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## SOME PROBLEMS WITH DEFINITION AND PERCEPTION OF EXTREMISM WITHIN SOCIETY

*Some social phenomena cannot be defined as easily as it might seem at first sight. This is certainly the case with extremism. Scientists, political authorities and potential extremists can define it in very different ways. There are many factors that influence the definition itself, such as a (non)democratic nature of the political system, the prevailing political culture, the system of values, ideology, political goals, personal characteristics and experiences, ethnocentrism, and many others. Extremism is essentially a political term which determines the activities that are not in accordance with norms of the state, are fully intolerant toward others, reject democracy as a means of governance and the way of problem solving and also reject the existing social order. As long as an extreme phenomenon is not defined legally, it is not possible to deal with it using coercive and other institutions of the national security system. But even then, when as a result of some political and social consensus some extreme phenomena and extreme acts become part of national penal codes, coping with extremism is not much easier. The main reason for that is (mis)perception of committed extreme acts. The paper discusses some of the above mentioned problems, explaining some semantic, political and legal characteristics and constrains in perceiving and defining extremism.*

### INTRODUCTION

Scientists, political authorities and potential extremists usually define extreme phenomena in very different ways. There are many factors that influence the definition itself, such as a (non)democratic nature of the political system, the prevailing political culture, the system of values, ideology, political goals, personal characteristics and experiences, ethnocentrism, and many others. Extremism in terms of terrorism, racism, xenophobia, interethnic and inter-religious hatred, left- or right-wing political radicalism and religious fundamentalism is essentially a political term which determines those activities that are not morally, ideologically or politically in accordance with written (legal and constitutional) and non-written norms of the state; that are fully intolerant toward others and reject democracy as a means of governance and the way of solving problems; and finally, that reject the existing social order. But nobody is really happy with such understanding, for firstly, it is not legally precise enough to be effective, and secondly, it might be philosophically, sociologically, psychologically and especially politically incorrect.

Therefore, one can agree that definition of extremism is similar to that of pornography - you cannot define it, but when you see it, you recognise it easily. Accordingly, it is not the intention of this short paper to come up with a universal definition of extremism, but to discuss some constraints to its definition and perception from semantic, political and legal points of view.

## UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS - CAN SEMANTICS HELP?

Since the lexeme extremism as defined above bears a negative connotation in terms of people's beliefs and actions, we focus on three elements of the relevant lexical paradigm of extreme as found in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* ([www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org)):

- the adjective extreme denotes "beliefs and political parties which most people consider unreasonable and unacceptable";
- the noun extremism stands for "political extremism (in term of extreme political opinions)";
- the noun extremist can denote a "group of extremists (in term of people with extreme opinions)" while the adjective extremist can represent a group of people with "extremist tendencies".

At first sight, one might say that such a semantic view is useless in searching for a proper definition of the term extremism, but I believe that it is quite important and can help. For example, if we just look at the semantic content of the term "extreme": what can give us better foundations for political and then legal definition of extreme individuals and groups than, for example, the feature of "unacceptability" of their beliefs and, in particular, their acts to the great majority of other people, members of the same community? It seems that using common sense in dealing with extremism is good for two reasons. Firstly, it helps describe a phenomenon that has been known for centuries, which is why it was lexicalised in the first place; and secondly, it is a very good starting point for all political debates about the phenomena that should also be, one way or another, defined legally. Of course, the prevailing system of values in society is crucial in the sense that it underpins our perceiving of beliefs and action of people as more or less extreme. It is the political culture which must, through the system of social consensus, find the way of defining extremism in terms of its political and, subsequently, legal expression. To a certain extent, even one of the basic human rights, the freedom of speech and expression, could sometimes be at stake when society is about to draw the lines defining (un)acceptability of particular verbal and non-verbal aspects of actions performed by individuals and groups.

