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# RADICALISM, EXTREMISM, AND TERRORISM

## Terminological Explanations and Their Role in Anti-Democratic Movements<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the analysis of the concepts of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, with particular emphasis on their role in anti-democratic movements. The paper aims to provide precise terminological clarification of these phenomena and examine how they are used by various groups and organizations seeking to undermine democratic systems. The article presents the differences between these concepts, their interconnections, and the context in which they are applied in political and sociological analyses. It also discusses how radical and extremist ideologies find space to develop within democratic societies, often exploiting legal political mechanisms to pursue their objectives. Furthermore, the article analyzes how terrorism, as the most extreme manifestation of extremism, serves as a tool for anti-democratic groups seeking to destabilize political order. Its reliance on violence distinguishes it from radicalism, which may advocate change without rejecting democratic principles, and from extremism, which may reject those principles but does not necessarily resort to violence. The paper highlights the necessity of precisely defining these phenomena in the context of contemporary challenges to democracy and points to the role of states and international institutions in countering their development.

**Keywords:** radicalism, extremism, terrorism, definitions, conceptualization, anti-democratic movements

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, radicalism, extremism, and terrorism have become prominent concerns in the context of global security and the stability of democratic societies. These phenomena, while often intertwined, carry distinct characteristics and implications that require careful analysis, particularly when their presence and growth threaten the foundational principles of democratic governance. Radicalism refers to the advocacy of drastic societal or political change, often within democratic norms. Extremism represents the adoption of positions that reject moderate or democratic ideologies, challenging the principles of democratic governance. Terrorism, as the most extreme manifestation of extremism, involves the deliberate use of violence or intimidation to achieve political or ideological objectives, directly threatening state security and citizen safety.

This article aims to clarify the terminological distinctions between radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, while also exploring their roles in anti-democratic movements. These movements, often driven by radical and extremist ideologies, seek to destabilize existing political structures, manipulate democratic systems, or undermine the rule of law to achieve their goals. The complex nature of these terms and their application in both political and sociological analysis warrants a closer examination of how they manifest in contemporary political landscapes.

The article explores how radical and extremist ideologies find fertile ground in democratic societies, where political freedoms may be exploited by those with anti-democratic intentions. In particular, it considers how terrorism, as the most extreme form of extremism, serves as a tool for groups seeking to destabilize or even dismantle democratic systems. Furthermore, it highlights the need for clear definitions of these terms to effectively counter the rising threats to democratic norms.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR RADICALISM, EXTREMISM, AND TERRORISM

This article adopts a linear conceptual model to frame the relationships between radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, treating them as part of a continuum of escalating anti-democratic behaviors. Radicalism represents the initial stage, characterized by advocacy for significant societal or political change, which may remain within democratic norms. Extremism marks a progression, where individuals or groups reject moderate or democratic ideologies, often challenging the fundamental principles of democratic governance. Terrorism, as the most extreme form of extremism, involves the deliberate use of violence or intimidation to achieve political or ideological objectives, directly threatening state security and citizen safety. This model acknowledges that while radicalism may not inherently lead to extremism, and extremism may not always culminate in terrorism, there exists a potential pathway of escalation driven by ideological intensification, group dynamics, and external factors such as social polarization or political

instability. The phenomena are analytically distinct yet interconnected, allowing for overlapping manifestations in certain contexts. For instance, radical ideologies may co-exist with extremist behaviors without progressing to violence, but terrorism typically emerges from extremist ideologies that justify violent means. This framework provides a structured lens for analyzing their roles in anti-democratic movements.

## DEFINITIONAL RETROSPECTION

Over many decades, scholars have developed many definitions of radicalism and extremism, among which there is still no universally accepted legal definition. The meanings of both terms have evolved inconsistently, depending on the social and political changes that have taken place in different parts of the world, thus reflecting the configuration of political power in different civilizations and periods. A comparison of events taking place in Western Europe illustrates these correlations by pointing to the relationship between political power and social history. This is because historically, radicalism is primarily associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century civil rights movement, whereas extremism is a more modern concept that only developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of the phenomenon of totalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, for example, radicalism as a term has been around – at least – since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while extremism has more modern connotations. In fact, it appeared in 1942 in the ‘Duden’ dictionary (German ‘extremismus’),<sup>3</sup> and in 1974 was used by German domestic intelligence (Verfassungsschutz). At the end of the 1970s, the term extremism was first used by the academic, political scientist and historian Manfred Funke.<sup>4</sup> His example was followed in the 1980s by other German scholars. For the majority who used the term, it denoted a basic contradiction to the fundamental values contained in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. In practice, it had reference (e.g. in the 1950s) to the rulings of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany, and more specifically to the rulings against the Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands (SRP), the heir to Hitler’s National Socialists (NS). The German political debate with ‘extremism’ in the background, strongly dominated the socio-political debate after the Second World War, and in a way delayed a more neutral conceptualization of the term in the social sciences in Germany. Today, extremism is defined separately in this country in relation to radicalism, as *any action directed against the fundamental freedoms of a democratic system*.<sup>5</sup> The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) clearly indicates that its aim is not *to combat radical and extremist organisations and parties that allow an active struggle*

<sup>2</sup> A. Bötticher, *Radikalismus und Extremismus Konzeptualisierung und Differenzierung zweier umstrittener Begriffe in der deutschen Diskussion*, Leiden 2017, p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> “Extremismus,” in *Duden*, at <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Extremismus>, 12 March 2025.

