

THE PHENOMENON OF RADICALIZATION. CONCEPTUAL NUANCES AND SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Abstract: *The onset of a new form of terrorist threat at the beginning of the 21st century, at a European level, characterized by the involvement of European citizens or residents in acts of terrorism has led to a paradigm shift in the way the fight for terrorism prevention is approached. From a counterattack strategy, the decision factors have turned towards a prevention-oriented strategy, based on early intervention policies. To define the transformation process of an individual leading a normal life into a person who resorts to acts of extreme violence against the community, the concept of "radicalization" was used. If, until 2001, this term was mainly used to indicate a shift towards a more radical policy, after 2004 it was more and more used among researchers, political dissidents, and mass-media, becoming a central element in the terrorism prevention policies. Recently introduced in the national legislation, the concept of "radicalization" for terrorist purposes is less known and debated by the scientific works in Romania; however, it represents a field of maximum importance and topicality not only for the European institutions, but also for the Member States of the European Union which are confronted with radicalization as a phenomenon. This article approaches the main aspects related to the conceptualization of the notion of "radicalization" for terrorist purposes, which are required for a better understanding of the phenomenon.*

Key words: *radicalization; security; terrorism; security strategies; violence.*

1. Introduction

Over the last years, the prevention of radicalization towards terrorism has been one of the priority objectives of the EU institutions and organisms related to security. The issue has been part of the priority fields on the European Agenda regarding Security (COM (2015) 185 since April 28, 2015) and, starting with 2005, significant instruments have been designed in view of preventing and fighting this phenomenon that affects many of the EU states.

Approached as an element of the preventive side of the fight against terrorism, *radicalization* is a new field of research. The concept was initially brought into discussion by the intelligence services¹ and later on it was taken over in the official documents of the EU institutions after the terrorist attacks from 2004 in Madrid and 2005 in London, attacks² which led to an increased awareness regarding the onset of a new form of terrorist threat – "the internal threat".

The classical terrorism, with well-structured units, mostly seen in the past as an external threat, has been replaced by a destructured form based, as Anthony Giddens mentions, "on a feeling of mission and commitment, which allows a free flourishing of the global organization" (Giddens, 2010: 837).

Currently, terrorism has changed its organizational structure and the terrorist entities fully benefit from the facilities provided by the new technologies. The

¹ The first uses of the concept of radicalization were "among the European police and the intelligence circles shortly after the attacks from September 11, 2002 and it simply meant "anger". Its swift ascent started with an internal document of the European Union (EU) for the fight against terrorism, issued in May 2004, which listed the potential fundamental causes of this "anger", exploited by foreign recruiters to attract vulnerable young Europeans in terrorist campaigns abroad" (Coolsaet, 2016).

² The attacks were not committed by terrorists coming from outside the European space, but by people from the Spanish or English diaspora, without proven connections with the terrorist networks.

promotion of extremist ideas and concepts is made using various channels or small groups that act without any direct connection with the terrorist organization that inspires them - „Leaderless resistance”¹. A characteristic of this new form of unconventional threat was the implication of European citizens - “homegrown terrorists”² in the attaches in Europe.

The new societal transformations, with major implications on the security of states, have spread concern among the political decision factors at a national and European level and have triggered a shift in the European approach of terrorism – from a fighting strategy towards a prevention strategy³ based on early intervention policies. As the radicalization process was considered a precursor of the terrorist act, “the accent shifted from punishments to doctrines and prevention practices, whose main role is the identification of potential criminals prior to the perpetration of crimes. This new “prevention model” has led to a development of the operating systems and analytical instruments focused on the identification of suspects, ideas and behaviors in a pre-criminal phase” (Bianchi, 2018). Basically, there occurs an extension of the aspects related to the concept of terrorism, with an accent on its preconditions.

2. The Definition of the Radicalization Concept for Terrorist Purposes

After 2005, the concept of “radicalization” has been the subject of various definitions, as the term is frequently used in the current language – in political discourse, the documents of European institutions and agencies, but also in the academic environment and mass-media – especially in the states confronted with terrorist attacks. As Rik Coolsaet noticed, “this concept has even become a global brand for the efforts of many countries to fight terrorism” (Coolsaet, 2016: 37). Despite the 15 years of research, as in the case of the concept of “terrorism”, no consensus has been reached regarding the definition of “radicalization”, the concept being rather complex, ambiguous and still controversially defined (Schmid, 2016:27). Radicalization seen as a gradual process that occurs in stages is the only aspect upon which most experts in radicalization agree.

