

# Are we fueling the radicalization fire?

- *How policy legitimacy affects violent extremism*

## Introduction

Preventing terrorism through the prevention of violent extremism and radicalization has been crucial in European countries' policies since 9/11. Recent events in Spain, UK, Germany, Belgium and France indicate that European governments struggle to eradicate these security threats, although they have tried directly through counter-terrorism (see European Commission 2018) policies or indirectly through policies on other areas (e.g. foreign, social or immigration and integration).

Whether it is foreign fighters leaving for Iraq or Syria, lone wolves striking at opportunity or organized terror cells operating underground in European capitals, policymakers and political scientists ask themselves: what drives people to become violent extremists? Ehud Sprinzak (1991, 1995) points to the concept of *state legitimacy*, arguing that groups or individuals may perceive state policies (e.g. on counterterrorism, integration, foreign affairs or social affairs) as *repression*, and thus *illegitimate*. However, we know comparatively little about what impact perceived *policy legitimacy* has on other phenomena such as radicalization and violent extremism (Davenport & Inman, 2012, p. 619f). In this vein, European governments may actually fuel the radicalization fire, which their wide range of policies are trying to put out.

In academia though, the radicalization literature has grown (rapidly) into several different explanatory branches without much consideration to *policy legitimacy*. One branch stresses individual characteristics and inclinations especially behavioral disorders, major clinical illnesses and personality disorders (Horgan, 2008, pp. 82-86; Malthaner, 2017, pp. 376-378; Slooman, Demant, Buijs, & Tillie, 2006; Victoroff, 2005, pp. 12-13). Another addresses the significance of social relations and highlights the importance of contextualizing the radicalization phenomenon by analyzing for instance recruitment and radical milieus (Borum, 2011; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Horgan, 2008; Neumann & Rogers, 2007). A third branch of researchers has pointed towards sociological structural factors such as globalization and dissolution of traditional communities as well as identities as viable explanations (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, p. 810; Victoroff, 2005, pp. 3-4). Consequently, the radicalization literature has favored explanations, which does not address the "political" side of the coin, although European governments are actually invoking policies with the risk of fueling political

grievances. In short, a highly political field lacks explanations, which take into account direct consequences of policies instead of accepting the “rebels without a cause”-narrative.

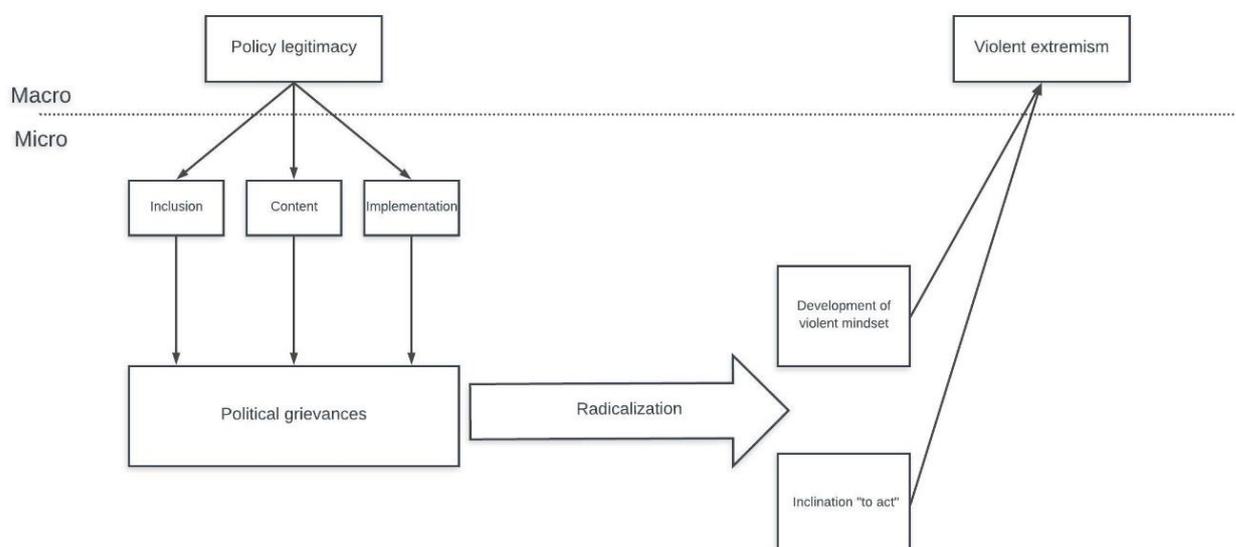
This PhD project aims to provide just that by answering the following research question:

