

# POLITICAL SCIENCES

## RADICALIZATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2024 ELECTIONS IN EUROPE AND UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**Frunzeti T.,**

*Professor, PhD, Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania  
Academy of Romanian Scientists*

**Miu V.**

*PhD candidate, Carol I National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania  
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### Abstract

The 2024 elections present a unique sociopolitical landscape marked by a resurgence of radicalization across various spectra. Radicalization profoundly impacts electoral dynamics, shaping voter behavior, political discourse, and policy agendas. Extremist groups and individuals seek to influence elections through disinformation campaigns, targeted propaganda, and online manipulation, sowing seeds of division and undermining democratic norms.

**Keywords:** radicalization, extremism, populism, 2024 elections, Europe, United States

### Introduction

According to Radicalisation Awareness Network, radicalization is the “process through which an individual comes to adopt extremist political, social, or religious ideas and aspirations which then serve to reject diversity, tolerance and freedom of choice, and legitimise breaking the rule of law and using violence towards property and people”. [1, p. 5]

Cesáreo Rodríguez-Aguilera states that there are multiple economic, social, cultural and political causes for the current rise in the radical right in various European countries and it is difficult to say which is the most important. Undoubtedly, a significant contributing factor is the economic crisis that began in 2008 and the EU's and national governments' subsequent unwavering adoption of neoliberal deficit-control and austerity measures. These economic policies widen the divide between the wealthy elite and the majority of the populace, providing possibilities for the far right to capitalize on the discontent of the marginalized. Social developments that have reduced the size of the previous industrial working class, which had historically backed conventional left-wing parties have made the issue worse. Individualist, polarizing, and cynical perspectives of reality have become more prevalent in society as a result of cultural shifts and, in particular, the crisis of the great ideologies (particularly on the left, with its revolutionary goals). [2]

In light of the 2024 elections, radicalization presents serious threats to democracy both in Europe and the United States. Radical political parties, regardless of their extreme left or right wing, have the potential to undermine democratic institutions, incite divisiveness, encourage extremism, threaten minority rights etc.

The resurgence of radical parties on both the far left and far right has challenged the democracy of many nations. Parties advocating for nationalist, xenophobic, or authoritarian ideologies have gained traction, sowing division and uncertainty across the Europe and the United States. The rise of populism and nativism has strained the European project, threatening the unity and

cohesion of the European Union and undermining democratic values and principles.

Recent years have seen a noticeable increase in political radicalization in the United States, which has resulted in incidents like the Capitol attack. The stability of American democracy is being threatened by extremist groups and individuals who have attempted to subvert democratic institutions and norms. They have been emboldened by political hyperbole and online echo chambers.

According to Simon Walker, the chief of the Rule of Law and Democracy section at United Nations Human Rights, “democracy, human rights and the rule of law are interdependent and mutually reinforce each other. Weakening one endangers the others”. Hate speech targeting migrants and minorities to internet shutdowns to disinformation campaigns spread by new technologies aimed at manipulating public opinion, increasing risks are threatening the integrity of elections and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. [3]

This article aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of radicalization within the specific context of the 2024 elections both in Europe and the United States of America. By exploring the socio-political landscape leading up to these elections, the objective is to analyze the favorable factors for the rise of radical parties in recent years and the potential implications for democratic processes.

The article is structured in two parts in which we analyzed the threat represented by political radicalization in the United States of America and in Europe. In the case of Europe, we used Germany, Austria and Hungary as case studies. Of course, they are not the only European states that face political radicalization, but we considered it important to discuss them because Germany, Austria, and Hungary each experienced the 2015 migrant crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine invasion (which we consider as being a part of the favorable factors for the rise of radical speech and radical parties) differently, leading to diverse political

and social responses. These states have distinct political landscapes characterized by varying levels of support for mainstream and radical parties. Germany has a multi-party system with a strong tradition of centrist politics, while Austria has seen the rise of right-wing populist parties such as the Freedom Party. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, has witnessed a significant shift towards authoritarianism. As well, each country has implemented different policy responses and countermeasures to address radicalization and the rise of radical parties. Germany has focused on integration policies and combating far-right extremism, while Austria has taken a more restrictive approach to immigration and asylum. Hungary has pursued increasingly authoritarian measures, including restrictions on media freedom and civil liberties. Comparing these policy responses can highlight the effectiveness of different approaches in mitigating radicalization and extremism.

