Mapping the Roots of Cumulative Extremism Threat in Europe: An Examination in the Framework of Realistic Conflict Theory

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Abstract: Cumulative extremism refers to a situation in which an extremist idea, narrative, or group leads to the radicalization and extremism of another group as a result of its own attitudes and behaviour. This concept is used interchangeably with terms such as mutual extremism, symbiotic radicalization, or reciprocal radicalization, and points to an exceptional axis of extremism. European countries are the places where the threat of cumulative extremism is most tangible. This is since European countries have multicultural social structures. While European countries have a system based on multicultural understanding and 'coexistence', the last 40 years of the 20th century have seen various challenges to this system. When cumulative extremism is viewed as a process of intergroup conflict and conflict reproduction, important conclusions and inferences can be drawn within the analytical framework offered by Realistic Conflict Theory.

Keywords: *Cumulative Extremism, Europe, Realistic Conflict Theory, Right-Wing Extremism.*

Özet: Kümülatif aşırıcılık, aşırıcı bir fikrin, anlatının veya grubun kendi tutum ve davranışlarının bir sonucu olarak başka bir grubun radikalleşmesine ve aşırıcılığına yol açtığı bir durumu ifade etmektedir. Bu kavram karşılıklı aşırıcılık, simbiyotik radikalleşme veya karşılıklı radikalleşme gibi terimlerle birbirinin yerine kullanılmakta ve istisnai bir aşırıcılık eksenine işaret etmektedir. Avrupa ülkeleri kümülatif aşırıcılık tehdidinin en somut olduğu yerlerdir. Bunun nedeni Avrupa ülkelerinin çok kültürlü toplumsal yapılara sahip olmasıdır. Avrupa ülkeleri çok kültürlü anlayışa ve 'birlikte yaşama' dayalı bir sisteme sahipken, 20. yüzyılın son 40 yılı bu sisteme yönelik çeşitli meydan okumalara sahne olmuştur. Bu bağlamda, kümülatif aşırıcılık, gruplar arası çatışma ve çatışmanın yeniden üretimi süreci olarak görüldüğünde, realist çatışma teorisinin sunduğu analitik çerçevede önemli sonuçlar ve çıkarımlar elde edilebilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kümülatif Aşırıcılık, Avrupa, Realist Çatışma Teorisi, Sağ Aşırıcılık.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cumulative extremism is one of the specific dimensions of the extremist threat. It refers to a dynamic and reproductive process. It involves a symbiosis and an "endless loop" created by at least two main extremist ideologies, narratives or groups. Today, this process is largely practised by the jihadist movement-right-wing extremism dichotomy in Europe. Each extremist group blames the other for the problems of the in-group it claims to represent. As the narratives of extremist groups are shaped in this way, the communities defined as the counter-group are mutually positioned as 'legitimate targets and enemies'. As a result, groups that form the axis of cumulative extremism may use violence against each other as well as against members of wider communities that they define as 'out-groups'. This situation is common in Europe. In this respect, cumulative extremism can be defined as an existential threat to Europe. This situation requires a more concrete explanation of the roots of cumulative extremism in order to combat this threat in Europe. This study presents the danger that the threat of cumulative extremism poses to Europe. It does so by analysing the roots of cumulative extremism and the conditions under which this threat is reproduced. In this context, the roots of cumulative extremism are explained from the perspective of Realistic Conflict Theory.

1. Cumulative Extremism and Europe

Cumulative extremism refers to a situation in which an extremist idea, narrative, or group leads to the radicalization and extremism of another group as a result of its own attitudes and behaviour. This concept is used interchangeably with terms such as mutual extremism, symbiotic radicalization, or reciprocal radicalization, and points to an exceptional axis of extremism (Schmid, 2014, p.12). According to classical theories, factors that emerge or give impetus to radicalization and extremism often include feelings of relative deprivation, injustice, inequality, and the need for belonging among individuals or a particular group. However, in the context of cumulative extremism, the mere existence of a particular group can become a source of extremism for another group.

Thus, different extremist groups focus their justification for existence and struggle on specific grievances and socio-political goals, as well as on the aim to eliminate

or suppress another group, which they define as an opponent or enemy (Duckitt, 2003, p.562). This leads to the development of narratives and strategies of the two different extremist groups that form the axis of cumulative extremism, antagonistically. As cumulative extremism emerges, the extremist groups reproduce their narrativistic ground for justification of existence in relation to the existence of the opposing groups. The narrative and organizational reproduction of these groups ultimately leads to the reproduction of the situation of cumulative extremism itself.