Although initially the term was associated with terrorism, the way in which it is defined fails to reflect all the times the direct connection with terrorism. Such an example is the definition given by Mircea Martin: „Radicalization is a process, a movement of the mind (and often of the soul) which opposes, on the one hand, ambiguity, equivocity, confusion and on the other hand neutrality, impartiality, equidistance, indifference. The stakes are generally high, the gestures final, in line with the “all or nothing” principle. Here lies the “essence” of radicality”. (Martin, 2014:10).

There are definitions that invest the concept with an extremely broad significance, so that “it incriminates the legitimate political opinions whose only crime is that they differ from the social normative opinion” (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, Caluya, 2011:13), giving as an example the definition of Hannah Greg and col., who see radicalization as the “process by which the individuals transform, in time, their

¹ The *leaderless resistance* phrase, mentioned by Manni Crone, Martin Harrow, was developed, in the early '60s, by colonel Ulius Louis Amoss, former American intelligence officer and a staunch anti-communist. The *leaderless resistance* refers to an organizational strategy that opposes the pyramidal one, which implies small groups (independent phantom cells) or individuals (“Lone Wolf”) that are against changes or a certain system (Crone, Harrow, 2011:522).

² The notion of *homegrown terrorist* comprises two characteristics shared by most of the literature in the field – the involvement of individuals born and raised in the West and the implication in attacks on their own behalf, independent from a terrorist group from abroad. (Crone, Harrow, 2011:522); (Beutel, 2007:1); (Precht, 2007:15).

³ The identification of measures against violent radicalization is viewed by the European Commission, at the level of 2004, as a fundamental priority in the future strategy of preventing terrorism (COM(2004) 698).

vision on the world from one society tends to deem normal to one society deems extreme” (Greg, Clutterbuck, Rubin, 2008:2). In fact, with small differences, most approaches tend to expand the sphere of the concept, such as that considered by the intelligence service in Netherlands (AIVD), which sees radicalization as the “increase of the willingness to follow and/or support – if necessary by undemocratic, large-scale means – changes in the democratic order” (Borum, 2011:12). Other definitions, in an attempt to shrink the applicability sphere of the concept, stress the adoption of an *ideology* or *faith* that could stand at the basis of the involvement in terrorist acts (for instance, “the phenomenon by which certain individuals embrace extremist ideologies and behaviors that might determine them to commit acts of terrorism” (European Court of Auditors, 2018:6)) or *violence* (acceptance or active pursuit) for the fulfillment of objectives (for instance, Thomas Olesen’s definition of radicalization as “the process by which the individuals and organizations adopt violent strategies – or threaten to do so – to reach political objectives”(Olesen, 2009:8)).

There has been no shortage of metaphorical definitions in the attempt to understand the concept of radicalization. Zeyno Baran, for instance, sees radicalization as a “conveyor belt” (Baran, 2005:68) towards terrorism, on which individuals who share a radical ideology are pushed. Fathali M. Moghaddam uses the metaphor of the “terrorism ladder” to describe the social and psychological processes that lead to terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005), while Peter R. Neumann, in the volume dedicated to the first international conference on radicalization (2008) noticed the fact that “experts and officials have begun to make reference to the idea of “radicalization” every time they wanted to talk about what happens before the bomb explodes”.

The most intense debates related to the content of the concept of radicalization revolved around the necessity to draw a limit between *nonviolent radicalization* (ideological or cognitive) and *violent radicalization* (behavioral).

Thus, most definitions describe radicalization as the gradual appropriation or development of an extreme/radical ideology or faith. That implies the fact that the individual adopts “ideas that are in profound contradiction with those of the majority, denies the legitimacy of the existing social order and tries to replace it with a new structure based on a completely different system of beliefs” (Vidino, 2010:4). As a rule, the transfer takes place mentally from opinions to powerful ideas that become personal or collective certainties and eventually beliefs. Certain definitions (Allen, 2007:4) of radicalization refer, however, not to an *extreme/radical* ideology, thought or faith, but to an *extremist* one. This nuance is important in understanding the concept. The individual radicalized in extremisms no longer has simple opinions or thoughts (if he has simple opinions, they would accept their debate and dialogue with the other), but certitudes that are experienced, beliefs that become inflexible, fanatic, as they escape logic.

From this perspective, radicalization appears as a process developed at a cognitive level (“radicalization as an intellectual process” (Crone, 2016:589)) which fails to imply involvement in terrorist acts. Hence, the necessity of making a distinction between *nonviolent* and *violent radicalization*, which involves a further element, consisting in the pursuit or acceptance of violence as a legitimate, even desirable means of action. At this point, although the individual may remain in the cognitive sphere, being limited only to “accepting”, “wishing” or “considering” violence as a means to accomplish their objectives or those promoted by terrorist entities, most of the times there takes place a modification of the behavior, that may indicate the preparation to pass from opinion to action.