### **Methodology**

The study subject concerning the emergence of populism, nationalism, extremism towards radicalization in the United States of America and Europe is examined through the lenses of historical facts, content analysis, and conceptual source analysis.

In order to write the article, we analyzed data obtained from official websites, documents of the European Union, scientific articles so that the information is truthful. Although the sources used for the elaboration of the article are credible, previously verified, we must also take into account the possibility of a subjectivity bias in the choice of sources.

### **Radicalization in the United States**

In the context of the 2024 elections in the United States, it's essential to acknowledge the profound impact of recent events, notably the Capitol attack of January 6, 2021, committed by a mob of supporters of Republican President Donald J. Trump. [4] The assault on the heart of American democracy served as a stark reminder of the perils of political polarization and the potential consequences of radicalization within the electoral process.

According to Nicole Austin-Hillary and Victoria Strang, the Capitol attack was based on "racism and a fear of growing diversity in the United States was at the heart of the violence. While then-President Donald Trump encouraged demonstrators to retake the nation under the guise of halting certification of the 2020 election results, racism was in the roots of, and remains embedded in, this movement." [5]

The United States Capitol, an iconic symbol of American democracy, has unfortunately been the target of several violent attacks throughout its history: during the War of 1812, in 1954 when Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire, the bombing in 1971 committed by a radical left-wing organization and the shooting in 1998. These attacks, ranging from bombings to armed invasions, serve as stark reminders of the nation's vulnerability to extremism and political violence. As well it is important to emphasize that the attack of January 6, 2021, was the first time in the history when an insurrectionist crowd attempted to overturn a presidential election.

The Capitol attack of January 6, 2021, highlighted deep-seated divisions within American society, fueled by misinformation, conspiracy theories, and extremist ideologies. It underscored the susceptibility of certain segments of the population to radicalization and the willingness of some individuals to resort to violence in pursuit of their political objectives.

Moreover, the aftermath of the Capitol attack has triggered widespread debates about the state of democracy, the fragility of institutions, and the erosion of trust in electoral processes. It has prompted calls for accountability, introspection, and concerted efforts to address the underlying grievances and inequalities that fuel radicalization and extremism.

The attack on the Capitol serves as well, as a sobering reminder of how important it is to defend democratic principles, preserve the integrity of elections, and foster an environment that values tolerance, respect, and plurality in the effort to create a society that is more just and equal. The country needs to be especially watchful in protecting the fundamentals of democracy and paving the way for healing and reconciliation as it deals with the fallout from this historic incident.

Although it's impossible to predict the exact impact on radicalization, if Trump would be re-elected, we consider that it could exacerbate the already existing political polarization within the United States. His presidency has been marked by deeply divided public opinion, and his return to office might further entrench these divisions. This could lead to heightened tensions between various political factions, potentially fueling extremist ideologies on both the left and the right. As well, Trump presidency could be seen by some extremist groups as validation of their views and tactics. Throughout his first term, Trump's rhetoric often stirred controversy, and he was accused by many of failing to condemn far-right groups unequivocally. Another term could embolden such groups, leading to increased recruitment and radicalization among disaffected individuals. The international impact would be significant because it could inspire similar movements abroad, potentially leading to increased radicalization and extremist activities on an international scale.

### **Radicalization in Europe**

From the United States, the nationalist wave easily crosses the Atlantic and threatens European democracy. In Europe, there are national-socialist, neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, anti-LGBT and so-called "hooligan" groups. Many have political representation. In Germany, AfD became the largest opposition party in the Bundestag. In Spain, VOX is one of the largest formation in the Parliament. In Austria, the radical right has long been "normality". The Freedom Party of Austria is in coalition with the government of conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. By far, at the forefront of the nationalist-populist wave in Europe are Hungary and Poland. Hungary has two such parties: Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ and Jobbik, a significant force in the Hungarian Parliament, a party with a racist and anti-Semitic discourse. And in Poland, the Law and Justice party makes the law.

