DARE RESEARCH BRIEFING SEPTEMBER, 2021

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRAJECTORIES THROUGH 'RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST' MILIEUS

## **Summary of Key Findings**

- \*Adopting a milieu approach enables the examination of individual trajectories towards and away from extremism and the identification of factors that both facilitate and constrain radicalisation.
- Both underlying social and political grievances and affective and situational mediating factors were identified as important in young people's trajectories through 'right-wing extremist' milieus.
- \* Despite engagement in radical(ising) milieus, most respondents did not themselves cross the

- threshold into violence and so display trajectories of partial, stalled or non-radicalisation.
- \*The research findings demonstrate that radicalisation is neither a uni-directional process nor one 'done to' young people; individuals move, repeatedly, both towards and away from extremism in a reflective and engaged way.
- \* Recognising the significance of individual agency in trajectories of (non)radicalisation is key to developing effective prevention and counter extremism policy and practice.

### The DARE Research

This research briefing is based on qualitative data collected and analysed as part of the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. The project focuses on young people (loosely defined as those aged 15 to 30 years) and on two strands of extremism, which we refer to as 'Islamist' extremism (ISE) and 'right-wing' extremism (RWE).

The DARE project uses a mixed-methods approach and has multiple research strands. In this research briefing, data are drawn from 9 milieu-based ethnographic case studies of young people's trajectories through radical(ising) milieus in France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Norway, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia and the UK. In total 184 young people took part and 188 semi-structured interviews were recorded.



We cannot do justice to the complexity and contentious nature of many terms used in this briefing. For brief conceptual definitions, see: <a href="http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html">http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html</a>. For critical discussion and contextualisation of these terms, please consult the individual research reports: <a href="http://www.dare-h2020.org/research-reports.html">http://www.dare-h2020.org/research-reports.html</a>

Further information on the project and participating institutions can be found at the end of this briefing.







### Introduction

In this study, we understand trajectories as individual pathways shaped by intersecting structural, group and individual factors. This briefing considers the notion of trajectories through 'extreme right' milieus rather than right-wing 'radicalisation' to recognise, *inter alia*, that trajectories may lead individuals towards extremist attitudes or behaviours but also to partial or stalled radicalisation, non-radicalisation and de-radicalisation.

Both 'extreme right' and 'anti-Islam(ist)' are used in this Research Briefing. Whilst these terms should not be conflated, there is significant overlap between 'extreme right' and 'anti-Islam(ist)' attitudes and behaviours. In most of the countries studied, the growth of anti-migrant, anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments characterises the contemporary context, contributing to the increasing visibility of movements expressing such views. We found that few actors understood themselves as holding 'extreme right' views, exemplifying a high degree of dissonance between how movements and ideologies are described from the outside and from the inside.

'Anti-Islam(ism)' = active
opposition to 'radical Islam' or the
perceived 'Islamification' of
western societies often
accompanied by general antipathy
towards Islam and Muslims.

'Extreme right' = an umbrella term for political ideologies characterised by authoritarianism, opposition to democracy and exclusionary nationalism (including biological and cultural racism). The process, and criteria for selection of the milieus for study is outlined in the Introduction to the individual case reports (see: Pilkington and Vestel, 2020) and the milieus themselves are discussed in detail in the country based reports (see: <a href="https://www.dare-h2020.org/resources.html">https://www.dare-h2020.org/resources.html</a>). They can be broadly grouped into two types (see Figure 1).

