Extremism in Europe

We, as MIJARC Europe, see radicalization becoming a common situation in Europe, becoming a part of our daily life. MIJARC Europe, as a faith-based youth organization active in rural areas, wants to act against rising populism and extremism in Europe. We, young people, are witnessing that our vulnerabilities and those of others are becoming a target for extremism.

This position paper is the result of a seminar and a study visit with debates, discussions and workshops. It is created by young people from eleven different youth movements from all over Europe[1] representing and exchanging the realities in their countries. We talked about practices, how youth organizations are supporting young people in getting open-minded and tried to find ways of combatting extremism.

See

We have different realities in our countries, but together we stand for a European view. We experience different types of extremism: some of them are present in all European countries; especially right-wing extremism. Others are more specific for certain regions, e.g. nationalist extremism. Extremism needs furthermore to be seen with specific settings in mind in some areas, e.g. in rural areas due to seclusion. This is looked at with special interest from MIJARC Europe as a rural organization and we recognize a lack of studies on extremism and rural youth.

Observing the different realities, we also see a link between historical events and the development in our days: in former days, extremism started to work step by step. We have the feeling, that if we don't get active now, there's the chance that extremism raises again.

Furthermore, we see that the fear of the unknown forms the ground for a rise of extremism. Although we notice, that in areas with no or just a few members of a minority, extremism is more common than in "concerned areas". Especially there, but also in other regions we are experiencing an augmenting success of populistic parties all over Europe due to a rising mistrust in most of the politicians and classic parties in power. Connected to that, also the idea and the values of the European Union, especially solidarity, lost its appeal and trustworthiness to many people caused by the fact that the European Union doesn't own a social dimension.

It's often difficult to identify the motivations for radicalization. There are many push-factors, e.g. a lack of formal, informal and non-formal education and also social inequality that make a person more vulnerable for extremism.

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[1] The young people are coming from 11 different countries, representing different movements with different or non-religious backgrounds. The movements are: FYCA Armenia, System & Generation Turkey, BUJRUM Macedonia, YMDRAB Bulgaria, APSD Agenda 21 Romania, KLJB Germany, Landjugend Austria, MRJC France, MJRC Spain, JARC Portugal, GYC Malta.

The influence of classic and new media, e.g. social media platforms, is increasing and shaping our perspective of Europe and the world. Media is replacing social interaction in real life more and more. They are having more impact on people's lives and they are also offering spaces for violent and extremist expressions. Hate speech is a daily, but not a new issue, especially in social media. It goes along with the rise of toxic language in political life. It seems as if nothing is unsayable. Due to this evolution, discrimination is rising, in particular the one against migrants and asylum seekers.[2]

When it comes to religion, we realized, that it is sometimes abused as a justification for extreme acts; but there are also religious spokespersons[3] teaching hate instead of love, having an individual view of their religion. Even normal individuals are associating religion with extremism when they hear about terroristic attacks, although this is not the case.

Family and peer groups form a background that can prevent young people from extremism. The problem is that both family and friends often don't understand and don't realize why their relatives get radicalized and don't know what to do about it.

We as MIJARC Europe are dealing with young persons, which are more vulnerable than other groups for radicalization and sometimes are also victims of it. We try to influence young people and their peer groups by having projects combatting extremism. But we can still do more.

Judge

MIJARC Europe, being experts in working with young people in rural areas concerning the topic of extremism, we judge the situation as the following not agreeing with the current definitions of extremism and radicalization of European stakeholders, because they do not fit with our experiences and realities:

Violent extremists manipulate people, based on an ideology, which is sustained by people's vulnerabilities, fears and their urge for revenge. Furthermore, these ideologies are used as a justification for their violent extremism. They pretend that there is no alternative. Nowadays, there is a lot of public space for extremist actions, e.g. in the media, which allows them to spread fear.

Radicalization is not as negative as is the term, violent extremism'. Radicalization can be seen in a positive or negative way following your ideas without any compromises. It turns out to be negative, when a radical forces someone else to follow his/her ideas.

We see it as necessary to increase the offer of formal and non-formal education to reduce vulnerabilities of people facing extremism, hate speech and discrimination. Especially in formal education, we see a lack of methods that empower young people to be critical thinking citizens.

