yet been taken up by a sufficient number of operators and decision-makers. This refers, for example, to the awareness that often crimes that are completely outside the scope of extremism can still be their precursors. In recent years, there have been hundreds of cases worldwide of radicalized individuals in prison or out of prison, with criminal records for petty drug pushing, theft or assault, completely unrelated to the radical or terrorist matrix.

Prisons and crime represent tangible and abstract places of vulnerability to radicalization par excellence and it is now imperative to understand that. In other words, for example, thinking that an individual can not be about to approach radical groups of extreme right because he/she does not show an obsession for rigour and discipline or

radical groups of jihadist matrix “because he/she peddles drugs” is a gross mistake that radical groups belonging to various ideological worlds can easily exploit.

Still regarding the relationship with decision-makers and local area coordination, communities complain about the absence of a serious identification of needs, for example at regional level, and say that it often exists only at the level of the individual cooperative. Furthermore, the information that communities receive is often contradictory and confusing. Some testimonies from Emilia-Romagna point out, for example, that during the most serious phase of the Covid-19 emergency the communities for minors were left alone and often did not receive clear directives, for example regarding visits by relatives.

The widespread perception is that nobody listens and that it is often extremely difficult to meet and dialogue with decision-makers and other parties involved. There is the need for dialogue between the private individual, community and region to understand what needs are being actually met and what needs still need to be met. → 29

Another problem related to the situation of communities concerns communities with guests having a homogeneous background that, if on the one hand, facilitates recognition in the others thanks to the sharing of similar experiences, on the other hand, risks exacerbating forms of segregation, for example by origin or status of unaccompanied minors.

The last but very serious problem is the condition of youths over the age of majority, who often fall into a grey area before being almost abandoned to their fate.

Moreover, there is neither an effective and unanimous communication on reception issues nor a real global citizenship education, which is systematically entrusted only to schools. → 30

From the perspective of organizations such as CEFA Onlus, for example, citizenship education projects are among those that more closely deal with issues related to polarization, but the problem with these projects is that the public and, especially, the most receptive part of it is composed of individuals who *already* have a fairly developed awareness of the issues and values addressed and have the tools to recognize and avoid the various forms of polarization.

Instead, to be useful, the focus should be on those who are on the margins, individuals and young people above all, in the pro-

cess of polarization, while often we do not know how to intercept them. → 31

Despite the recognition of these difficulties, issues related to Global Citizenship Education and the projects and programs focused on it played a central role during the Rap project and the dialogue with the parties in the field.

In the last three decades, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has become a system of reference values and has taken on much greater significance than it had in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly thanks to the institutional work carried out in this direction by organizations such as, first and foremost, UNESCO.

As part of UNESCO's work, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is the answer to in-

equalities, poverty and violation of rights in an increasingly interconnected world where individuals - especially young people - are helped to become promoters of more tolerant, inclusive, safe and sustainable societies. → 32

Global Citizenship Education allows transversality between different sectors and does not bind to pre-established schemes. Its key principles include a focus on sustainable development, human and social rights, civil and labour rights.

According to Paola Berbeglia, ECG Delegate for the Italian Association of NGOs (AOI), the ultimate goal of this value system is to transform the life of the individual into a glocal value system, where global awareness and local roots on the area coexist in a fruitful synergy. → 33

Today, in Italy, the ECG is a strategic system, provided with dignity and resources, which ranges from the political level, presided over by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in particular, to the daily educational level in the field, made up of work that is not only formal and evaluative but open to change, which rejects pre-established solutions.

Several stakeholders during the research has mentioned the potential of the effective and systematic application of the principles of Global Citizenship Education to the fight against various forms of polarization and agreed on the need for greater work in this direction.

Paola Berbeglia, one of the world's leading experts on ECG, also recalls the new challenges that this system of human resources and values has to face today. The first challenge we face is that posed by populism and the need to advocate Global Citizenship Education in times of populism.

Populism, a phenomenon that has been dealt with extensively in this report, in addition to increasing polarization, is based on a continuous attack on the principles of global citizenship, which is often ignored in the context of an indistinct general in which the problems of the individual are exalted as the only ones really important. → 34

As regards the condition of the operators, it is fair to say that this is often a poorly known and little problematized issue.

However, from the field, they report that social cooperation operators are sometimes low-paid and that the staff is characterized by a turnover that risks to be at the detriment of the experience. The fact that the staff is low-paid depends in part on a sort of persistent prejudice, probably more widespread in Italy than in other European countries - especially in northern Europe - according to which those who work in social cooperation are a very similar figure to that of the volunteer. → 35

With regard to the approach of the media and public opinion to these issues, the biggest obstacle to a true understanding of the dynamics of polarization and paths of polarized individuals is the widespread perception of these individuals as irredeemable. It harms them, as it relegates them to an identity given by what they have done and not by what they are and what they could become.