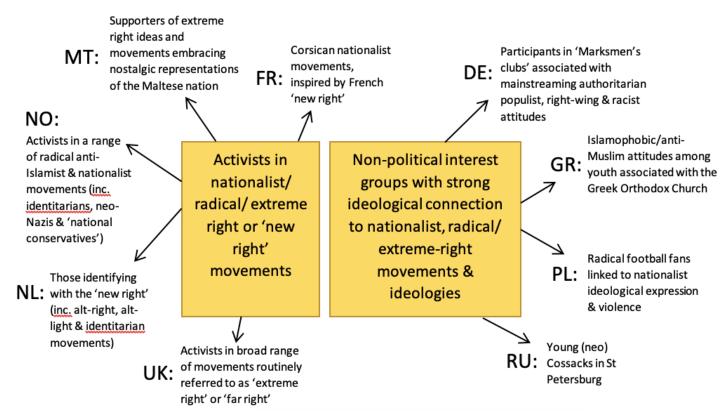


Figure 1: Overview of milieus studied

Historically, research has attempted to profile – socio-demographically and/or psychologically - a 'typical' terrorist actor (for a critique of such approaches, see Victoroff, 2006). Horgan's (2008) intervention, calling for a shift of focus from 'profiles to pathways' and 'roots to routes' marked an important move towards the understanding of terrorist involvement as a complex psychosocial *process* rather than state, although, arguably, the focus on the passage through distinct phases by individuals on such pathways retains a certain linearity to the understanding of the radicalisation process.

Influenced by the work of Malthaner (2017) and Malthaner & Waldmann (2014), the DARE research traces the trajectories of young people through radical(ising) milieus. We understand a radical milieu as an evolving relational and emotional field of activity through which collective identities and solidarities are constructed (Malthaner & Waldmann, 2014: 983). Such milieus can be religious, ethnic or political (or a combination of these) and form the supportive and sustaining social 'environments' from within which those engaged in violent, clandestine activity can gain affirmation for their actions and in which 'grievance' narratives, 'hidden' truths and 'rejected' or 'stigmatised' knowledge are disseminated (Malthaner, 2017: 389). In contrast to ecological models of extremism, which focus on the 'extremism-enabling settings' and their patterns of distribution (see: Bouhana, 2019: 17), DARE is interested in individuals' trajectories through such settings and the role of the reflexive capacity and agency of actors as they experience and respond to encounters with radical(ising) messages. It follows that we understand radical milieus not as simply 'hotbeds' of radicalisation but social environments in which individuals often criticise, challenge or confront the messages encountered there (Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014: 994). This understanding of the milieu as not only inciting and escalating violence but potentially inhibiting and

Political grievances feature strongly in the accounts by research participants of their trajectories through the milieus. These grievances focus on the pursuit by elites of policies of large-scale immigration and the perceived irreconcilable cultural differences of some immigrants.

constraining violence (ibid.) also means that we are interested in pathways of 'non-radicalisation' (Cragin, 2014; Cragin et al., 2015). Indeed, in the case studies selected for study, while research participants were actively engaged in radical(ising) milieus, most had

not crossed the threshold into violence and few supported its use (except in self-defence).

The social structures within

which young people are embedded and the extremist ideas and behaviours diffused in the milieus are key factors in shaping trajectories. However, trajectory outcomes are also profoundly informed by (changing) context and agency and are thus multi-directional (see Figure 2).

Personal grievances among milieu actors tended to be socio-psychological, expressed as feelings of loneliness or isolation. Some milieu actors, however, reported experiencing discrimination (at work, in education, in the criminal justice system) due to their political views.

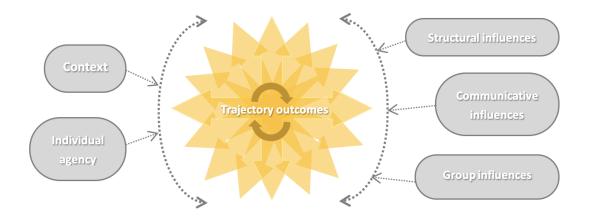


Figure 2: The multi-directionality of trajectory outcomes and the influences that shape trajectories.

Significance is attached to understanding how mediating factors (situational and affective) shape trajectory outcomes. Feelings of isolation, dislocation and frustration are common affective factors, which, for some, contribute to a sense of collective existential insecurity. Situational factors include the role of the family, peers and significant others, as well as social and health problems and a desire for community. Both situational and affective factors can be important in bringing an individual into a radical milieu, but also in constraining their engagement.

## **Trajectories and Grievances**

The term *grievance* is used to refer to a range of personal circumstances, emotional and psychological states and situational experiences that are seen as important factors in trajectories of radicalisation. In a study of homegrown Western jihadis, McCauley (2019: 6) sees *personal grievances* (such as social discrimination) and *political grievances* (exemplified by discontent with foreign policy) as combining to 'fuel radicalization of both ideas and actions'. Although the specific *political* and *personal grievances* felt by anti-Islamist actors differ, the influence and combination of both types of grievances present within RWE milieus.