Regarding narrative and organizational patterns, the groups that make up the axis of cumulative extremism tend to adopt a rigid 'us versus them' or 'us versus enemies' distinction. These definitions do not include only the extremist groups themselves. Instead, these definitions refer to the wider communities and collective identities (such as the identity of a nation, ethnicity, social class, minority, or religious group) that extremist groups claim to represent (Schmid, 2014, p.14). Once these definitions of in-group and out-group are made sharply, specific qualities are attributed to the two groups. Accordingly, positive qualities (such as goodness, purity, innocence, being right, and having the right values) and also victimization are attributed to the in-group, defined as us, while negative qualities such as guilt and responsibility are attributed to the out-group, defined as the enemy.

In this way, each extremist group reciprocally attributes the responsibility of problems of the ingroup, that it claims to represent, to the opposing group. While the narratives of the extremist groups are shaped in this way, the communities defined as the opposing group are reciprocally positioned as "legitimate targets and enemies" (Lygren and Ravndal, 2023, p.394). As a result, the groups that form the axis of cumulative extremism can use violence against each other as well as against members of the wider communities that they define as 'out-groups'. This situation is often observed in Europe.

European countries are the places where the threat of cumulative extremism is most tangible. This is since European countries have multicultural social structures. While European countries have a system based on multicultural understanding and 'coexistence', the last 40 years of the 20th century have seen various challenges to this system. In particular, the intensification of migration from Middle Eastern and African countries to European countries during this period has created socio-

political problems that target the understanding of multiculturalism and coexistence (Abbas, 2020, p.7). In this context, political approaches that perceive migration to European countries as a risk and a threat, as well as the problems experienced by migrant groups in the context of integration and adaptation to the culture and social structure of the countries to which they migrate, have laid the foundations for the cumulative problem of extremism.

The global jihadist ideology, which has gained impetus in the 1980s and has become one of the most important dimensions of extremism. Following the attacks of 9/11, global jihadism, which began to be accepted as a global threat, and the presence of terrorist organizations based on this ideology have affected cumulative extremism in Europe in several different ways (Abbas, 2020, p.7). The first is that terrorist organizations based on global jihadist ideology turned to a strategy of carrying out terrorist attacks in European capitals such as Madrid and London in the early 2000s. This situation initiated a process in which European countries felt the threat of global jihadism most acutely. On the other hand, the instability and conflict environment caused by global jihadist movements in Middle Eastern countries has increased migration from this region to European countries. Thus, this situation has begun to accelerate the cumulative extermination in Europe. The problems experienced by Muslim communities migrating to European countries in the countries to which they migrate, their perception of discrimination, exclusion, and injustice, on the one hand, and local societies' perception of migrants as potential threats in the context of jihadist extremism and the resulting xenophobia, on the other, have strengthened the ground for cumulative extremism (Lygren and Ravndal, 2023, p.396). In addition, the narratives and reciprocal actions developed by right-wing extremists and right-wing extremist ideology, which have been operating in Europe for many years, and by jihadist groups and extremists seeking to find a "safe haven" among the immigrant masses, have led to cumulative extremism becoming a major threat in Europe today.

2. Roots of Cumulative Extremism in the context of Realistic Conflict Theory

Academically, many approaches to explaining and addressing the mechanism, functioning, and reproduction of cumulative extremism have been proposed. However, there are very few studies in the literature on the roots of this mechanism.

In this context, it is instructive to use social psychological approaches to better understand and explain the roots of cumulative extremism. In particular, Realistic Conflict Theory sheds light on the roots of cumulative extremism. This theory is one of the most important approaches to explaining intergroup conflict and the causes and origins of this conflict.

When cumulative extremism is viewed as a process of intergroup conflict and conflict reproduction, important conclusions and inferences can be drawn within the analytical framework offered by Realistic Conflict Theory. Realistic Conflict Theory, unlike other approaches in the literature, points to the objective conditions and foundations of conflict and competition between groups (Morrison and Ybarra, 2008, p.159). In this context, Realistic Conflict Theory argues that the arguments of Symbolic Conflict Theory are superficial and claims to deepen them. Realistic Conflict Theory considers the cause of conflict between groups as the motivation to possess or control material resources. Within this framework, it challenges the arguments of Symbolic Conflict Theory by suggesting that realist motivations lie behind the processes perceived as symbolic conflict (Zarate, Garcia, Garza and Hitlan, 2004, p.103). This theory argues that the struggle for control over limited resources increases the propensity for conflict between groups and emphasizes that mutual narratives and symbols are symbolic forms of this struggle.

At this level, the views of T. Homer-Dixon help to explain the roots of cumulative extremism in Realistic Conflict Theory. Thomas Homer-Dixon's "Environment, Scarcity and Violence", published in 1999, is a pioneering work in this field. In his analyses, Homer-Dixon argues that environmental security is a phenomenon that gains meaning within the framework of different perceptions by social groups. Accordingly, in any country or society, different political, ethnic, religious-sectarian, or class differentiations may identify the environment and natural resources with group identities. As a result of these groups identifying the environment and natural resources with their group identities, environmental security becomes part of identity security. This situation has many implications at the societal level.