The Rhizome Against Polarization project aims to prevent radicalization and polarization in Austria, Italy and Spain adopting a bottom-up approach, focusing on the participation of forefront *practicioners* equipping them with new tools and knowledge for prevention and suggesting innovative policies against polarization and radicalization.

In the course of the research we have followed the double track that includes both phenomena and that conceives polarization as the series of mechanisms that lead to create one's own identity only against that of someone else, based precisely on the opposition between Us and Them.

Recommendations

On the other hand, radicalization consists in a growing willingness to conceive, support and use violence as a tool to foster the political and social change to which one aspires.

During the long dialogues that took place in the focus groups and in the semi-structured interviews, both components of the problem emerged strongly, as well as multiple recommendations, ideas and winning approaches that will need to be given new attention in the three regions under examination and in the whole country.

The *policy recommendations* set out below - which do not aspire to represent an exhaustive list of all potential virtuous behaviors in the prevention of polarization and radicalization - will be structured along three macro-areas:

A - Actions for those vulnerable to polarization;

B - Actions for operators and practitioners working with vulnerable people;

C - Actions with institutions and on the representation of the phenomena of polarization and radicalization.



**Actions for
individuals vulnerable
to polarization within
the system of reception,
social services and
juvenile justice**

A1. Work with the subjects themselves on their own identity and help them build modes of interaction that go beyond the manifested antisocial behavior or any crimes they may have committed.

A2. Create programs that insist on the autonomy and responsibility of individuals, especially the youngest, so that they become independent of the community itself.

A3. Promote needs of belonging to the local area that are different and broader than those satisfied belonging to groups with similar paths and peers.

A4. Promote, using a systemic and national approach, civic education paths that go beyond literacy, on which we sometimes focus almost exclusively.

A5. Reflect with the young people on the ways in which some movements retain new members and sympathizers, as they are able to provide strong identities and affiliations.

A6. In a prison context, the work with the polarized subject or the subject at risk of polarization should be set up as a teamwork and never a one-to-one process imposed from above.

A7. Avoid the creation of groups that are too homogeneous and that could encourage the dynamics of self-exclusion and ghettoization, both in the local area and in the prison context. A good practice is to mix individuals with different backgrounds during playful, sports, expressive and recreational activities and during meals.

A8. Involve as many stakeholders as possible from the local area in the path of the subject outside the community or the justice system: potential employers, trainers, schools, young people with similar and different paths and physical and mental health services.

A9. Reorganize the transition between the local social service and the criminal service in order to make it smoother.

A10. Create tools to make sure that the subject not only respects the rules because they are imposed from above, but that he/she is able to introject the reason.

A11. Develop a new focus on the different times that come into play in the juvenile justice system and calibrate the objectives with respect to the times needed to reach them, the times of the subject, the family and the justice, which often do not coincide. The projects must be sustainable in terms of time.

A12. Proceed in theoretical reflection and actual applications of reparative justice.

A13. Proceed to a more decisive and systematic use of the principles and experiences gained within the projects of Global Citizenship Education as part of the paths to combat different forms of polarization.

A14. Create forms of mediation between the victim and the offender but also within the community in a broader sense. In recent years, juvenile justice bodies have worked tirelessly in this direction, but the focus on reparative justice needs to become a consolidated system approach.

b

Actions for operators and practitioners working with individuals vulnerable to polarization within the school system, reception system, social services and juvenile justice

B1. - Create and implement widespread training courses on polarization indicators and signals for teachers, principals, community workers, health care personnel and anyone in daily contact with young people.

B2. In the educational field, enhance the quality of the connection between consequent school orders in order to provide the superior one with the best possible familiarity with the young person.

B3. With regard to prison, it is essential to increase the education and training of prison police officers at all levels and to combat the persistent forms of racism and intolerance that still exist in some professional categories that work daily with young foreigners and or individuals of other religions.

B4. Still with regard to the training of operators and *practitioners*, it will be essential to modernize their approaches, which must be as transversal as possible to the different professions and have a distinctly practical and interactive connotation rather than theoretical and frontal.

B5. Encourage a meritocratic approach to the granting of funds to those entities that achieved the best results in the local area.



**Work with
institutions and on
the representation
of the phenomena
of polarization and
radicalization.**

C1. Contain the idea that hate speech and verbal violence are ultimately unrelated to physical violence, although there is a close link with it.

C2. Adoption of a systemic and organic approach by the institutions, to contain the multiplication of individual and isolated initiatives in the area, with a focus on all aspects of violence and not just to those circumscribed, as in the case of hate speech.

C3. Strengthen Global Citizenship Education as a methodology of awareness raising and training for the fight against cultural hatred, strengthening the systemic and networking action between public and third sector entities, also through the identification by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) of a person responsible for coordination and supervision. → 36

C4. Think back to control and direct action on online polarization and radicalization, particularly on some radical websites and movements, hopefully in a stronger control line.

C5. Acquire awareness of the toxic and increasingly common online link between fake news and discrimination.