From respondents' narratives, we identified five recurring factors that contributed to trajectories towards extremism. Of these five, two are political grievances and three are affective and situational mediating factors. These mediating factors feature not only in shifts towards extremism, however, but are found also to constitute blocks to it and thus shape trajectories away from radicalisation. A further three factors were also identified as directing young people's pathways away from extremism. While these factors recur in many narratives, it is important to note that factors central to one

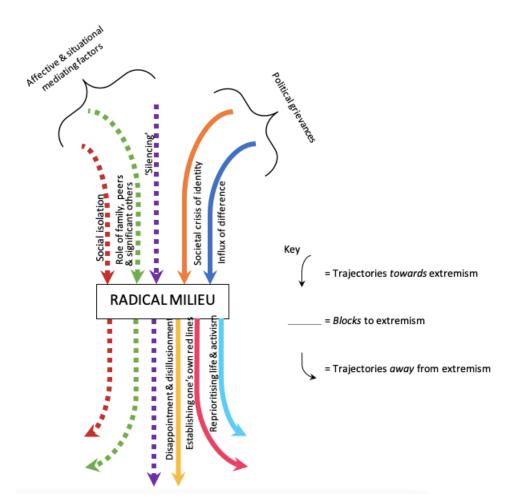


Figure 3: Factors shaping trajectories towards and away from extremism

respondent's trajectory may have been experienced very differently, or not been evident at all, in the pathway of another research participant.

Figure 3 illustrates the grievances articulated by respondents, that contribute to radicalisation trajectories, as well as those factors that can both push people towards and away from extremism. The purpose of this diagram is as a representation of common themes identified from respondents' narratives. It provides a mechanism to organise our findings; it does not depict an example of an individual's trajectory.

Individual trajectories are much more complex and the boundaries between themes more blurred. To capture the interactive and iterative influences of affective and situational mediating factors and grievances, Figures 4 and 5 depict Alice's (UK) and Arne's (Norway) different individual trajectories towards and away from extremism.

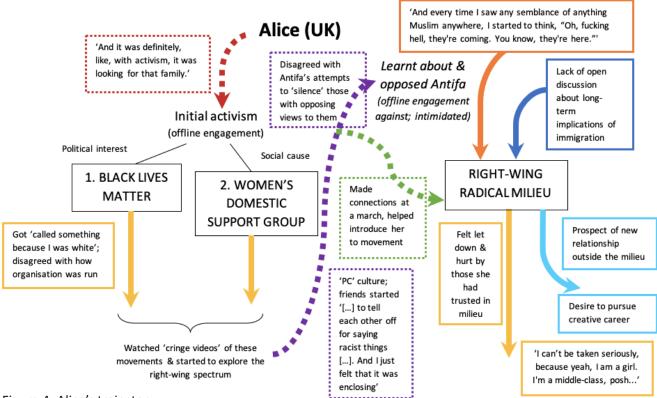


Figure 4: Alice's trajectory

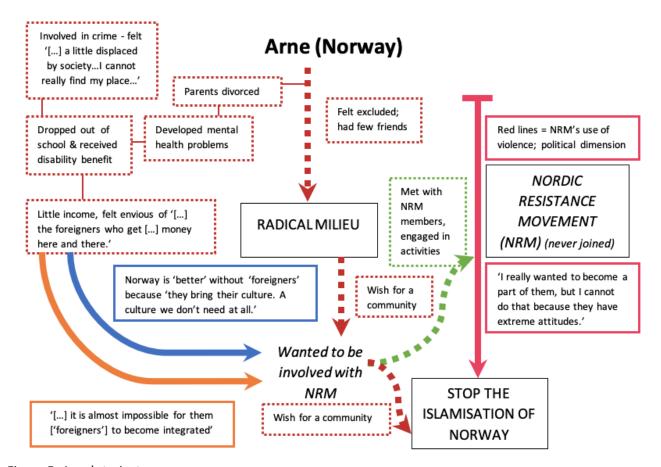
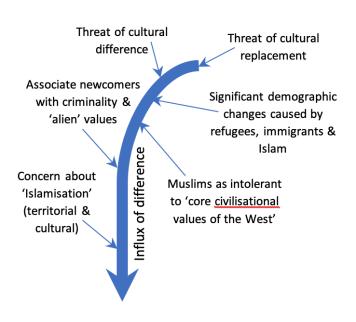


Figure 5: Arne's trajectory

### Influx of difference

Many milieu actors perceive the arrival and presence of refugees and immigrants as increasing rapidly and constituting an intolerable influx of difference. They associate immigrants with criminality, framing cultural differences as 'alien' and as challenging the core civilisational values of the West. This forms a key political grievance.