*How does policy legitimacy influence radicalization, hence violent extremism?*

Hence, this project addresses the “dark side” of terror prevention through direct and indirect policies by introducing the concept *perceived policy legitimacy* into the radicalization field. I argue that policies might be perceived as illegitimate, thus inducing political grievances. Hereafter, these grievances affect the risk of violent extremism, when individually perceived grievances become collectivized and amplified through group deliberation. The argument is that an individual with politically induced grievances is more likely to seek out likeminded individuals or being recruited to existing groups with the same perceptions of illegitimacy. Previous studies argue that individuals through deliberation in groups with likeminded people tend to develop more extreme beliefs than they had initially (Everton, 2016; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969; Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie, 2010; Stoner, 1961). Therefore, I argue that an individual’s perceptions of policy could induce potentially dangerous grievances, especially when they are collectivized and deliberated in groups. Consequently, group polarization increases individuals’ risk of accepting violence as a just and effective mean to an end, thus increasing the general risk of violent extremism in a given country.

The next section outlines some thoughts regarding a preliminary theoretical framework.

## Theory



*Figure 1: Theoretical outline*

I initiate this preliminary theoretical framework by defining policy legitimacy. Hereafter, I discuss the concept in relation to the neighboring concepts: support, trust and loyalty. It is worth noting, that this project focusses on individual's perceptions. Thus, the aim of the initial conceptual discussion is not to present the ideal definition of policy legitimacy. The meaning of the exact concept is in this perspective subordinate to understanding peoples' *perceptions* of the concept. This initial conceptual discussion has the purpose of building a theoretical starting point and bridging between policy, radicalization and development of violent extremism.

I define *legitimacy* as a subjective interpretation found in the beliefs and perceptions of individuals and groups regarding the actions of others (Wallner, 2008). In these terms a person, group, idea or policy is perceived as legitimate. Thus, von Haldenwang (2017) argues that legitimacy is a contingent property of political order. In this view, legitimacy stipulates a collective order, which binds members of that collectivity under a common set of values and norms. In broader society, the concept functions as a particular type of political support that is grounded common good or shared moral evaluations (ibid). The process in which legitimacy is procured is termed *legitimation* (Gerschewski, 2018; Marquez, 2016; Tyler, 2011; von Haldenwang, 2017). In that sense, legitimacy is an attribute while legitimation is an action (Barker, 2001; Gerschewski, 2018). Hence, von Haldenwang (2017, pp. 273-276) presents the idea that "the procurement of legitimation is dialogical by nature". The citizens (often through collectivities) provide legitimacy. They respond to legitimacy claims of rulers by endorsement or rejection. At the same time, they also express legitimation demands, which rulers decide to either meet, repress or compensate (ibid). This implies that a governments' power to make binding decisions without inducing dissent and grievances must rest on a confidence among the public that policies are justified and appropriate (Dahl & Shapiro, 2015). In sum, legitimacy is a relational concept between the ruler and the ruled in which the ruled perceive the rulers claims as being justified (Gerschewski, 2018, p. 655).

Here I plan on discussing support, trust and loyalty as done by Gerschewski (2018).

My argument has its' abstract starting point on the "supply" side of this dialogical relationship. When representatives of the political order (e.g. elected politicians) make legitimacy claims through certain policies, citizens react by making a subjective interpretation regarding this specific policy. They evaluate the policy individually or as a symbol of series of government

policies. Based on the evaluations citizens may endorse the policy and alter behavior as it specifically prescribe. Often this process results successfully and the rulers have “acquired” the citizen’s legitimacy. On the other side, citizens may also reject the policy, thus perceiving it as illegitimate. Hence, the governments’ power to make binding decisions may induce dissent and political grievances.

Therefore, I argue that specific policy or series of policies may induce political grievances if individuals or collectivities perceive these as illegitimate. Consequently, the aggrieved may perceive these policies as a type of state repression which ridicule, stigmatize or silence the targeted, (Davenport & Inman, 2012; Marx Ferree, 2004) causing an *inflammatory effect* where would-be moderates are pushed to see violence as a legitimate tool against the state (Rørbæk, 2016, p. 4).