<sup>4</sup> M. Funke (ed.), *Extremismus im demokratischen Rechtsstaat – Ausgewählte Texte und Materialien zur aktuellen Diskussion*, Bonn 1978.

<sup>5</sup> R. Stöss, *Rechtsextremismus im vereinten Deutschland*, Berlin 2000, p. 13.

against the democratic institutions of the German state. According to the BfW, radical organisations and parties are outside its area of interest, as long as they respect the basic principles and freedoms of the democratic order of the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>6</sup>

In the Anglo-Saxon world, discussion of extremism dates back to World War I.<sup>7</sup> However, the term itself was used much earlier, in 1546, by Bishop Stephen Gardiner, who referred to his enemies as extremists.<sup>8</sup> There is also another known source for the term, indicated by Joseph Worcester, i.e. William Safire's 1846 dictionary.<sup>9</sup> Although the origins of the term extremism are not clear, it is generally accepted in Anglo-Saxon countries that it was the US Senator Daniel Webster who made the term popular. Webster used it in 1850 to describe the violent behavior of participants in a debate on the (anti-) slavery issue that took place during the American Civil War.<sup>10</sup> It can be assumed that the re-emergence of the term extremism occurred about a century later. It was used in the debates of the time by, among others, John L. Carpenter, Edgar Metzler, Walter B. Mead, Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab.<sup>11</sup> In the 1960s, the term received an empirical elaboration that sought to better conceptualize it. However, a real breakthrough came only in the 1990s, when Manus Midlarsky developed a groundbreaking theoretical framework based on the foundations of ideology, narrative and group-think. Midlarsky aimed to explain why and how individuals and groups of people become violent and what factors lead to political violence.<sup>12</sup>

The term terrorism, unlike radicalism and extremism, has deeper historical and intellectual roots that require separate consideration. Derived from the Latin *terror* ('to tremble'), the term gained political significance during the French Revolution, notably described by Hegel as the *Schreckenzeit* or 'time of terror', referring to the period of violent purges under Robespierre.<sup>13</sup> Early reflections on terror as a political tool can be traced to classical thinkers such as Machiavelli, who in *The Prince* discussed the strategic use of fear to maintain power, and Xenophon, who explored violence as a means of governance in *Cyropaedia*. Aristotle, in *Politics*, addressed the destabilizing effects of extreme actions within political communities, laying a philosophical foundation for

<sup>6</sup> Glossar, *Was ist der Unterschied zwischen radikal und extremistisch?*, at [http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/Glossar\\_FAQ/FAQ/](http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/Glossar_FAQ/FAQ/), 12 March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> R.G. Pradhan, "Extremism in India," *The New Statesman*, vol. 2, no. 46 (1914), p. 617.

<sup>8</sup> W. Safire, "On Language; What's an Extremist?," *New York Times*, 14 January 1996, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/14/magazine/on-language-what-s-an-extremist.html>, 12 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> J.L. Carpenter, *Extremism U.S.A. The Facts behind Americas Radical Political Movements*, Phoenix 1964; E. Metzler, *Let's Talk about Extremism*, Scottsdale 1968; W.B. Mead, *Extremism and Cognition – Styles of Irresponsibility in American Society*, Dubuque 1971; S.M. Lipset, E. Raab, *The Politics of Unreason – Right Wing Extremism in America 1790-1970*, New York 1970.

<sup>12</sup> M. Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism – Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, Cambridge 2011.

<sup>13</sup> R. Wokler R., "Contextualizing Hegel's Phenomenology of the French Revolution and the Terror," *Political Theory*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1998), pp. 33-55.

understanding terror as a political phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> In modern scholarship, the term terrorism has evolved to describe acts of violence or intimidation aimed at achieving political or ideological goals, often targeting civilians to create widespread fear.<sup>15</sup> This historical evolution underscores the complexity of terrorism as a concept, distinct from radicalism and extremism yet often emerging as their violent culmination.

As indicated previously, radicalism is an older term than extremism. It has undergone changes in meaning over more than two hundred years. It was originally used in medicine, then (in the late 1790s) to describe a political stance. The concept spread from the time of the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688, through the Enlightenment in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, reaching Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of content, it became a determinant of enlightened, liberal to left-wing political principles opposed to reactionary political establishments. Radicalism became a political doctrine inspiring republican and national movements dedicated to individual and collective freedom and emancipation, targeting the post-1815 monarchical and aristocratic status quo. At the time, radicalism was largely anti-clerical, anti-monarchist and strongly pro-democratic. Some of its demands (such as women's suffrage) became mainstream ideas and were implemented in most parts of the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Political opponents have often tried to depict radicalism as a revolutionary, mainly leftist, and more recently religious, subversive force. Historically, however, especially if this is true of political parties pursuing their aims, radicalism has been more closely associated with progressive reformism than with utopian extremism, whose glorification of mass violence has been generally rejected by radicals.

## RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM AS VAGUE AND AMBIGUOUSLY DEFINED TERMS

Extremism is widely regarded in academia as a collective term for movements that seek to unify society under dogmatic principles according to which all opposition should be suppressed and minorities subjugated.<sup>16</sup> This refers to groups and individuals who want to achieve their goals in ways that are at odds with the prevailing standards, i.e. incompatible with the principles and ways of liberal democracy and/or when these goals themselves contradict the principles of a liberal democratic constitutional state. The characteristics that are found specifically and exclusively in extremist groups are, according to Coolese and Lowe, a rejection of the legal order and a preference for or

<sup>14</sup> N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W.K. Marriott, London 1908; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, trans. W. Miller, Cambridge 1914; Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. B. Jowett, Oxford 1885.

<sup>15</sup> A.P. Schmid, "Terrorism – The Definitional Problem," *Case Western Reserve Journal International Law*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2004), s. 375-419, at <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol36/iss2/8>, 12 March 2025.

<sup>16</sup> C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, New York 2007; A.P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review," *ICCT Research Paper*, vol. 97, no. 1 (2013), p. 22.

legitimization of the use of covert violence.<sup>17</sup> These are also methods of constructing interpretations about the world, where significant relationships exist, and which frequently focus on religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities.<sup>18</sup> These, in turn, are referred to as the ‘alien group’.<sup>19</sup>

Many scholarly studies emphasize the presence of radical or extremist ideologies to define what extremism is and, in some cases, to explain why people engage in covert political violence, although the causal link between the two is difficult to establish empirically. In doing so, ideological polarization and extremist ideas need to be distinguished from extremist political action, as the former is not a sufficient or necessary condition for the existence of the latter. They may also have a reverse relationship.<sup>20</sup> In the contemporary European context, individuals and movements with non-liberal ideas and actions are often labeled and perceived as extremist. At the same time, extremist attitudes are worth separating from radical attitudes, as the latter refer to actions within a democratic framework, whereas the former do not do so, or even oppose it.<sup>21</sup>

Extremism, according to Astrid Bötticher, boils down to a definition of so-called consensus,<sup>22</sup> derived based on two distinct analytical methodologies developed by R. Kosellecka (method of terminological analysis)<sup>23</sup> and G. Sartori (method of conceptual analysis),<sup>24</sup> who indicates, among other things, that: *Extremism is characterised by the ideological position taken by those anti-establishment movements that understand politics as a struggle for supremacy rather than a peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for the development of the common good. (...) It divides fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and enemies, with no room for diversity of opinion and alternative lifestyles. Extremism is, because of its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise. Extremists, perceiving politics as a ‘zero-sum’ game, tend – if*

<sup>17</sup> A.P. Schmid, “Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?,” *ICCT Research Paper*, May 2014, at <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf>, 12 March 2025; S. Olsson, “‘True, Masculine Men Are Not Like Women!’. Salafism between Extremism and Democracy,” *Religions*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2020), p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> R. Coolsaet, “What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case,” *Egmont Paper*, no. 75 (2015), at <https://egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2015/03/75.pdf>, 12 March 2025; D. Lowe, “Prevent Strategies. The Problems Associated in Defining Extremism. The Case of the United Kingdom,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 40, no. 11 (2017, 40(11)), pp. 917-933.

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Berger, *Extremism*, Cambridge 2018.

<sup>20</sup> R. McNeil-Wilson, V. Gerrand, F. Scrinzi, A. Triandafyllidou, *Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe today*, Glasgow 2019, at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338987364\\_McNeil-Willson\\_R\\_Gerrand\\_V\\_Scrinzi\\_F\\_and\\_Triandafyllidou\\_A\\_2019\\_Polarisation\\_Violent\\_Extremism\\_and\\_Resilience\\_in\\_Europe\\_Today\\_an\\_Analytical\\_Framework\\_Technical\\_Report\\_BRaVE\\_Project](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338987364_McNeil-Willson_R_Gerrand_V_Scrinzi_F_and_Triandafyllidou_A_2019_Polarisation_Violent_Extremism_and_Resilience_in_Europe_Today_an_Analytical_Framework_Technical_Report_BRaVE_Project), 12 March 2025.

<sup>21</sup> M. Vlieg, M. de Koning, *Beleidsinstrumenten en Extremistische Wereldbeelden. Een verkennend rapport*, Nijmegen 2020, p. 36, at <https://repository.wodc.nl/handle/20.500.12832/3020>, 12 March 2025.

<sup>22</sup> A. Bötticher, *Radikalismus und Extremismus Konzeptualisierung...*, p. 340.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-168.