For many respondents in France, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia and the UK it is the perceived pursuit and support for unrestrained immigration by governments and elites that make immigration and cultural difference so threatening. Feelings of resentment and alienation are exacerbated by a belief that elites hide the benefits they reap from immigration fuelling an 'us' versus 'them' narrative in which elites are viewed as ignoring the experiences and difficulties faced by the non-elites (UIf, Norway).



#### **BOBBY (FRANCE)**

'[...] unfortunately, their [immigrants'] numbers are too great, we're clearly being replaced, we're disappearing, little by little through migration, through interbreeding'.

Respondents fear that such immigration will lead to the cultural replacement and relegation of the native population to minority status. As Dan (UK) puts it, 'we are becoming a minority in our own country'.

Milieu actors 'view' Islam and Muslims as particularly threatening and culturally hostile. Their narratives suggest this stems from the growing visibility of Islam and Muslims in their immediate environments, combined with a belief that Muslim communities are unwilling to change their cultural practices and values in order to 'fit in' with western societies.

Constructing Muslims as a societal 'exception' contributes to a fear of territorial and cultural 'Islamisation of Europe' (Mikaël, France). This is expressed as a real and current threat by respondents in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK. Respondents (e.g. Mona and Marlene, Germany) understand 'Islamisation' as the transfer of values, traditions and practices related to Islam to wider society through their increasing accommodation leading to the replacement of local traditions with Islamic traditions. Respondents (e.g. Cara, UK) describe territorial 'Islamisation' as the imposition of Islam in non-Islamic countries – a form of Muslim 'colonisation'.

## Societal crisis, identity and need for defence

RWE respondents often interpret their experience of the influx of difference as indicative of a deeper societal crisis of identity. For some this crisis is expressed as one of a collective existential nature; for Christopher, France as a country and identity 'is dead'. The most radical interpret cultural diversity as an attempt to undermine western values and promote hatred towards the West. Jacob (Greece) argues that the superiority and purity of Greek Christian culture means 'the transnational centres of power want to destroy it'.

Dutch, British, French and German respondents describe how encounters with visual and auditory markers of difference concentrated in specific geographical areas provoke feelings of displacement and alienation.

### R14 (NETHERLANDS)

'[...] when you see it you think, "is this really the Netherlands?" For example, [names street], a beautiful street with old houses, but almost every shop is Arabic - kebab shops, shops with Arabic fashion such as headscarves and Arabic texts... that sort of thing. People who just don't speak Dutch. Then I think, "where are the Dutch?" Where have I ended up? [...]'

Greek and Russian respondents – whose milieus were closely tied to Greek and Russian Orthodox churches respectively - talk about this underlying societal crisis in strongly moral and spiritual ways. According to Alexey (Russia), 'an ideological, spiritual degeneracy' characterises the world. Father Gabriel (Greece) asserts that Greek society is 'in a state of decay' that can only be addressed by a return to spirituality.

Regardless of how the societal crisis of identity was understood, a common reaction across the case studies was the *need to defend identity* in order to prevent the 'extinction' of white Europeans. This gives rise to widespread concern about the inevitability of violence or even 'civil war' (see Figure 6).

# MIKEY (UK)

'I think, if things continue as they are, and I think there's not the open dialogue which I think it needs to sort of put paid to people's concerns, build bridges, whatever needs to be done to secure peace, that unfortunately I think something like that [violence] is likely.'

#### **SAUVEUR (FRANCE)**

'As long as there isn't a war, a real civil war, as long as the French don't move to get them out of the country, things won't change. It will get worse and worse. You think the Arabs should be moved out of the country... I think the French should take up arms and get them out.'