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[2] MIJARC Europe already expressed its opinion on migration and asylum in a former position paper that can be found here: https://mijarceuropeblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/7-position-paper-welcome-in-europe-e28093-our-responsibility-for-asylum-seekers-ga-modified-version.pdf
[3] Spokespersons are those people who are forming the image of a religion in public. They are not necessarily the authorities of a religion.

The fear of the unknown is not a new problem; it already existed in former times. Nowadays, it is just more visible with more migrants coming to Europe. This fear is projected on minorities and can be provoked by the media and political stakeholders willingly or unwillingly.

When it comes to hate speech, there is a dilemma between the Freedom of Speech and every person's right to keep its dignity. It's hard to find a balance. Nevertheless, it's important to show solidarity and take care of each other. Politicians and stakeholders should especially care more about the wording they are using as they are public figures.

The rise of populism, used by extremists, scares us as it is paving the path to extremism: Using highly simplified messages and proposing "quick solutions" for complex issues, misleads people to gain power. Economic austerity and growing inequalities in our societies are the perfect basis for populist speeches to rise and find support. Populist spokesmen also take advantage of the loss of attractiveness of the EU-project. That loss is mainly caused by the EU being an economic project, not involving social aspects and not being legitimated by good democratic processes.

We also want to clarify, that religious spokespersons teaching hate, are leading their followers to radicalization; it's not religion on its own. If followers do not reflect enough on their belief and just accept the spoken or written word literally, the situation gets even more dangerous. For us, religions are a tool of love and solidarity. We agree with what Pope Francis said concerning the interreligious dialogue:

> *"The dialogue that we need cannot but be open and respectful, and thus prove fruitful. Mutual respect is the condition and, at the same time, the aim of interreligious dialogue: respecting others' right to life, to physical integrity, to fundamental freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression and of religion."* [4]

These principles are also present in other religions, e.g. in Islam:

> "*Respect and honor all human beings irrespective of their religion, color, race, sex, language, status, property, birth, profession/job and so on.*"[5]

Act

We are demanding from politicians and religious leaders, that...

- they are active in the prevention of extremism
- they avoid and condemn a toxic and discriminating language.
- they promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

We are demanding from different institutions (e.g. religious communities, societies, media, etc....), that...

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[4] Pope Francis (2015) at the Interreligious Meeting for 50th Anniversary of *Nostra aetate*. See also: http://www.pcinterreligious.org/pope-francis-general-audience-interreligious-dialogue_339.html

[5] Reflection on Qur'an 17/70

- they search for common grounds for fighting extremism together. The different cultures and religions should get together and be in dialogue more often to foster their understanding of each other.
- the topic of extremism is included in formal and non-formal education in all age groups. History has to strengthen our capability of thinking critically and we should never forget about it. Therefore, we ask for a good pedagogic approach to it, secured by educational programs, teachers and other persons involved in education. They have to choose ways in which they don't limit, but offer spaces for students to become citizens, thinking and reflecting critically. Media also is also responsible to inform people about extremism in all kinds of channels. This approach should also include faith.
- there are strict guidelines in social media to avoid hate speech. There should be enough resources and finances spent on that. Especially young people must be taught to react critically and sensitively to hate speech on the internet.
- help is offered for families, friends and peer groups which are confronted with radicalized relatives. They need to have help and advice.
- institutions, civil society organizations and all the other actors join forces to prevent young people from extremism.

As MIJARC Europe is part of society, we see ourselves being responsible to get active. Therefore, we will:

- combat populism on our own level. We continue to give young people a sense of democracy by following democratic rules in our events and supporting them in developing citizenship, preventing them from being vulnerable.
- stay active in the topic in our member movements to foster a positive approach to religion that activates people.
- have more projects and actions concerning extremism on a European level. We will go on working on our different realities in our movements respecting the different religious backgrounds we have. Through these actions, we empower young people with critical and social knowledge about media, politics, religion and history
- support the idea of a shared European project, built on cooperation. Creating a social dimension on European level, based on even more exchange between Europeans, we keep on having activities with young people from all over Europe to live the European idea, as well as fostering the topic of extremism in our national movements. For that we need to have the support of our politicians and European stakeholders.