As we mentioned above, the 2015 migrant crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine each created conditions that were favorable for radical parties and radical speech for several reasons. These crises heightened feelings of anxiety and insecurity among the population. The influx of migrants in 2015, the rapid spread of COVID-19, and the military conflict in Ukraine all generated fear and uncertainty about the future. Radical parties often exploit these feelings of insecurity to promote their agendas, offering simplistic solutions and scapegoating marginalized groups. As well, these crises exacerbated existing economic inequalities and social discontent. Economic downturns, job losses, and strains on social services due to the migrant crisis and the pandemic fueled resentment and grievances among certain segments of the population. Radical parties exploited these grievances by blaming migrants, foreign powers, or political elites for economic hardships and promising to address them through radical policies. Ultimately, these crises exacerbated societal divisions and polarization. Debates over immigration, public health measures, and foreign policy became increasingly polarized, creating fertile ground for radicalization and extremist rhetoric. Radical parties exploited these divisions by stoking fear, resentment, and animosity towards perceived adversaries. The spread of disinformation and propaganda through social media and other channels amplified radical narratives and conspiracy theories related to these crises. Radical parties and actors disseminated false or misleading information to manipulate public opinion, sow distrust in democratic institutions, and promote their own agendas. The influx of migrants, particularly from non-Western countries, triggered concerns among some segments of the population about the preservation of national identity and cultural heritage. Radical parties capitalized on these fears by framing immigration as a threat to national identity and advocating for strict anti-immigrant policies.

Overall, the convergence of the 2015 migrant crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine created a volatile environment characterized by insecurity, economic dislocation, social discontent, polarization, and distrust in institutions. Radical parties and actors seized upon these conditions to advance their agendas, exploit grievances, and promote radical speech that appealed to segments of the population disillusioned with the status quo.

### Germany

Extremist parties and movements, especially those on the far-right, have a history in Germany. Even though Germany has stringent laws and institutions in place to prevent and counter extremism, including laws that prohibit the display of Nazi symbols and Holocaust denial, there are still concerns about the presence and influence of radical groups in the country.

Germany has seen a resurgence of far-right extremism in recent years, with groups such as Alternative for Germany (AfD) gaining political representation. AfD has been criticized for its anti-immigrant rhetoric and its connections to individuals and groups

with extremist views. The party's presence in the German political landscape has raised concerns about the normalization of xenophobic and nationalist ideologies.

Within the book "Radical Right Populism in Germany", Ralf Havertz states that a radical right or extreme right party has indeed not been perceived as normal in Germany for some time. This is an especially sensitive issue in Germany, because of its devastating history with right-wing extremism during the Nazi period (1933–1945). AfD is a rather young political party, but it can already be said that AfD, despite its short time of existence, is the most successful radical right populist party in the Federal Republic of Germany. [6, p. 1-34]

Some of the most important aspects for which the AfD is recognized are euroscepticism, anti-immigration stance, nationalism and islamophobia.

Recently, the party's co-president, Alice Weidel, was able to enforce a more moderate program despite the fact that many voices advocated a maximalist stance toward the so-called Dexit, or Germany's exit from the European Union (EU) and NATO. The AfD would have suffered by the radical demand to quit the EU right away, as the population was aware of the benefits Germany derived economically from its membership in the EU institutions. Germany would lose a number of benefits and its exporting position if it were to leave the EU. The AfD party would have run the danger of losing a sizable portion of its voter base and a majority if he had backed the party's swift exit from the EU.

The anti-immigration stance started during the 2015 European migrant crisis, when more over 1.5 million migrants arrived in Germany as a result of previous Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcoming stance toward refugees, especially those from the Arab world. However, the AfD has fully rejected this approach. [7]

As a right-wing populist and nationalist political party, AfD espouses patriotic sentiments, emphasizing the importance of German identity, culture, and sovereignty. The party criticizes multiculturalism and globalization, advocating for policies that prioritize national interests and cultural preservation. As well, AfD has been criticized for its Islamophobic rhetoric and policies. The party portrays Islam as incompatible with Western values and sees it as a threat to German society. AfD has called for restrictions on Islamic practices, such as the construction of mosques and the wearing of headscarves.