Homer-Dixon explains these effects through the concepts of structural scarcity, ecological marginalization and contextual factors (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.14).

According to Homer-Dixon, structural scarcity occurs when a political, ethnic, religious-sectarian, or class group that has the majority of power in a society establishes dominance and control over natural resources and causes deprivation to other groups (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.15). The dominance-deprivation equation formed within this framework is linked to group identities. However, as a result of the effects of structural scarcity, it lead to the process of ecological marginalization. Ecological marginalization is defined by Homer-Dixon as the migration of groups whose access to and use of natural resources is restricted as a result of structural scarcity, or the damage to natural resources and the environment caused by agricultural activities carried out with primitive methods in the absence of technological know-how (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.16). Ecological marginalization is often accompanied by migration to cities, leading to deeper sociological fractures. Structural scarcity, ecological marginalization, and their consequences often create a dynamic within the group identities that exist in the society in question. According to Homer-Dixon, when this dynamic is combined with contextual factors and variables such as dissatisfaction, perceptions of discrimination and deprivation, the search for superiority, and prejudices held by members of group identities, conflict and violence manifest themselves (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.17). In this process, the fact that perceptions of power-deprivation at the level of the environment and natural resources are effective is an expression of identity-based violence and conflict.

In this context, Homer-Dixon's points facilitate the explanation of the roots of cumulative extremism from a Realistic Conflict Theory perspective. According to Homer-Dixon, the struggle for control and resources between groups often creates a basis for conflict. One of the manifestations of this situation is cumulative extremism. Looking at the narratives that feed cumulative extremism, we can see situations such as scarcity/limitation of resources, and identification of group identity with resources or space. Each party to cumulative extremism blames the other for their group's lack of access to resources, argues that they are discriminated against based on their group identity, and claims that the other group threatens the place and the resources found there, which they define as belonging to their group (Kalevi, 2012, p.193). In this way, cumulative extremism creates intergroup conflict

and violence based on mutual access to resources, control and domination of resources, and deprivation of resources (Schnurr and Swatuk, 2012, p.6)

CONCLUSION: CUMULATIVE EXTREMISM AS A "REALISTIC CONFLICT" IN EUROPE

When cumulative extremism is analysed from the perspective of Realistic Conflict Theory, the roots of cumulative extremism in Europe can be better explained. In this context, an examination of the narratives of the parties generating cumulative extremism in Europe reveals, first, that the scarcity and ecological marginalisation arguments of jihadist extremists provide an important rationale. Accordingly, jihadist extremists claim that Western countries are exploiting the resources of Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa, usurping the resources that belong to them and condemning them to deprivation and poverty, as a result. This narrative is supported by the argument that Muslim societies were forced to migrate to Europe because of the usurpation of their resources and that they are trying to reclaim their usurped resources in this way (Lygren and Ravndal, 2023, p.398). These arguments of jihadist extremists in Europe are therefore clearly in line with the approach proposed by Realistic Conflict Theory. These groups argue that the "'Muslims", which are described as in-group by them, have faced extortion and exploitation, whereas God has given them control over the resources of the whole earth inherently, and that violence and the use of force are necessary to achieve this.

On the other hand, right-wing extremist groups, which are the other component of cumulative extremism, identify European geography and its resources with the in-group identities they define (Jens, 2018, p.25). According to the narratives of these groups, immigrants and Muslims from the Middle East and Africa seek to usurp and exploit the resources of European societies. In this context, right-wing extremist groups position themselves as Europe's protectors against this "extortion" and "occupation". In this framework, right-wing extremism basically takes a defensive position in order not to lose control over Europe's resources and geography. This situation feeds into narratives based on xenophobia and prejudice and also underlines the narrative of right-wing extremists defending themselves and the "cultural superiority" of the societies that they claim to represent, against "outdated and archaic religious movements" (Betz and Johnson, 2017, p.72).

This situation also highlights the importance of using alternative narratives rather than counter-narratives to counter cumulative extremism in Europe. While counter-narratives are seen as one of the most effective tools in the fight against extremism, they can be counterproductive in the fight against cumulative extremism. This is because counter-narratives in the fight against extremism only serve to reproduce extremist narratives by providing counter-arguments. However, countering cumulative extremism requires alternative narratives that transcend both reciprocal extremist narratives. It must also create a different paradigm to challenge the given extremist narratives that give rise to cumulative extremism. In this way, the impact of cumulative extremist narratives can be mitigated and perceptions of group identities can be reshaped. This can help to eradicate cumulative extremism and its narratives and break the links between perceptions of group identities and the sources that create the grounds for realistic conflict.

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