Current Armenian Society: The Rise of Radical Attitudes

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Abstract: This article discusses radicalism as a phenomenon that has become widespread throughout the world, extremism and terrorism that it engenders and the meaning, content and correlation of the key concepts as well as sources, root causes and manifestation forms of those phenomena. Effective fight against those intricate phenomena is hampered by the absence of their common interpretation and agreed-upon definitions and of a well-established methodological foundation for their research. Factors that generate and sustain radicalism and extremism include increase in social injustice and inequality, the growing scope of poverty, unemployment and corruption, the dismantling of the system of social guarantees, legal insecurity of person and property, refusal from democratic reforms, the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, weak rule-of-law State and civil society, the disintegration of a traditional value system, latent and explicit normative conflicts, the lack of access to effective political and educational institutions, the impossibility to change the current state of affairs through democratic methods, the absence of channels for venting out discontent and unwillingness on the part of State entities and political actors to take public discontent into consideration. It is important to note that radicalism and support extremism are also boosted by unjustified and unlawful use of violence by State agencies as well as violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms of individuals that are suspected of committing terrorist acts and/or of holding membership in a banned extremist organization. The process of radicalization of the Armenian society has been going on for a long time. It can be accounted for by the fact that the public at large made certain demands as it had certain expectations for the authorities, while the authorities, in their turn, either reacted slowly, with a delay or did not react at all. In the quarter-century after gaining independence, Armenia experienced several outbreaks of political radicalism, which at times grew into extremist and even terrorist actions. The economic crisis, the blockade of roads, migration and unemployment serve as a fertile ground for the growth of protest sentiments, especially among Armenian youth. While youth activism is sometimes perceived with enthusiasm, it should be borne in mind that any social confrontation and civil disobedience have their inner logic of evolution. The situation may deteriorate progressively because radicalization is the most likely scenario in the dynamic of social confrontation resulting in widespread violence, chaos and disruption of social fabric.

Keywords: Radicalism, Extremism, Terrorism, Armenian Society, Youth Movements

1. Introduction

A wide-scale process of political, social, economic, ideological and cultural transformation that was triggered in the post-Soviet countries over a quarter of a century ago is still incomplete. It is only the facade of these societies that has been changed, while many processes have been unfolding inconspicuously only from time to time breaking through to the surface of society's life, usually as destructive phenomena at that. Creating a fertile ground for the emergence of radical attitudes and actions, they are among the most powerful factors that push forward those attitudes and actions in the societies undergoing a painful process of transformation.

The reform and transformation processes have been unfolding at different speeds in different spheres thus not infrequently bringing about an aggravation of social contradictions as well as an upsurge in discontent of various social groups and strata thereby contributing to the radicalization of their mentality and positions, especially against the background of a decline in living standards, exacerbation of social polarization, an increase in democratic deficit and a rise of social anomie.

On the one hand, social transformations tear apart the society's traditional way of life or are perceived as such thereby causing frustration of some social groups that, as a consequence, escalates into protest, discontent, aggression and other forms of destructive conduct. On the other hand, some social groups, first of all among youth, are dissatisfied with the speed of change, which, in their view, should have expanded a scope of opportunities for self-realization and facilitated their access to resources and social lifts. Since not infrequently their social expectations are not justified, while opportunities are non-existent or blocked, some members of those social groups become radicalized.

Undermining stability in the society, radicalism, in its turn, makes a negative impact on economic, political and social life and consequently reduces the quality of life. Thus, a vicious circle arises. The plummeting quality of life leads to the emergence and proliferation of radicalism and its consequences, whereas extant radicalism hinders the improvement of quality of life. Therefore the study of the phenomenon of radicalism in the diversity of its aspects and in close connection with such socially dangerous phenomena as extremism and terrorism has become increasingly relevant and has been gaining topicality, in particular within the framework of interdisciplinary studies.

Extremism and terrorism as its ugliest form have become a hallmark of the new millennium. Declarations and resolutions are adopted and national, regional and global action plans to counter terrorism and militant extremism are formulated and implemented. The struggle against those phenomena has become protracted and has been carried on with varying success against the background of their expanding scope, frequency and manifestation forms as well as of enhanced severity of acts and indiscriminate use of tactics, means and targets hitherto considered unacceptable.