*circumstances permit – to engage in violent struggle, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will to gain and maintain political power. Where extremists gain state power, there is a tendency to destroy social diversity and pursue an all-embracing homogenisation of society, based on an ideology often linked to apocalyptic-like beliefs. (...) Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are against the constitutional state, majority democracy, the rule of law and human rights for all.*<sup>25</sup>

Astrid Bötticher, on the basis of findings resulting from the adoption of two methodologies (Koselleck's and Sartori's), proposes her definition of radicalism, which seems to clearly describe the concept: *Radicalism refers to the political doctrine advocated by socio-political movements favouring both individual and collective freedom and emancipation from the rule of authoritarian regimes and hierarchically structured societies. In this sense, radicalism, advocating fundamental political change, is a form of hostility to the status quo and its establishment. Often its initial milieu is found among the sons and daughters of the bourgeois elite, young people who identify with and seek to improve the social conditions of the greater population. (...) Radicalism as an ideological mindset is highly critical of the existing status quo, seeking to restructure and/or overturn outdated political structures. Their opponents often portray radicals as violent; but this is only partially correct, as radicalism is historically more associated with progressive reformism than with utopian extremism, whose glorification of violence it rejects. Radicalism is emancipatory and does not seek to subjugate people and impose conformity, as extremism does. Radical narratives contain utopian ideological elements, but they do not glorify the distant past. While unwilling to compromise their ideals, radicals are open to rational arguments as to how to achieve their goals. Unlike extremists, radicals are not necessarily extreme in their choice of means to achieve their goals. Extremists reject the label of extremists, while radicals define themselves as radicals.*<sup>26</sup>

The European Commission's own position on the proposed definitions of radicalism, at the same time crucial for global change, is presented by the European Commission. According to it, radicalism is *a complex phenomenon in which individuals and groups have become intolerant of basic democratic values such as equality and diversity, with an increasing tendency to use force to achieve political ends that negate or undermine democracy.*<sup>27</sup> What is important, as Jacek Mazurczak points out, is its use of the term 'phenomenon', since from the point of view of the possible evolution of radical attitudes, it would be more appropriate to use the word 'process',<sup>28</sup> i.e. the successive actions followed by individuals or groups in order to use/apply political and/or ideological violence. It is worth mentioning in this regard that as early as 2005, radicalization was already considered by the European Commission as one of the stages of recruitment to

<sup>25</sup> A. Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2017), p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> A. Bötticher, *Radikalismus und Extremismus Konzeptualisierung...*, pp. 335-336.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, at [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/radicalisation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/radicalisation_en), 12 March 2025.

<sup>28</sup> J. Mazurczak, "Radykalizacja jako proces prowadzący do ekstremizmu i terroryzmu," *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2020), pp. 45-73.

terrorist organizations,<sup>29</sup> which, incidentally, was highlighted by the Commission in 2018 with regard to the security of the whole of Europe (not only the Member States).<sup>30</sup>

Several definitions by academics<sup>31</sup> and state/regional security actors<sup>32</sup> have, inter alia, one characteristic attributed to radicalism, i.e. the gradual changeability of beliefs. These, in turn, may (not necessarily) lead to political/ideological violence culminating in acts of terror.

In short, both radicalism and extremism refer to social and political forces that occur on the fringes of liberal democratic societies. It can be assumed that certain elements of both phenomena are consistent with each other, while others are in conflict with each other.

### THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM. AN ATTEMPT TO CONCEPTUALIZE

It seems necessary to attempt to define fundamentally contested and often (over) used and unclear terms such as radicalism and extremism from an academic perspective. Both radicalism and extremism deviate significantly from the politically moderate, mainstream positions found in democratic societies. However, centrist positions in the political arena can also change, making it difficult to define extreme radicals and extremists. What emerges from this definitional exploration, according to Astrid Bötticher, is that radicalism can be situated on the periphery of the democratic consensus, whereas extremism lies outside its boundaries (see Table 1). Although the meanings of these two contested concepts may sometimes overlap to some extent, it seems that they should not be equated. When confronted with radicalism, democratic political systems have shown the capacity to absorb radical demands based on reasonable compromises, whereas when confronted with extremism, democratic systems, and pluralistic societies are incapable of making any compromises, especially when faced with dogmatic demands based on ideological constructs related to faith/religion that have no solid basis in social reality. It is worth noting that the links between radicalism and terrorism are much weaker than those between extremism and terrorism. In this sense, the use

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, *The Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Terrorist Recruitment: Addressing the Factors Contributing to Violent Radicalisation*, Brussels, 21.9.2005, COM(2005) 313 final, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0313:FIN:EN:PDF>, 12 March 2025.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, *High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCCEGR)*, final report, 18 May 2018, at [https://grease.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/11/20180613\\_final-report-radicalisation.pdf](https://grease.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/11/20180613_final-report-radicalisation.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> See more in : J. Mazurczak, "Radykalizacja jako proces...".

<sup>32</sup> e.g. European Commission, 2002, at [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/radicalisation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/radicalisation_en), 12 March 2025; National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, *Terrorist Threat Assessment of the Netherlands*, 44, April 2017, at <https://english.nctv.nl/site/binaries/site-content/collections/documents/2017/06/23/summary-terrorist-threat-assessment-netherlands-44/Summary+DTN+44.pdf>, 12 March 2025.

of the term radicalization to denote a shift towards a particular form of political violence, namely terrorism, is, according to Bötticher and other scholars, misleading,<sup>33</sup> yet it seems to be a fixed term within contemporary public political discussions,<sup>34</sup> a point that merits emphatic emphasis. The danger is that any form of radical rebellion – even legitimate resistance against corrupt and brutal authoritarian regimes – will be disqualified as illegitimate extremism. This has the potentially dangerous effect of situating pro-democratic radicals within the ideological scope of anti-democratic extremists. Many threatened authoritarian regimes tend to equate radicalism with extremism because it allows them to claim that in the current geopolitical situation the only choice is between relative stability, which supposedly only they can offer, and violent extremism in the form of, for example, jihadist terrorism.