Overall, Germany should be concerned about AfD because through their activities, the party challenges fundamental democratic values, including pluralism, tolerance, and the rule of law. Germany's reputation as a democratic and tolerant country could be also they can be placed in an unfavorable light. Internationally, the party's presence in German politics may raise concerns among allies and partners about the state of democracy and human rights in Germany, impacting diplomatic relations and Germany's standing on the global stage. Germany should be vigilant about AfD and its implications for democracy, social cohesion, and international standing. Addressing the underlying grievances and concerns that fuel support for AfD while reaffirming

democratic values and principles is crucial to counteracting the party's influence and safeguarding Germany's democratic institutions.

### **Hungary**

Hungary has garnered attention as a populist country primarily due to the policies and rhetoric of its Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, and his Fidesz party. Viktor Orbán has been in power since 2010, and his leadership style is characterized by a strong, centralized government. He often presents himself as a defender of national interests against perceived external threats, including immigration and globalization. Orbán and Fidesz frequently criticize traditional political elites, portraying themselves as outsiders fighting against entrenched interests. This anti-establishment rhetoric resonates with many voters disillusioned with mainstream politics. Orbán's government has emphasized nationalism, promoting Hungarian identity and sovereignty. This includes policies such as "illiberal democracy", which prioritizes national values over liberal democratic principles.

In 2010, Hungary's ruling Fidesz party started to lean toward authoritarianism and illiberalism. A new constitution was ratified by the ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and media freedom was curtailed. The 1988-founded Fidesz party is another illustration of the adaptability of right-wing populism. It was once a mainstream liberal alliance that only shifted to the right in response to electoral setbacks. Fidesz is currently seen as a conservative populist party in the country that supports interventionist economic measures. Because it incorporates citizens of those nations who are descended from Hungary, its conception of the Hungarian nation poses a challenge to those nations. By implementing proposals from the platform of the extreme right-wing party Jobbik, Fidesz has started to alter the structure of the nation's political system. Starting with the migrant crises in European Union, Orbán's government adopted the anti-migrant attitude, that turned over time into an anti-EU attitude. [8, p. 3]

During the 2015 European migrant crises, Hungary was one of the most was one of the most bitter European countries regarding the wave of migrants. Hungary has adopted strict immigration policies, including building fences along its borders to prevent the entry of migrants and refugees. Orbán's government has framed these policies as necessary to protect Hungarian culture and security.

In recent years, Hungary has been accused for breaching European values and the rule of law. According to the provisions of Article 7 of the Treaty of European Union, if a country seriously and persistently breaches the principles on which the EU is founded as defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities) it allows for the possibility of suspending European Union membership rights (such as voting rights in the Council of European Union). [9] The first time Hungary faced accusations of breaching Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union was in 2018. The European

Parliament voted to trigger Article 7 proceedings against Hungary in September 2018, citing concerns over the rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights in the country under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party. The European Parliament's decision came after years of tensions between Hungary and the EU over issues such as the independence of the judiciary, media freedom, treatment of refugees and migrants, and the rights of minorities, including the LGBTQ+ community.

At the beginning of 2024, Hungary was accused again for breaching Article 7 of Treaty of European Union. In a resolution adopted in January with 345 votes for, 104 against and 29 abstentions, Members of the European Parliament expressed concern about the further erosion of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary. [10] But the European Commission didn't trigger the suspension clause. Didier Reynders, the European Commissioner for Justice, argued that the Commission can't take a decision in the process due to lack of consensus within the Council. [11]

Nevertheless, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2024, Hungary will be the member state to hold the Presidency of the Council for 6 months. [12] An authoritarian state like Hungary, who was accused for breaching principles like democracy, rule of law, respect for fundamental rights etc., should raise concerns considering that will lead one of the most important institutions of European Union.

### **Austria**

Austria, like many other European countries, faces the challenge of radical political movements, including parties like the Freedom Party of Austria (FPO). FPO has a complicated history, spanning from its controversial beginnings in Austria's post-war far-right movements to its current status as a powerful political force. However, even with its changing character, concerns remain regarding the party's future, especially in light of its involvement with radicalism and nationalist discourse.