While some authors consider that the mere acceptance of certain ideas that justify or approve of violence is an indicator of violent radicalization, other researchers or experts refer to violent radicalization as a means that inherently involves a concrete violent behavior (European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalization, 2008:5). Thus, Lorenzo Vidino, in an attempt to find an answer related to the types of radicalization the policies to counteract this phenomenon should address, considered that "violent radicalization takes place when an individual passes to the next stage of using violence to promote opinions deriving from cognitive radicalism. Violent radicalization constitutes an immediate threat to the security of the collectivity and, therefore, all the radicalization counteracting programs address it" (Vidino, 2010:4).

The phrase "violent radicalization" was criticized, as it fails to reflect accurately the concordance with the phenomenon whose prevention was considered by the European institutions, namely the process that drives the individual towards terrorism, further nuancing and clarifications being required.¹ Thus, referring to the phrase "violent radicalization", Alex P. Schmid claims that the "term of violent radicalization" comprises two confusions: (i) it shouldn't be understood as "radicalization through violence" but as "radicalization towards violence"; (ii) and, moreover, the reference is not towards "violence" in general, but towards a certain type of political violence, a terrorist violence against the civilians and non-fighters. The general significance is "radicalization as a group or individual process to dedicate oneself more and more towards the involvement in political terrorism actions" (Schmid, 2013:1).

Given the numerous criticisms, the phrase "violent radicalization" is more rarely used among specialists, being replaced by "radicalization towards violent extremism and terrorism", to indicate the process an individual that becomes involved in terrorist acts undergoes. At the same time, there is a preference for a distinction between *cognitive radicalization* ("radicalization as an intellectual process" (Crone, 2016:589)) and *behavioral radicalization* (actionable). For instance, Randy Borum considers that the cognitive stage needs to be surpassed to understand the way individuals "progress or not - from thought to action" (Borum, 2011:8). Thus, Borum stresses the role of "action paths" or "action scenarios" as being critical for understanding the way in which extremist ideologies and beliefs are translated into "actions of terrorism or violent extremism" (Decker, Pyrooz, 2011:153).

Peter R. Neumann shows that, unlike those who consider radicalization a "purely cognitive phenomenon that culminates with various 'radical' ideas about society and government", there are researchers that plead for the definition of the concept "through the actions (often violent or coercive) that result from these ideas" (Neumann, 2013:884). This aspect, the author states, has led to a distinction between (cognitive) radicalization, on the one hand, and "violent extremism"², "action paths" (Randy Borum) or "behavioral radicalization" (Lorenzo Vidino)", on the other hand.

¹ „The word 'violent' "needs further clarification. Socialization in violence is not necessarily equivalent with socialization in terrorism. Although there are multiple forms of violence, not necessarily of a political nature, terrorism is a special type of political violence" (European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalization, 2008:5).

² The specific regulations of the National Committee of Terrorism Control in Australia define violent extremism as: "the desire to use or support the use of violence in other particular beliefs, including those of a political, social, or ideological nature. This may include acts of terrorism" (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, Caluya, 2011:13).

Although the arguments in favor of defining the concept by relation to behavior are pertinent¹, the authors who support this approach fail to describe the behavioral characteristics or types of actions that might indicate progress on the path of terrorism. According to Schmidt, radicalization implies “a higher and higher commitment to involve in confrontation tactics accompanied by conflict of behavior” that “might include either (i) the use of pressure and coercion (non-violent), (ii) various forms of political violence, other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism under the form of terrorism and war crimes”. (Schmid, 2013:24).

Progress in identifying certain actions prior to the involvement in terrorism is, however, rather difficult. There is a tendency, when we refer to the final moment of the radicalization process, (“the leap towards terrorism”) to relate only to the involvement in the perpetration of a terrorist attack against civilians or various public objectives. However, the radicalized individual may fulfill, for instance, various roles for the accomplishment of political, ideological, or religious objectives of a terrorist group, not only on an operational level, but also in other fields of interest (for instance, communication, propaganda and recruitment, training, fund raising, logistic support). Or, such activities fall under the incidence of legislations in the field of terrorism, being criminally sanctioned, including specific actions of the instigator or accomplice and even if they are committed under the form of attempt or in the stage of preparation.