Table 1. The fundamental differences between radicalism and extremism. Conceptualization attempt according to Astrid Bötticher

Radicalism	Extremism
1. Radical movements tend to use political violence in a pragmatic and selective manner.	1. Extremist movements regard violence against their enemies as a legitimate form of political action and tend to adopt extreme forms of mass violence as part of their political credo.
2. Radicalism draws narratively towards a 'bright' future for all.	2. Narrative extremism is characterized by a strong palingenic element linked to a belief in the restoration of what has been lost.
3. Radicalism is emancipatory and is not in itself anti-democratic.	3. Extremism is inherently anti-democratic; it seeks to abolish constitutional democracy and the rule of law.
4. Democracies can live with radicals, but not with uncompromising, violent extremist militants.	4. Extremist movements cannot be integrated into liberal democratic societies because of their intolerance of ideologies other than their own.
5. Radicalism is not opposed to equal human rights; in the past, progressive radicals attempted to extend human rights to the disadvantaged.	5. Extremists openly confront the notion of universal human rights and the institutions that are designed so that they are respected by all.
6. Radicals, while advocating a path of action that is very different from the continuation of the status quo, do not seek to close down open societies and destroy diversity in society, as extremists do.	6. Extremists want to close down the open market of ideas. Unlike radicalism, extremism is extreme both in terms of its aims and in its choice of means to achieve them.
7. Radicalism represents a rebellious defiance of the establishment.	7. Extremism is aimed not only against the establishment, but all those who do not accept its dogmatic formula for transforming society.

<sup>33</sup> See also: A. Hołub, "Ekstremizm i radykalizm jako środowiska rozwoju terroryzmu," *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis*, vol. 17 (2016), p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> A. Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions..." p. 75.

Radicalism	Extremism
8. Radicals, who are in a numerical minority, may retreat from mainstream society into a form of steadfast isolationism or niche culture, existing alongside pluralistic societies without perpetually seeking confrontation with the mainstream.	8. Extremists engage in provocative and aggressive actions against the established order.
9. Radicalism is more oriented towards universal morality.	9. Extremism is characterized by a particularist morality, applicable only to its own members.
10. Historically, radicalism has been more egalitarian or less elitist.	10. The concept of extremism is closely linked to authoritarian dictatorships and totalitarianism. Extremists are advocates of supremacy opposed to the sovereignty of ordinary people.
11. Radicalism draws strongly on the political heritage of the 18 <sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, with its ideas of human progress and its belief in the power of reason.	11. Extremism is associated with an irrational, usually religious and fanatical belief system that claims a monopoly of truth, on the basis of which it seeks to transform society according to its retrograde vision.

Source: author's own based on A. Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2017), p. 75

In a similar vein to Bötticher, Adam Hołub comments on the undefined scope of meaning of the terms 'radicalism', 'extremism', and 'terrorism', which – as he highlights – results in the presence of numerous definitions of them in the literature on the subject.<sup>35</sup> It is right for the researcher to point out that *in the case of extremism and radicalism, it is possible to trace different interpretations of them, noting that in many cases and countries they are treated as synonymous*.<sup>36</sup> However, in spite of its interchangeability in meaning, as Hołub points out, extremism should be treated in a different way than radicalism,<sup>37</sup> which seems an equally valid remark, since radicalism, as Roman Tokarczyk writes: *does not exclude its supporters from the sphere of legalism. It is possible to preach radical slogans to change reality and at the same time recognise the rules and mechanisms of action generally accepted in a given system. Politically radical actors rely primarily on 'theoretical reflection' rather than violent direct action*.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, it can be assumed that the fundamental characteristic of extremism – as opposed to radicalism – is violence representing a non-democratic means of achieving goals;<sup>39</sup> in oth-

<sup>35</sup> A. Hołub, "Ekstremizm i radykalizm...".

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. and K. Izak, "Zagrożenie terroryzmem i ekstremizmem w Europie na podstawie wybranych przykładów. Teraźniejszość, prognoza ewolucji i kierunki rozwoju," *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*, no. 5 (2011), pp. 116-148.

<sup>37</sup> For more on the subject: A. Hołub: *Współczesne partie radykalnej lewicy w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Nowa rzeczywistość – stare cele?*, Olsztyn 2013, pp. 27-51.