C6. Implement new investments in effective forms of collective socialization inspired by widely successful experiments such as the establishment of Erasmus.

C7. Reconsider the ways in which new actions to prevent and combat polarization and radicalization are presented: often, inevitably, the “State” label risks being unattractive to young people at risk of polarization and radicalization. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how to avoid the risk of losing the potential effectiveness of the actions at an early stage.

1 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, United Nations, available at the [link](#). Last access: 14 August 2020.

2 M. Guerzoni, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

3 Ibid.

4 A. Ingegno, testimony in focus group, 17 July 2020.

5 A. Ingegno, A. Lombardi, L. Lugli, A. Matassa, Anna Tomasello, testimonies in focus group and interviews, July 2020.

6 A. Lombardi, testimony in focus group, 20 July 2020.

7 Ibid.

8 A. Tolomelli, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

9 Ibid.

10 V. Suigo, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

11 E. Garimberti, interview, 17 July 2020.

12 A. Tomasello, testimony in focus group, 17 July 2020.

13 M. Guerzoni, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

14 See, for example, the work conducted by the Commission for the study of radicalization and jihadist extremism, *Verso un approccio italiano alla prevenzione della radicalizzazione* (Towards an Italian approach to the prevention of radicalization). Available at the [link](#). Last consulted: 17 August 2020.

15 In this regard, see the analysis on the role of perceptions for polarization,, pp. 5-6, 24-28.

16 E. Garimberti, interview, 17 July 2020.

17 Ibid.

18 A. Lombardi, testimony in focus group, 17 July 2020.

19 M. Guerzoni, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020

20 G. Naletto, interview, 16 July 2020.

21 V. Suigo, testimony in focus group, 25 June 2020.

22 F. Chirico, interview, 07 September 2020.

23 See the [link](#). Last consulted: 16 August 2020.

24 See the [link](#). Last consulted: 16 August 2020.

25 See the [link](#). Last consulted: 16 August 2020

26 See: www.missionlegality.com

27 L. Vasile, interview, 9 September 2020.

28 See: www.cpl-lombardia.it

29 M. Guerzoni, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

30 A. Tolomelli, testimony in focus group, 24 June 2020.

31 Ibid.

32 See Unesco, Global citizenship education, at the [link](#).

33 P. Barbeglia, interview, 28 September 2020.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 See WeWorld, MigratED Policy Brief on Global Citizenship Education, at the [link](#).



Concluding remarks

The first part of the report attempted to highlight those factors that can lead to violent extremism dividing them into three different and intrinsically related dimensions. At the same time, we focused on possible preventive actions and counter-actions of these phenomena. Actions conducted at the individual and community level (micro and meso dimensions) can in fact lead to structural changes in the societies they belong to: however, for them to be truly effective, they must be part of an integrated and systemic strategy aimed at creating a fairer, more democratic and sustainable society (OPEV 2019).

In line with the methodology adopted by the project, we decided to focus on the so-called *soft measures*: preventive or remedial measures aimed at acting, through the use of non-coercive methods, on the emotional sphere of individuals at risk of radicalization, in the process of radicalization or already radicalized (Hoeft 2015), considering that a mere repressive response based on a securitarian approach is insufficient.

The approach used allows us to refer to a different concept of security, based more on social rights than on the function of control (and the resulting creation of ine-

qualities). Attitudes and attention towards the most vulnerable people and, more generally, towards otherness, the promotion of human rights, community work and the involvement of civil society play a fundamental role in an attempt to curb polarization and radicalization.

Throughout the research for the Rhizome Against Polarization project, aimed at understanding the polarization scenarios in three European countries and, in the case of this Report, in the Italian regions of Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Lombardy, some key factors have represented the pillars of the work.

The first factor consisted in the **concept of social capital**, with the presence or lack of push or pull social infrastructure to polarization and special focus on the younger generations.

This was linked to the topic of inequalities and latent or explicit conflicts, focused on the presence or lack of positive socio-economic and inclusion perspectives and on the physical and virtual spaces for the participation of citizens in the processes of widespread prevention.

The third aspect that deserved particular attention was the **presence of extremist movements and organizations** and ideological radicalization trends that can be observed in the area and the ways in which they are taking hold of the demands of the individuals.

Last, but not least, the issue of **security** has been central, both in its real levels - which in the case of the three regions have been analyzed mainly through the lens of young people with anti-social behaviour and xenophobic accidents and clashes - and in the perceptions that citizens develop about the security of their local area.

It is necessary to recall once again the inestimable contribution made to the research by the participants in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews who, in the summer of one of the most difficult years of contemporary Italian and foreign history, have offered their time, skills as well as their instinct and sensitivity developed during their work experience, to give the project interpretation-keys otherwise unattainable for non-experts, as well as testimonies, good practices, criticism and *policy recommendations*.

The latter, listed and analyzed above, are a valuable resource for field workers and decision makers engaged in the fight against radicalization and polarization and in the effort to ensure that young people can *be part of the process without exclusion*.

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