The Romanian legislator defined terrorist actions as “preparing, planning, favoring, perpetrating, leading, coordinating and controlling the *terrorist act*, as well as any other activities performed after its perpetration, if related to the terrorist act” (art. 4 p. 7 of *Law no. 535/2004 regarding the prevention and fight against terrorism*, with its subsequent modifications and completions). The same normative act (art. 38³) stipulates that all the crimes set down in its content constitute acts of terrorism.

Terrorist acts also include the activities carried out by an individual during the self-radicalization process (without having connections with terrorist entities). For instance, the individual who accesses or downloads repeatedly materials of terrorist propaganda in view of familiarization with the radical ideology, performs an activity that falls under the incidence of the criminal law². Such an action may take place in an incipient stage of the cognitive stage, namely that of indoctrination, research and internalization of extremist ideas or, later on, in the stage of deliberation and taking the decision to support or be engaged in violent actions.

Therefore, in understanding and defining the concept of radicalization we need to bear in mind that it was born out of the necessity to approach the underlying factors of the terrorism acts. It was assumed that if the causes of radicalization were understood, as well as the contribution of the systemic factors, the profile of radicalized individuals, the interaction between context and individual profile, it would be possible to elaborate proper strategies to extract the individuals (or groups) from radicalization and, implicitly, from their involvement in terrorism. Peter R. Neumann claims that with the introduction of the term “radicalization, it became once again possible to speak about the roots of terrorism and, therefore, to treat the causes rather than the symptoms of this phenomenon (Neumann, 2008:4).

¹ The mere adoption of certain radical or extreme ideas or conceptions does not automatically lead to the involvement in violent actions or terrorist acts but may constitute a starting point towards terrorism. There is a tendency, in labeling someone as radicalized, to assume that they advance on the path towards terrorism. Deciding that radicalization at the level of ideas automatically leads to terrorism is a risky approach from the perspective of fundamental rights and liberties, taking into account that, as we showed, not all radical individuals end up engaging in violent activities.

² In the national legislation, such an activity constitutes a crime and is punished by imprisonment from 6 months to 3 years or a fine (art. 38¹ of *Law no. 535/2004 regarding the prevention and fight against terrorism*).

Starting from these premises, we believe that the radicalization process should be viewed *in integrum*, with all the stages that determine the progress of an individual towards the moment they decide to take the “leap into terrorism” seen as an act of violence that is carried out in view of reaching the objectives or interests of terrorist entities. In this vision, cognitive and behavioral radicalization are stages of this process, without claiming that one is necessary for the other.

We cannot eliminate the role of ideology in the radicalization of many of the authors of the terrorist attacks in Europe over the last years (for instance, the authors of the attack from Great Britain – London Bridge, from 2017 - Yousseful Zaghba, Rachid Redouane, Khuram Butt – about whom the close acquaintances reported that prior to the involvement in the perpetration of the attack, they had become more and more radical, changing their attitudes and behavior¹). Furthermore, the behavior reflects a change in the system of faith and the transformation of the individual’s identity, namely a cognitive radicalization that takes place or took place prior to embracing action.

Therefore, I support the opinion of French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, presented during an interview conducted in 2016, according to which “a violent action without ideology (murder, for instance) is not radicalization, and neither is extremist ideology, without a violent action (some forms of religious fundamentalism, for instance)”.

At the same time, we need to take into account that an individual may remain in the cognitive stage by adopting an ideology, a system of thought or extremist beliefs without moving on and acting according to them. Similarly, an individual may develop a violent behavior without having radical or extremist ideas, pursuing, or supporting the perpetration of terrorist acts (Lucas, 2008). Della Porta and LaFree thus bring into discussion the example of those who become involved in the violent activities of a group, motivated by other reasons (friendship, family relationships, loyalty for the group) than the adhesion to its radical objectives.

Regarding the final point of the radicalization process, it could be placed prior to the involvement in terrorist acts, a moment that would coincide, in our opinion, with the internal period² of the criminal activity (the psychic period). “At this decision point, the subject judges the pros and cons of their future acts. Once the subject decided to act, the individual has become a violent radical. The only space between them and the terrorist act is the final decision of the way in which, when and where to commit the violent act” (Lucas, 2008).

In Romania, the notion of radicalization has been recently introduced in the legislation that regulates the field of terrorism. Art. 4 p. 27 of *Law no. 535/2004* defines radicalization as a “complex process, by which an individual comes to pervert their convictions, feelings and behavior following the adoption of an extremist form of thought, in which the use of violence or even self-sacrifice by suicidal methods are legitimate and desirable forms of defense and/or compliance with the interests promoted by the terrorist entities”.