Before diving into what I will label “the radicalization mechanisms”, let us return to the components of policy legitimacy. How are citizens’ policy and legitimacy perceptions formed? Peters (2016) argue that citizens evaluate and *perceive* policy legitimacy on three “dimensions”: (i) degree of inclusiveness in the policy-making process, (ii) policy content, as well as (iii) practice of implementation and outcomes. Because citizens form their perceptions of policy legitimacy in three steps, I argue that grievances accumulate within different time-scopes and with different reasons, but all together as a reaction to exogenously given policy. Shortly, there are differences when and why citizens may reject legitimacy claims. Thus, I elaborate each policy legitimacy “dimension” individually.

### **The three dimensions in some keywords (tentative)**

#### Inclusion:

- Could evoke the feeling of desperation, being turned away, abandoned by the political system, a top-down perception, if included citizens know where to express potential discontent, directing discontent through political channels,

#### Content:

- Direct provocation → important. *Ceteris paribus* the content is the “matter”.
- Or symbolism, less dangerous because inclusion in the process and actual implementation is where the potentially aggrieved have the possibility of influencing policy. If citizens are involved in the policy making process this can be viewed as “the

bureaucratic part” where civil servants “just write” what different actors have agreed upon.

Implementation:

- Interpretation of law, the “encounter” where individuals can have what Tyler (2011) calls “teachable moments”, procedural justice, possible violent encounters and “visualization” of the state in “delegitimizing” acts,
- Tylor (ibid.) argues, regarding citizens meeting with the police, that the perception of fairness and legitimate authorities increases trust and compliance in the police

Interactive effects:

Inclusion – content + implementation

- Individuals may not like the policy-content, but if the procedures of inclusion and implementation are fair or just, they might not feel aggrieved.
- Fairness and just procedures may decrease the possible grievances acquired by the illegitimate content.

-Inclusion + content + implementation

- Individuals may be completely indifferent with the process as long as the content and implementation align with their interests, beliefs or values.

In sum, all three dimensions have the potential of inducing grievances. None is more dangerous than the others are. Moreover, one could argue that these dimensions are intertwined. Individuals or groups may evaluate policy legitimacy differently on different dimensions. As an example individuals may perceive the degree of inclusiveness in the policy-making-process as illegitimate, but at the same time legitimize the content or specific implementation. There may different dynamic interactive effects at play.

I find it necessary at some point to discuss the importance of “grievance entrepreneurs”, who may be the link between the individual and potential grievances. If individuals are politically ignorant or simply do not care about policies, these entrepreneurs could address their perceptions of policies, thus potentially invoking grievances by (intentionally or non-intentionally) framing certain narratives regarding policies. This could be the place to discuss this. Moreover, I could discuss grievances regarding specific policies, political actors and the policies system as a whole.

### **Radicalization – mechanism (work in progress)**

I define radicalization as a process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs (Borum, 2011, p. 9; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; King & Taylor, 2011; Sedgwick, 2010). I argue that these politically induced grievances increase individuals' risk of taking a path towards violent extremism. The radicalization literature argues that aggrieved groups/individuals often are more prone to being recruited to a radical political, religious or social community in which indoctrination gradually changes the individuals' view of the world (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, p. 801; Lindekilde, 2012). This occurs because radicals actively recruit, enforce group bonding and peer pressure (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). In addition, grievances fuel individual identity crises and the lack of belief in oneself to address these grievances through legal and constitutional channels (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). Moreover, existing social networks (Borum, 2011; della Porta, 2008) or "dark" individual characteristics (McGilloway, Ghosh, & Bhui, 2015) amplify extremist environments availability to aggrieved groups or individuals. Hence, they develop "violent mindsets" and shift attitudes toward accepting violent measures, increasing the probability of performing violent extremism (Stankov, Saucier, & Knežević, 2010). In their eyes, they are warring a repressing state (Lindekilde, 2012; Sprinzak, 1991, 1995).