Sauveur believes that civil conflict is the only way to achieve 'change'. In contrast, Dan and Mikey (UK) and Per and Gunnar (Norway) expressed hopes for peaceful resolutions. Even those who looked towards non-violent resolutions, however, feared that civil conflict was inevitable.

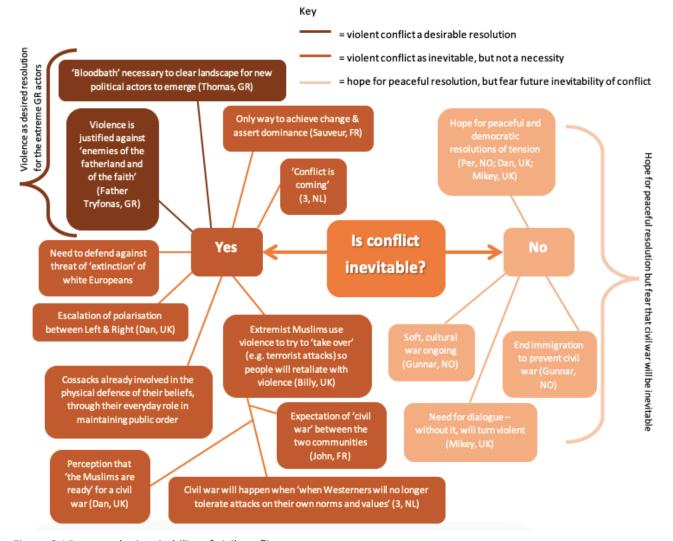
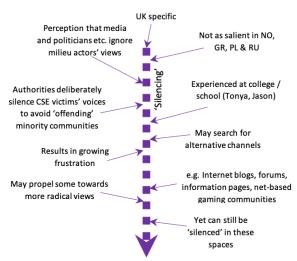


Figure 6: Views on the inevitability of civil conflict

### 'Silencing' and the search for alternative sites of expression

Trajectories associated with feelings of being 'silenced' are of primary relevance to the UK. Many respondents felt that their interpretation and critique of the current socio-political and economic situation is rejected. They believe that politicians, mainstream media and societal institutions do not take account of, or represent, their views because these are often counter to, 'accepted' opinion. Both Tonya and Jason (UK) had formative experiences in college and school where they felt that their views were dismissed 'radical', contributing as to their perceptions of being 'silenced'. Reflecting on her work experience during college, Tonya describes being '[...] beaten into submission, like, "Your opinion is not accepted here. Do not say a damn thing." So I didn't.'



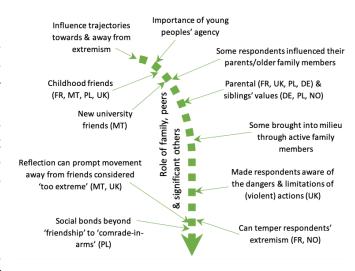
#### CRAIG (UK)

'If you take away people's political voice, on both sides, it becomes cancerous and it basically becomes something very, very malevolent very quickly.' This may propel people towards more radical views or movements or may encourage them to seek alternative channels through which to express themselves. Such channels are usually found online, although research participants report exclusion (through bans) from such spaces also.

The relative absence of a sense of being 'silenced' among actors in milieus in some other countries – such as Norway, Greece, Poland and Russia – may result from the greater degree of public representation of views to the right of the political spectrum in government or other public forums and spaces.

## Role of family, peers and significant others

The role of family, peers and significant others acted as affective and situational mediating factors. Family could influence trajectories both towards and away from extremism and for some it limited the types of activities an individual engaged with within a milieu. Even when family, peers and significant others played a role, this did not negate the agency of the young people in these relationships, which remained central to informing their trajectories. Most respondents who referred to the influence of family members cited parents or siblings, although other key family members mentioned included grandparents and uncles. Several respondents in France, Germany, Poland and the UK said that their parents held values sympathetic to extreme right views. Mona and Lena (Germany)



described how their parents had instilled in them from childhood that they should not bring home, or marry, a Muslim. Family members who were themselves active in the milieu helped to bring respondents into the same milieu. Both Dan and Robbie were introduced to the RWE milieu by their fathers. However, in both cases, their fathers also played important roles in raising their awareness of the dangers and limitations of (violent) actions. Peter (Germany) and Sandra (Poland) had been brought into radical milieus by siblings. Peter's elder brother belonged to a neo-Nazi group and, he says, 'when you [...] get introduced to them [ideas], you develop opinions in that direction and then you strive for it a bit.'