According to Reinhard Heinisch and Diana Hofmann, Austria is a more particular case because it differs from other European countries. They highlight three important aspects. First, they state that Austria and Russia have a tight friendship. Strong relations exist between the FPO and the Kremlin. Second argument is that the 1955 State Treaty that put an end to the Four Power occupation upholds Austria's long-standing neutral foreign policy. In fact, Austria is not a member of NATO and did not join the European Union (EU) until after the conclusion of the Cold War. And the third factor is Austria's significant reliance on Russian energy supplies, particularly natural gas, and the close economic relations between the two nations constitute a third reason. In fact, just a few months after Russia annexed Crimea, in June 2014, Austrian political and business elites gave President Putin a warm reception in Vienna. Therefore, despite the fact that all of Austria's major political parties have backed keeping cordial relations with Russia, the FPO has distinguished itself by pursuing closer political relationships with the Kremlin due to ideological reasons. [13, p. 34]

We consider these factors to be valid due to the facts that both the FPÖ and the Kremlin have been associated with nationalist and Eurosceptic ideologies. This alignment on certain issues, such as skepticism towards the European Union and advocacy for national sovereignty, has facilitated cooperation between the two entities. The FPÖ has historical ties to Russia and the former Soviet Union. These connections date back to the Cold War era when Austria maintained a policy of neutrality and engaged in trade and cultural exchanges with Eastern Bloc countries. Some members of the FPÖ have maintained personal and political connections with Russia over the years. As well, The FPÖ has sought to build political alliances beyond Austria's borders, including with Russia. This has involved meetings and exchanges between FPÖ officials and representatives of the Russian government and pro-Russian groups. Such alliances may be driven by shared interests in challenging the status quo in European politics and countering perceived threats from Western liberal democracies. The energy and economic interest is valid due to the fact that Austria relies on Russia for a significant portion of its energy imports, particularly natural gas. Economic ties between the two countries, including trade and investment, may also contribute to a degree of cooperation and alignment on certain political issues. Furthermore, the FPÖ's pro-Russian stance may also be influenced by geopolitical considerations. Some members of the party view Russia as a counterbalance to what they perceive as Western hegemony, particularly in the context of NATO expansion and tensions with the United States and European Union.

Overall, although some observers have expressed concern over the relationship between the FPÖ and the Kremlin, it is crucial to remember that the nature and extent of this relationship may differ amongst different FPÖ factions and are subject to shifting political dynamics both at home and abroad. The development of the FPÖ is a sobering reminder of the ongoing contradictions between the attraction of radical ideologies and democratic norms as Austria struggles with the complexity of its political landscape. The trajectory of the FPÖ, from its contentious beginnings to its contemporary expressions, illustrates the complex relationship between history, extremism, and social dynamics. As the nation charts its course forward, understanding the lessons of the FPÖ's past and navigating the emerging trends of extremism are crucial steps in safeguarding the integrity of Austrian democracy and fostering a more inclusive and resilient society.

### Conclusions

The impact of radical parties on European elections varies from country to country. While some far-right parties have made significant electoral gains and even entered government coalitions, others have faced backlash and electoral setbacks. Factors such as electoral systems, mainstream party responses, and the mobilization of civil society all play a role in shaping election outcomes.

Addressing the threat of radicalization in the context of the 2024 elections requires a multifaceted approach. It necessitates robust measures to strengthen democratic institutions, safeguard the rule of law, and

promote civic education and engagement. Additionally, efforts to counter extremist narratives, combat online radicalization, and foster social cohesion are essential to mitigating the risks posed by radical parties to democracy both in the United States and Europe.

In our opinion, the rallying of people around radical ideas is the expression of some frustrations and it can be understood. There are people who lost from the economic crisis, there are people who have not adapted to globalization, in short these people feel a sense of anger. What is incomprehensible are politicians like Trump who use these people by capitalizing on their grievances to destroy democracy without being able to put anything that works back.

We also consider that more censorship and control measures are needed on social media, which play a very important role in the propagation of radical discourse. In the 20th century, after the First World War, when fascism and bolshevism were born, the situation was somehow similar. The cinema, the radio, the microphone, etc., made possible the meetings with thousands of people, where people like Hitler could make themselves heard. Thus, that "non-media" that was in no way controlled allowed the rise of totalitarianism. Unfortunately, despite all the regulations or self-regulations that are made, the same thing is happening now with the new media, and populist, nationalist, extremist, anti-EU messages, etc., end up being distributed to the masses.

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