An important question in that perspective is, how individually perceived grievances transform into potential violent collective action? The literature on group polarization provide an answer. Schkade et al. (2010) report from their experiment in Colorado that deliberation in like-minded groups may shift individual opinions toward more extreme views and increase intragroup consensus (ibid.). The authors point to the concept of *ideological amplification*, which is an amplification of pre-existing tendencies. The same mechanism may be at play in terms of policy legitimacy and perceived grievances. Individuals who reject a legitimacy claim may sort themselves (deliberately or inadvertently) along their rejection. Moreover, the costs of mobilizing their rejection are possibly low because people already sort themselves along political lines purely in geographical terms (ibid. p. 228). This could also occur concerning people's reading and other media consumption (ibid.). Thus, people have easier low-cost access to other like-minded aggrieved individuals who perceive the given policy as illegitimate either due to lack of inclusion, the content, implementation procedures or a combination of these. Simply, they may already be in certain networks or groups beforehand.

However, group polarization may have different implications regarding the context in which they are studied. As an example researchers have studied group polarization in terms of “risk” – thus in a psychological sense. Stoner (1961) argued that risk-inclined people became still more risk-inclined because of deliberation. This seems not only to apply to risk-inclined people. Moscovici and Zavalloni (1969) found that risk-averse people became more risk-averse to certain risks after discussion.

### **Dependent variable: Violent mind-set and inclination to act**

A possible way to investigate the dependent variable is to distinguish between “Inclination to act” and “Violent mindset”. Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) argues that we need to distinguish between activism and radicalism. Activism is an individual’s readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action. Contrary, radicalism is an individual’s readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action. This distinction illustrates something about people’s intentions regarding how they potentially could express their political grievances. Do they engage in legal activities through the political system’s channels or do they trust other arenas and techniques? Although, there is not always a clear nexus between intentions and behavior, one could argue that *violent intentions* is at least one step further down a “radicalization” pathway compared to not having them.

Another possible dependent variable that could be useful is perspectives regarding an extremist militant mind-set. According to Stankov et al. (2010) the term consists of three factors: Proviolence, Vile World and Divine Power. Proviolence indicates that violence is not only an option, but it may be a useful means to achieve one’s personal and social goals. Stankov et al. argue that this is not enough. In addition, there needs to be an “enemy” or a belief in a corrupt and Vile World that is perceived as the cause of suffering of the group to which a person belongs. The third factor is the Divine Power-factor, which indicates that violence needs to be sanctioned by someone – often a superior power (e.g God). The third factor should be excluded because the project aims at addressing a more general phenomenon than “just” militant Islamism, which the authors specifically focus on (Stankov et al., 2010, pp. 70-71). Moreover, it resonates with religious belief (ibid.). In sum, this dimension represents individual’s *cognitive ability* to act violently.

By utilizing two dimensions together with an item, which measures the support for others’ terror attacks in Europe; it is possible to capture both individual’s attitudes, cognitive ability actually to use violence and their willingness/intention to act either activist or radicalistic.

## **Possible studies**

Study A investigates a possible causal link between perceived policy legitimacy and violent mindset/inclination to act. One possible design could be to use a survey/lab-experimental study. The idea is to divide the respondents (random selection, Danish population) into four (six) groups.

- a. Group A receives a text concerning the lack of inclusion in the policy-building process.
- b. Group B receives a text concerning illegitimate law-content
- c. Group C receives a text concerning illegitimate implementation
- d. Control group (divided in three) receives a neutral text on one of the different dimensions

Hereafter, it could be possible to measure their violent mindset through Stankov et al.'s approach or "inclination to act" using Moskalenko & McCauleys approach. It might be fruitful to make some preliminary focus group interviews regarding what "illegitimate" law-content and implementation could be. Perhaps NCFE could provide some knowledge through their link to "Infohusene" or their existing contacts.

### (Study B):

You could vary the text pieces in study A regarding specific political areas such as social, foreign, integration, justice policies. Thus, it may be possible to see if any policy area is more or less "dangerous". Topics, which "threaten my identity".

### Study C:

- Interactive dynamic effects between different policy legitimacy dimensions and combinations of such.

### Study D:

An alternative study could be to test specific group polarization effects in relation to the dependent variables. The idea could be to measure the individuals' perception of policy legitimacy and scores on the dependent variables before and after group deliberation much like Schkade et al. (2010). In this study it could be possible to alter group composition based on the variables of interest and deliberation topics (different dimensions of policy (il)legitimacy) or

add conspirators. This study should concentrate on how individually perceived grievances amplifies in groups and thus address whether this affects violent extremism.

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