## PERCEIVING AND DEFINING THE PHENOMENA – FROM PUBLIC DEBATES TO POLITICAL PROCESS

When one observes extremism from the political point of view, they have to deal with at least two of its dimensions. Firstly, there is always a diverse political environment (political context) in which a particular phenomenon or action is detected, perceived, defined and observed; and secondly, in such a political environment, there is, along moderate ones, always a significant number of political movements and parties that operate on the margins (extremes) of the prevailing political culture and often offer a "haven" to different forms of extremism and extremists.

Starting with the second dimension, one may agree that political radicalism is present in all societies, that it is more or less dangerous, and that it is interesting for our debate primarily as a potential tool comprising extreme actions that are not necessarily conducted by extreme political parties but could be sponsored or politically supported by them. Since the downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe (including Slovenia), the most "important" European radical political parties have emerged from the right wing of the political spectrum. S. Ramet (1999: 3 - 27) points out the following main characteristics of such parties: "intolerance", "hostility to popular sovereignty (antidemocratic attitudes or authoritarianism)", and "yearning for traditional

values". However, are these parties really extreme to the extent that they could be dangerous for a democratic political and social order? If they accept democracy as a means of governance and problem solving in a society, then they usually do not represent a real threat to political stability and security, says theory. But what if they should use democracy only as a tool for achieving their extreme goals after having seized the political power? One should never forget such historical experiences from the days of Nazis and communists. Therefore, the agenda of radical political parties' programmes seem to be even more important than the "way" of their implementation. In this regard, we can probably agree with C. Mudde (2000: 12) who distinguishes between "radicalism" and "extremism". According to him, radicalism just opposes the constitution, while extremism is hostile towards it. However, parliamentary extreme (in Mudde's term – radical) right- and left- wing political parties have been modernised in the last 15 years and have become particularly interesting because of some extreme ideas and attitudes towards the recent history issues such as, for example, the question of Holocaust, ethnic, religious and other minorities' rights, immigrants etc. The parties of J. M. Le Pen in France, J. Haider in Austria, and G. F. Finni in Italia are typical representatives of such parties (Betz, Immerfall, 1998).

There are, of course, also small non-parliamentary groups all over the Europe that have political programmes and goals which are not in accordance with their respective constitutions. In such cases, the states usually use their coercive institutions (intelligence services, police, and prosecutors) to monitor and control them. In the worst case scenario, even a judicial decision is taken, if necessary, by which organisations and activities of such groups are outlawed, though such cases are rather rare. Namely, the freedom of expression is probably the most defended human right in today's world, and extremist groups and individuals that promote racism, intolerance, xenophobia etc. are quite well "protected" too. If they do not take actions that are deemed criminal and are stipulated as such in penal codes of their respective states, they usually manage to continue with their activities. Moreover, they can even commit verbal criminal offences: due to the fact that, in such cases, the police and state prosecutors usually take freedom of expression "too seriously", meaning they are very cautious when having to prosecute such acts; such extremist groups and extremists stand very good chances of avoiding any serious punishment.

Another problem (representing first dimension) lies in political and moral motivation required for definition of those extreme actions that need be either publicly condemned or defined as criminal offences and as such, incorporated into penal codes. For example, if we take a look at the issue of different perception of violence in the manner of T. Bjorgo (1997: 7-8) bringing us D. Riches evaluation of violence connected to racism and intolerance to immigrants and foreigners, we can see that what the majority of people would regard as violence against the above mentioned marginal groups, some members of the same society would perceive as nothing but "struggle", "fight", "self-defence" etc. Since we all know who has the final say, formally, in policy making process, it is logical to believe that even the highest degree of consensus among laymen and the professional public regarding the extreme phenomena is not to suggest that that some law that should manage these phenomena is going to be effective, as it is often "modified" in a parliamentary and non-parliamentary policy process. Needless to say, though the aforementioned extreme political parties may, in fact, not represent a direct threat to security and order, they are not so innocent when it comes to the political and public debate about extremism in society: jumping to the defence of an extreme behaviour commonly unacceptable to the great majority is a typical task of these parties.