<sup>38</sup> R. Tokarczyk, "Teoretyczna a praktyczna istota współczesnego ekstremizmu politycznego," in E. Olszewski (ed.), *Doktryny i ruchy współczesnego ekstremizmu politycznego*, Lublin 2004, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> A. Wirsching, "Przemoc przeciw przemocy? – o ideologicznych założeniach ekstremizmu prawicowego i lewicowego po I wojnie światowej," in U. Backes, *Skrajnie prawicowe ideologie w historii i współczesności*, Wałbrzych 2005, pp. 56-71.

er words, the use of methods and means of action that disregard generally accepted norms of behavior, especially those that do not respect the lives, freedoms and rights of citizens.<sup>40</sup> However, it is worth remembering, quoting Roger Scruton, that *the association of radicalism with extremism is not as unjustified as it might seem*,<sup>41</sup> hence at the level of scholarly discourse and research, the terms are often used interchangeably.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, it seems that in the pursuit of a terminological consensus, the two concepts could then appear together, for – citing Holub – *by using one concept, we explain the other, an example of which is the statement that radicalism may mean a method of reaching an extreme goal*.<sup>43</sup> In conclusion, therefore, it can be assumed that: *Political or religious extremism, as opposed to radicalism, goes much further in terms of ideas and goals. It does not so much demand fundamental changes to the system, leaving it in its basic framework, as much as it seeks to completely change it for another. Radicalism advocates a profound modification of the political system, extremism rejects it in its entirety. Radicalism in its method and means remains within the sphere of recognition by the given system, extremism uses (although not exclusively) extra-legal means and methods, not recognised in the reality in which it operates. This is why extremism is similar to, and in part overlaps with the phenomenon of terrorism*.<sup>44</sup>

## TERRORISM AS THE FINAL LINK IN THE CHAIN OF VIOLENCE

Terrorism, as one of the most destructive and extreme manifestations of extremism, poses a threat to security and social stability. Its extreme nature stems from the use of violence to achieve specific political, ideological, or religious goals. The deliberate choice of violence characterizes terrorism as a method of action, often employing tactics of intimidation and fear-mongering. It is a strategy aimed at influencing political or social decisions by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear.

Terrorism, as a concept marked by ambiguity and multidimensionality (see Table 2), is – like radicalism and extremism – often simplistically associated with an *extreme method of action involving the use of broadly defined violence based on unlawful activities*.<sup>45</sup>

The progression from radicalism to extremism to terrorism can be understood as a continuum of escalating anti-democratic behavior. Radicalism, characterized by advocacy for significant change, may remain within democratic norms. Extremism involves a rejection of democratic principles, often through ideologies that oppose fundamental

<sup>40</sup> R. Scruton, *Słownik myśli politycznej*, trans. T. Bieroń, Poznań 2002, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Blok (ed.), *Nauka o polityce*, Poznań 1987, p. 301; A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut, *Systemy polityczne współczesnej Europy*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 80-87, pp. 100-101.

<sup>43</sup> A. Hołub, “Ekstremizm i radykalizm...”, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> R. Leonowicz, “Straż Graniczna wobec terroryzmu. Wybrane zagadnienia materialno-prawne,” in P. Majer, M. Sitek (eds), *Jakość w działaniach na rzecz bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego państw Grupy Wyszehradzkiej z perspektywy europejskiej*, Józefów 2011, p. 422.

freedoms. Terrorism, as the most extreme form of extremism, employs violence or intimidation to achieve political or ideological goals, directly threatening the security of the state and its citizens.

A cross-section of the literature on the study of radicalism, extremism and their final phase, terrorism, reveals not only the lack of uniform, conceptually similar definitions, but additionally indicates the complexity of the issues themselves. According to a survey carried out by Schmid, Forest and Lowe<sup>46</sup> on the phenomenon of terrorism as an aftermath of extremist phenomena, only the first two components (Table 2) of the main definitions of terrorism, i.e. 'violence or force' and 'politics', had the highest percentage support from the respondents (91.1% and 82.2% respectively).<sup>47</sup> Civilians (victims) not involved in combat (48.2%) and a factor related to threat, fear, or attempted intimidation (47.2%) ranked relatively high on the list of components mentioned (Table 2). It is important to note that the respondents represented various scientific disciplines such as political science, security science, international relations, and, to a lesser extent, history, sociology, and psychology.

The ambiguous semantic structure of the term terrorism is evidenced by the vast number of definitions found in the literature.<sup>48</sup> This fact constitutes a significant obstacle to countering/fighting terrorism and in some cases may raise doubts as to the qualification of the acts carried out by the perpetrators of alleged terrorist attacks.

Despite numerous and diverse efforts undertaken by the academic community, advisory and consultative bodies, as well as individual states and international organizations, there is no single, universally accepted or applied definition of terrorism. It is also difficult to determine how many definitions of terrorism currently exist. Moreover, it should be noted that new terminological distinctions emerge each year.<sup>49</sup>

In seeking an answer to the question of why it is so difficult to develop a single universal definition of terrorism, one can refer to the arguments presented by Sebastian Wojciechowski. The researcher identified several key issues, which he then subjected to detailed analysis.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A.P. Schmid, J.F. Forest, T. Lowe, "Terrorism Studies. A Glimpse at the Current State of Research," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2021), pp. 143-144.

<sup>47</sup> To clarify: the percentage total refers to the frequency of responses relative to the total number of respondents to the question: what is your (own or preferred) definition of terrorism?

<sup>48</sup> A.P. Schmid, J.F. Forest, T. Lowe, "Terrorism Studies...".

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> S. Wojciechowski, "Why Is It so Difficult to Define Terrorism?," *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 38 (2009), pp. 59-66.