¹ Khuram Butt’s brother-in-law reported his radicalization in 2015. Rachid Redouane’s wife, a British citizen, separated from the former, refusing to convert to Islam. A sign of change in her husband’s behavior was considered to be the refusal to allow their daughter to watch music videoclips.

² Criminal doctrine draws a distinction within this first stage (the internal period) between three moments: the birth or conception of the idea to commit the crime; the deliberation; the criminal decision or resolution. This stage fails to attract criminal consequences but is important in the analysis of the subjective side of the crime committed, being specific to the crimes perpetrated with intent.

In the conceptualization of radicalization a cognitive stage was considered (*“the adoption of an extremist form of thought”*) which is manifested through a negative transformation of the convictions, feelings and behavior (*“comes to pervert their convictions, feelings and behavior”*). We notice that the Romanian legislator prefers the use of the phrase *“extremist system of thought”* compared to many other definitions that refer to the *“adoption of an ideology”* as a precondition of radicalization. Relating to an ideology as a specific element in defining radicalization has been intensely debated in the specialized literature.

The term *“ideology”* represents a system of faith, values, norms shared by the members of a community or a group, a *“communal map of our social world”*, the collective-social component representing a central element in defining the notion (Horgan, Holbrook, 2019:5). In case of many of the authors or terrorist attacks carried out in Europe, characterized as radicalized right Islamists, it was assessed that they had not previously been concerned with religious aspects prior to the involvement in terrorist acts. In fact, a part of them had *„only a cursory knowledge of, or commitment to, the radical ideology”* (Borum, 2011).

We believe that the phrase *“adoption of an extremist form of thought”* provides a wider context than the notion of *“ideology”* and allows for a series of radical or extremist ideas or conceptions that cannot be unequivocally attributed to a certain ideology. Moreover, the definition regulated in the national legislation shows that the acceptance and the necessity of using *“violence or even self-sacrifice by suicidal methods”* characterizes the extremist system of thought adopted by the radicalized individual. The mere adoption of certain radical/extremist opinions or ideas does not automatically lead to labeling individual as radicalized, as appropriating or sharing the conceptions that involve the use of violence are an implicit element of the acquired system of thought. However, the Romanian legislator does not consider any type of violence but only that violence that expressly aims at the *“defense and/or compliance with certain interests promoted by the terrorist entities”*.

The adoption of a system of thought results in a transformation, a change in a negative direction (*“perversion”*) of the convictions, feelings, and behavior of such individual. In this sense, there is a series of researchers who attempted to identify and determine indices (signals) of radicalization that may be observed in the behavior of an individual, such as: a change in the physical look, modifications occurring in the circle of acquaintances, characterized by distancing from the old social group, giving up certain habits, conversion to a new religion, intolerance towards certain categories of people, etc. Such behavioral modifications may be indicative of the individual's transformation process, but they are no proof that such individual will become involved in terrorist acts. In corroboration with the ideas or convictions related to the necessity of using violence in defending or supporting the interests of certain terrorist entities, such signs may constitute arguments in favor of an individual's radicalization and, implicitly, of the social danger that may be generated by the individual and the profoundly negative nature of the radicalization phenomenon.

3. Conclusions

In the conceptualization of the notion of radicalization, of relevance is the context of the introduction of the term in the field of terrorism and the attempts to define it in the course of time. Despite a boom of research on the matter, as in the case of other concepts, such as extremism or terrorism, no generally accepted definition has been accepted or agreed upon by most of the representatives of the academic or political environment. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the context of

introduction and the justification of its necessity in the field of terrorism prevention to fully understand the concept.

We believe that the definition adopted by the Romanian legislator is a balanced one, that determines its meaning in the context of terrorism. The conceptualization of the idea of radicalization is important, on the one hand from the perspective of the political decisional factors for the conception and determination of the prevention and control strategies and, on the other hand, from a social perspective, so that the individuals may adapt their behavior to common norms and values. In the context of implementation of the measures that are part of the state's interventionist policy in case of radicalized individuals, it is important to establish a clear conceptual background, so that the efforts to fight against this process should not be oriented to individuals who would probably never become involved in terrorism (Horgan, 2012).

The phenomenon of violent radicalization is a social issue that causes perturbations in society, more precisely a specific form of deviance. From a sociological perspective, any act of deviance refers to a "divergence or a deviation from the expectations of the group or collectivity, an unusual, irrational, or abnormal act, determined by particular circumstances, conditions and states, which creates a situation of legitimacy that arouses various reactions from the audience" (Rădulescu, 1999:3).

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