## **LEGALLY DEFINED BUT STILL NOT EFFECTIVE?**

As mentioned above, in order to avoid the misunderstanding of what extremism is and what it is not, and to make the fight against extremism legally possible, many actions found their way into national penal codes. For example, the Slovenian penal code (Sotlar, 2002) also includes the following acts that could be interpreted not just as classical criminal offences but those that are also driven by some "special", extreme goals: violation of the right to equality; insult to foreign country or international organisation; insult to the Slovene people or national communities: violent conduct; stirring up ethnic, racial or religious hatred, strife or intolerance; disrupting religious ceremonies; causing public danger; hijacking; placing air traffic in jeopardy; terrorism; diversion; incitement to violent change of the constitutional order; criminal association for purposes of perpetrating criminal offences against the constitutional order and security of the Republic of Slovenia; international terrorism; taking of hostages.

But even then, when as a result of some political and social consensus, some extreme phenomena and extreme acts become part of national penal legislation, meaning that legal foundations for coping with extremism are established, the coping is not much easier than one might think. For example, in 2001, a small group of Slovenian skinheads attacked a well-known and popular TV entertainer of African origin. This event has triggered a huge public debate, especially when the police did not recognise the attacked actor as the only victim, accusing him of being partly responsible for the incident on account of having previously provoked the skinheads (Sotlar, 2002). Human rights activists and organisations thought that skinheads' motive for the attack was nothing but racial hatred and that the police and the state prosecutor were not right in not recognising that. Such cases can be found anywhere in Europe (Fraser, 2000).

If this be the case, we have to ask ourselves what went wrong. Whom are we going to blame, if so many extremist actions are not prosecuted? Have we made crucial mistakes in legal definition of extreme actions? Do we overestimate the rule of law, and the role of law and law enforcement agencies, while underestimating "childish" and "innocent" verbal and physical expressions of extremism? Or are we just inconsistent in implementing laws and good practices applicable to the extreme phenomena?

We believe that the main reason of that is (mis)perception of the committed extreme acts, meaning that even a "perfect" legal definition of extreme acts is obviously not effective enough in addressing extremism within society. What we still need is to raise public awareness of the problem. As a result, politicians are bound to take it more seriously as well. And not only they! Members of national security bodies (broadly speaking, intelligence agencies, police, prosecutors, courts etc.) obliged to fight the problem must be able to recognise and treat extreme phenomena in legally acceptable ways. For example, in Slovenia, the author has never met a single man or woman from aforementioned bodies who was not very upset when somebody publicly (in a newspaper, on the radio, on the internet) used hate speech in order to insult Slovenia or Slovenes in a very rude way, but many of them who did not respond to hearing someone insult others, like blacks, non-Slovenes, homosexuals, Jews etc. Once again, it seems that they just hid themselves behind "the freedom of expression as basic human right", and some members of political elite would agree with such behaviour.

## **INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION – BETWEEN LEGALISTIC APPROACH AND "VIGILANTE-ISM"**

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the author's intention was not to come up with some universal definition of extremism, but rather to speak on the problems

connected to the perception and definition of the phenomena. It seems that the biggest problem in dealing with extremism and extremist criminal offences lies in a fact, that they affect more or less only individuals and smaller groups of people, minorities, marginal groups etc that does not have any substantial social, economic or political powers. This explains why social and political sensitivity are still relatively low when some extremist act is committed. In such cases, it becomes clear that the problem can not be solved only by legal provisions. In other words – legal framework is necessary, but without effective implementation of laws in this field, dealing with the problem will not be successful. State bodies must take responsibility in this regard, but it would not be serious without animating the whole society. Efforts should be made toward the zero tolerance in perceiving extremism within society, and if this means a kind of "vigilante-ism" in the best meaning of the word - so be it!

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## ENDNOTE

- 1 More on European radical left, see: Mudde, 2001.

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