Table 2. Components associated with the term 'terrorism' (in percentages) selected by representatives of the academia (respondents) to define the phenomenon.

No.	Component of definition	Respondents' selection in %
1.	Violence or force	91.1
2.	Politics	82.2
3.	Civilians, people not involved in combat as victims	48.2
4.	Targeting, goal, emphasis of purpose	46.7
5.	Emphasized threat, fear or intimidation	46.7
6.	Non-state actor (non-state group), movement, organization as perpetrator	37.8
7.	Emphasis on non-state actors as perpetrators	35.6
8.	Ideology, ideological	33.3
9.	Indirect action or targeting emphasized	28.9
10.	A state actor or territorial entity (sub-state) is included as a perpetrator	22.2
11.	Deliberate, planned, calculated or organized action	20.0
12.	Extraordinary, in violation of accepted principles (moral or legal)	20.0
13.	Coercion	20.0
14.	Propaganda	20.0
15.	Random, uncritical nature	15.6
16.	Symbolic in nature	15.0
17.	Government or state as victim	15.6
18.	Criminal, illegal character	15.6
19.	Psychological character emphasized	15.6
20.	Method of struggle, strategy, tactics	11.1
21.	Covert, hidden character	11.1
	Arousing concern	

Source: author's own based on, A.P. Schmid, J.F. Forest, T. Lowe, "Terrorism Studies. A Glimpse at the Current State of Research," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2021), pp. 143-144

Here are some of them:

1. The inability or difficulty in distinguishing terrorism from related phenomena or processes.

Terrorism is often difficult to differentiate from other related phenomena such as terror, guerrilla warfare, struggles for national independence, irredentism, or separatism. The term 'terrorism' is frequently used to describe a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, from anarchist or revolutionary actions to outright criminal acts. The same situation can be interpreted as either an act of terrorism or a fight for national independence, depending on political, religious, or ethnic perspectives. For example, the activities of the IRA or ETA have been viewed differently: while some Irish or Basque nationalists consider them a form of struggle for independence, the majority of public opinion regards them as terrorism. A similar ambiguity applies to groups such as the Tamil Tigers, Hamas, and Kurdish or Chechen extremists, whose actions are either framed as legitimate resistance or acts of terrorism, depending on the perspective of the observer.

2. The deliberate use of the term ‘Terrorism’ by decision-makers and opinion leaders

Political decision-makers (e.g., politicians) and opinion-forming circles (e.g., the media) often deliberately use terms such as ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ to shape public opinion, discredit specific individuals or groups, justify certain actions, create a ‘smoke-screen’, or gain popularity. As a result, the term can serve as a tool of manipulation, yielding political or material benefits. This practice became particularly widespread after the September 11 attacks. Since then, the authorities of various countries – such as the United States, Russia, Israel, and the United Kingdom – have frequently exploited terrorism-related rhetoric, especially in politically significant contexts, such as election campaigns.

3. Avoidance of the Terms ‘Terrorism’ and ‘Terrorist’

In some cases, members of terrorist organizations deliberately avoid identifying themselves as terrorists. Instead, they use terms such as ‘fighter’, ‘guerrilla’, ‘liberator’, or ‘servant of God’ to eliminate negative connotations associated with terrorism. By doing so, they attempt to shape their image in a way that legitimizes their actions. A notable example is a statement by one of Lebanon’s terrorist leaders, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah: *We do not see ourselves as terrorists because we do not believe in terrorism. We see ourselves as mujahideen [holy warriors] waging a Holy War for the people.*<sup>51</sup>

4. The political exploitation of the lack of a universal definition of terrorism

The absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism allows certain states to manipulate the concept to serve their own interests, both internationally and domestically. This ambiguity provides them with a strategic advantage, enabling them to justify specific policies or actions while avoiding legal accountability.

This is particularly evident in the actions of states accused of supporting terrorism, such as Iran and Sudan, and previously Iraq and Libya. These countries have a vested interest in resisting the adoption of international legal frameworks on terrorism, as such regulations would directly conflict with their broader political and strategic objectives.

5. Attempts to explain terrorism through related but incomplete concepts

Efforts to define terrorism often rely on related terms such as radicalism, extremism, acts of terror, terrorist acts, or policies of terror, none of which fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. While these terms may describe aspects of terrorism, they fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of its nature.

Another common oversimplification is equating terrorism with Islamic fundamentalism or other ideological concepts. This represents a classic ‘stopgap’ measure used when a universally accepted definition is lacking. An example of such an approach is the European Union’s definition of ‘terrorist offenses’, which attempts to address the issue within a legal framework but does not fully resolve the definitional challenges associated with terrorism.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> B. Hoffman, *Oblicza terroryzmu*, trans. H. Pawlikowska-Gannon, Warszawa 2001, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Fight Against Terrorism – Definitions of Terrorist Crimes and Support to Victims*, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3A4322328>, 12 March 2025.

6. The challenges of defining terrorism due to its constant evolution

The difficulty in presenting a comprehensive and precise definition of terrorism arises from its ongoing evolution. Terrorist organizations emerge and dissolve, their methods and evaluations change, and new forms of terrorism (e.g., eco-terrorism, bio-terrorism, cyberterrorism, global terrorism) emerge. The assessment of individuals, organizations, movements, and ideologies also shifts. Terrorism's evolution affects both its definition and its forms, types, and scope. Transformations within and around terrorism take various forms, reflecting its changing nature. These factors complicate the clear understanding and definition of terrorism.