#### DAN (UK)

'Me dad's always been Orange Lodge Loyalist. [...] he's not a racist [...] He's anti, very anti-immigrant. He knew after Lee Rigby, I wanted to go on something like that. And he said, "EDL are marching at Manchester. I've got you a ticket if you want to come, for the train."

However, respondents in Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, France and the UK also mentioned having had left-wing family members who influenced their upbringings and trajectories. Redford (France) credits his grandfather's and parents' leftist ideologies for holding him back from adopting extreme right-wing views.

We also encountered a number of cases of generational role reversal in which it was respondents who influenced their parents or older family members. Espen (Norway) describes how his uncle's ideological position 'got quite influenced by me' while Paul's (UK) parents followed him into the extreme-right party in which he was active. Young people are thus not

only 'victims' of parental socialisation but shape the political contours of their immediate environment.

Friends (whether made during childhood or later in life) also act as natural influencers both towards and away from extremism. Of the French, Maltese, Polish and UK respondents who mentioned the influence of friends as informing their trajectory towards extremism, most relationships were formed in childhood. The role of friends as informing trajectories away from extremism was described by several of the UK respondents. This occurred when an individual perceived a friend to have moved in a direction that was 'too extreme' causing them to draw their own 'red line' (see below).

#### **JONATHAN (MALTA)**

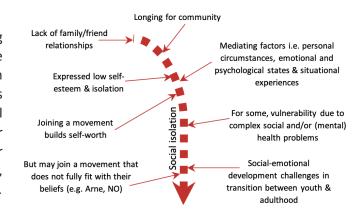
Jonathan was the only respondent who mentioned the influence university friendships had on his trajectory towards extremism. He joined the Imperium Europa party so that he could 'share this with this friend. It became our thing and then, then I started getting into what he was saying'.

#### ROBBIE (UK)

As a teenager, Robbie (UK) consciously decided that he did not want to follow his friends into the EDL: 'My friends were older than me – they were sixteen - fifteen, sixteen. They were going on these marches, and they told me what they'd seen, what they'd heard, what they'd said. And I thought, "That's... it's not... I don't want to be part of that because it's..." Even at thirteen, I thought, "That's not the right way to go about it."'

## Social isolation & longing for community

Although family and peer relationships can introduce young people to radical(ising) milieus, equally the lack of supportive and bonding relationships may be an important factor in trajectories towards extremism. This supports Sieckelinck et al's (2019) understanding of the distinct social-emotional developmental challenges faced by young people in their transition between youth and adulthood as an important factor in radicalisation. Where familial relationships were poor, respondents expressed low self-esteem and social isolation.



Activist groups provided a positive sense of 'family' or 'community' that helped to build their self-esteem and self-worth, as stated by Kitka (Poland), Arne (Norway), R18 (Netherlands), Paolo and Jason (UK).

Respondents who noted feelings of *social isolation and a longing for community* were often vulnerable to movement towards extremism due to the intersection of a range of complex social problems, including mental health issues.

#### ARNE (NORWAY)

Arne's trajectory (outlined in Figure 5) exemplifies the intersection of complex social problems which contribute to feelings of social isolation and longing for community. Arne found that it was 'the unity, the community' which drew him towards the openly national socialist Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Despite his misgivings about the politics of the NRM, and not endorsing their use of violence, he associated the NRM with positive feelings of community and acceptance.

## **Trajectories away from extremism**

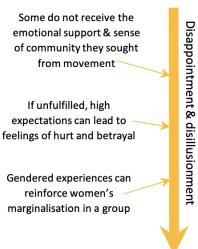
Trajectories away from extremism are similarly personal and distinctive. We found that disappointment and disillusionment with movements, establishing one's own red lines and reprioritising life and activism recurred as common influences. These factors worked alongside the role of family and peer relationships, participation in movements or other sites of expression, which, as discussed above, could, in some circumstances,

shape trajectories away from as well as towards extremism.

### Disappointment & disillusionment with the movement

While longing for community produced by feelings of social isolation pulled some respondents towards extremism, if the support sought was not experienced, it resulted in feelings of disappointment and disillusionment with the movement or feelings of hurt or betrayal. This confirms Bjorgø's (2011: 10) argument that 'high expectations of the emotional dimensions of the new community brings with it potential disillusionment when expectations, be they in relation to political goals, friendship or a sense of belonging and purpose are left unfulfilled'.

This was most clearly articulated by respondents who had already made the decision to leave a movement, such as Lee (UK).

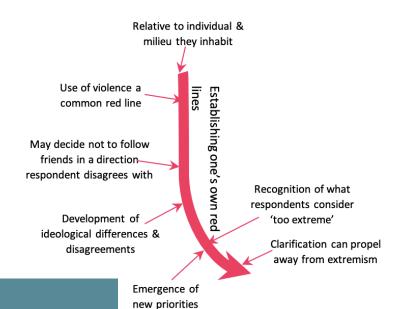


#### LEE (UK)

At the time of interview, Lee had recently been released from prison and described his trajectory as, 'I radicalised myself, and now I've gone through it, and now I've deradicalised myself'. He explained his decision to move away from his former activism by a sense of disillusionment with the movement after its members failed to financially assist his girlfriend and her children whilst he was in prison (even though, he had set up a hardship fund to ensure those convicted would be helped). This reinforced a growing sense that he had wrongly prioritised activism over family. The turning point came, he explains, when he was told by social workers prior to his release from prison that if he was to return to activism, they would seek protection orders that would prevent his access to his own and his girlfriend's children. This, he said, made him think, 'That's it. I can't do it anymore. I can't, I can't run the risk of my kids and [names girlfriend]'s kids being taken away.'

## Establishing one's own red lines

In some cases, individuals establish their own red lines, halting their movement towards or triggering a step back from, extremism. Such lines delineate what an individual finds acceptable in terms of ideological positions and political actions. Where these lines are drawn differs widely as they are shaped by the individual, the milieu and the wider societal context. We found that respondents often identified others (inside or outside their milieu) that they considered 'too extreme' as a means of clarifying those lines and establishing limits on their own behaviour and trajectory towards extremism.

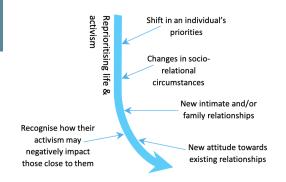


#### **ANITA (NORWAY)**

'They [the NRM] are concerned with race and they want to have a white Scandinavia and that is something that I am not concerned with at all... I feel that crosses a limit. But I can understand why they cross that limit [...] but I really do not support them, absolutely not [...]'

## Reprioritising life and activism

Decisions to step away from extremism may also be associated with a shift in priorities, in which the individual *reprioritises other elements of their life over activism*. The most cited shift in priorities related to the development of new intimate and family relationships, or new attitudes towards existing relationships.



#### SAMUEL (MALTA)

Samuel realised 'life's too short for hating' after getting to know a colleague of immigrant background:

'I had never spoken to a black person before in my life. [...] because it was a collegial relationship, I didn't have much choice in the matter [...] And you know, after repeatedly working together and having drinks, I started to realise that this person is like everybody else [...] I started to feel this internal conflict within me, I was like "What the fuck am I doing man? What is this crap?" [...] Life's too short, for hating [...] this guy, changed my mind.'

Trajectories are individual pathways shaped by intersecting structural, group and individual factors including political grievances and affective and situational mediating factors. While different kinds of factors are distinguished here for analytical purposes, in reality they intersect in complex ways and the boundaries between them are blurred. The trajectories that ensue are neither linear nor uniform; indeed, most actors in the milieus studied in the DARE project had not crossed the threshold into violence themselves. Taking a milieu approach – rather than studying radicalisation by tracing trajectories from the end-point (in violent extremism) backwards – provides a more complex understanding of how individuals can be propelled towards extremist attitudes or behaviours but also how trajectories of partial or stalled radicalisation, non-radicalisation and de-radicalisation are charted.

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#### **Participating Institutions**

- The University of Manchester, UNITED KINGDOM
- Oslo Metropolitan University, NORWAY
- École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, FRANCE
- Anadolu University, TURKEY
- German Institute for Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies, GERMANY
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