7. Problems with the definition of terrorism due to personal ambitions, affinities, or accompanying emotions

New definitions of terrorism are sometimes created as a result of the individual expectations or ambitions of their creators (e.g., scholars or institutions). The evaluation of a particular process or event often depends on whether we share similar views on the topic, approach, or individual, or whether we oppose them. It thus depends on the degree of our emotional involvement, conscious or subconscious, which is based on various premises, such as religious, ethnic, cultural, or political factors. This is also related to the different perceptions of the essence of terrorism by representatives of different social groups.

8. Difficulties in defining terrorism due to the diversity of methods and means used in attacks

The difficulty in defining terrorism stems from the variety of methods and means employed in terrorist attacks. These can include assassination attempts, harm to individuals, property destruction, hostage-taking, vehicle hijacking, and more. The weapons used may be conventional, weapons of mass destruction, or cybernetic. Potential targets can be categorized as personal or material, traditional or unconventional, stationary or mobile, and by groups such as politicians, public figures, and ordinary citizens. All of this makes it extremely challenging to provide a clear definition of terrorism.

9. Difficulties in defining terrorism on the international stage

The difficulties in defining terrorism internationally stem from debates over the precise definition, identification of its components, and the listing of terrorist organizations. Additionally, there is a need to distinguish terrorism from struggles for national independence. The lack of a unified definition within the United Nations illustrates these disagreements, hindering international consensus. These challenges arise from ideological and political differences and the difficulty in distinguishing terrorism from national liberation movements. Until the 1990s, some countries opposed global regulation of terrorism, favoring sectoral conventions. Today, the main issue is not the content of the definition but when conventions should apply, especially regarding national liberation movements and state-sponsored terrorism.

10. The variety of definitions of terrorism within a single state

The multitude of definitions of 'terrorism' within a single state complicates the precise characterization of the phenomenon, highlighting its complexity. For instance, the U.S. administration has not developed a single formal definition of terrorism, while

individual agencies have their own definitions tailored to specific legal, strategic, and operational needs.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, terrorism, as the most extreme form of extremism, emerges from ideologies that reject democratic principles and resort to violence to achieve political or ideological goals. While radicalism may inspire reformist or revolutionary ideas, it is the progression to extremist ideologies that creates a pathway to terrorism in certain contexts.

Key to addressing it is finding effective methods to prevent radicalization and solutions to minimize the risk of terrorist attacks and their impact on society. The issues related to the lack of clarity and consistency in terminology represent a significant obstacle in countering terrorism and, in some cases, may raise doubts about the classification of actions committed by perpetrators of alleged terrorist attacks.

## CONCLUSION

The concepts of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism are fundamental to understanding the dynamics of contemporary anti-democratic movements. This article has sought to delineate a precise terminological distinction between these phenomena and examine their interrelationships, demonstrating how they may be instrumentalized by various actors seeking to undermine democratic institutions and values. By analyzing the conceptual overlaps and distinctions among these terms, it becomes evident that their boundaries are often fluid, contingent on the socio-political context in which they are employed. This conceptual ambiguity presents significant challenges to counteracting these threats effectively, yet it remains essential for a comprehensive understanding of the risks facing democratic societies today. The ability of radical and extremist ideologies to develop within democratic systems – often by exploiting legal and political mechanisms – poses a critical concern, as such ideologies can manipulate public discourse, deepen societal divisions, and subvert democratic norms from within.

Furthermore, this study has emphasized that terrorism, as the most extreme manifestation of extremism, constitutes a potent tool for anti-democratic forces seeking to destabilize political order. The strategic use of terror to instil fear and advance radical agendas not only challenges state security structures but also threatens the broader democratic fabric, requiring a delicate balance between security imperatives and the protection of fundamental freedoms. The necessity of striving for precise definitional clarity regarding these concepts is paramount, as it provides the analytical foundation for the development of effective countermeasures. Without well-defined parameters, efforts to prevent radicalization, prosecute extremist activities, and foster international cooperation in combating these threats risk becoming inconsistent and ineffective.

In this context, the role of states and international institutions is indispensable. While individual states are responsible for crafting domestic strategies to address radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, a meaningful and coordinated response necessitates

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<sup>53</sup> A. Schmid, "Terrorism – The Definitional Problem...", pp. 375-377.

international collaboration. States must engage in intelligence-sharing, legal harmonization, and community-based interventions to mitigate the spread of extremist ideologies. Additionally, international organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, play a crucial role in fostering dialogue, establishing normative frameworks, and coordinating transnational efforts to counteract these threats.

Addressing radicalism, extremism, and terrorism requires a multidimensional, interdisciplinary approach that integrates security policies with broader political, social, and cultural strategies aimed at safeguarding democratic resilience. Only through a concerted effort – at both national and international levels – can democratic societies effectively counteract the corrosive impact of these phenomena and uphold the principles of political stability, social cohesion, and the rule of law.

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