The post-Soviet countries have not been immune to those negative phenomena. Modernization processes have been accompanied there by aggravation of interethnic problems and by rising intolerance, terrorism and religious extremism.

2. Root Causes and Factors of Radicalization

To be able to combat more effectively the militant extremism and especially terrorism as its most dangerous manifestation it is first of all necessary to identify the root causes and factors that promote or impede their emergence and evolution. It is not incidental that in recent years the global community's agenda has incorporated an issue of the necessity to intensify the research of those phenomena with a view to formulating a more efficient, consistent and coordinated policy of prevention and counteraction.

This issue is topical also for the European Union where due to integration of and opening of borders by European countries the free movement of the work force created risks of an influx of criminal and extremist elements under the guise of labor. It is known that political, social, economic,

religious and interethnic problems and, moreover, conflicts or even growing tensions and splits in the society along those fault lines, thereby leading to conflicts, constitute a favorable environment for extremist attitudes to emerge and to take root. Radicalism is a most important precondition for the emergence and proliferation of extremist worldviews and serves as an ideological and emotional basis of extremism.

At present, a common interpretation and agreed-upon definitions of the intricate phenomena designated by terms 'radicalism' and 'extremism' are non-existent and a solid methodological foundation for their research is yet to be laid. Thus, Remi Cross and David A. Snow point out that "sociological understandings of radicalism and radicals have often been vague and ill-defined … This conceptual ambiguity is due in part to the fact that radicalism and radicals are often defined by their context", [1]). In different countries and in different periods of time these concepts may have different content and can be perceived and interpreted in different ways. Some researchers hold a view that radicalism "means a way of thinking and a related model of behavior. "The term "radicalism" (from Latin *radicalis* "of or having roots") means literally an uncompromising desire to go all the way, to seek drastic changes in any activities" [2]).

In our view, radicalism is characterized by *absolutization* of 'simple' solutions for complex and multifaceted social, political, economic, interethnic, religious, environmental and other problems, by *justification* and *idealization* of violence as an "effective" means of direct and immediate action, by *an illusory hope* of thereby overcoming social and political helplessness and by the *absence of tolerance* and of *readiness for dialogue and compromises*.

In the present-day political science, the view that radicalism and extremism are two different phenomena is prevalent. Also widespread is the view that radicalism differs from extremism in that the former manifests itself in the sphere of ideas, while the latter in the sphere of actions. The *European Parliament Resolution on the prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisations* (2015) states that "… radicalisation has become a term used to describe the phenomenon of people embracing intolerant opinions, views and ideas which could lead to violent extremism" [3].

Indeed, a growing number of researchers and politicians, including Statesmen, tend to interpret extremism exclusively as *an aggregate of specific actions*. Thus, ideas, views and opinions and their dissemination do not fall under this interpretation and are designated manifestly or are implicitly understood as pertaining to radicalism. Thus, the *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism* (2001) defines extremism as "an act aimed at seizing or keeping power through the use of violence or changing violently the constitutional regime of a State, as well as a violent encroachment upon public security, including organization of illegal armed formations and participation in them" [4].

However, it does not follow that radicalism can be construed as limited to radical ideas and views. It may

incorporate radical actions as well. It should be noted that radicalism is dangerous also because it can give rise to retaliatory radicalism thereby enhancing a spiral of confrontation, distrust and hostilities.

The forms of radicalism can be distinguished by a degree of militancy of espoused goals and methodsused. Moderate radicals seek to reform society using the least severe means and resorting to minimal violence. Revolutionaries seek to effect momentous changes of all social institutions and do not shy from using violence, when they see it fit. Extremists tend to resort to the most drastic measures, including terror, in order to attain their goals [5].

According to its classical definition, political radicalism (or radicalism in politics) encompasses socio-politicalideas and actions aimed at effecting drastic, momentous, sweeping changes in the existing socio-political institutions. At the same time, radicalism is not directly connected with any one particular ideology. It is just a certain kind of a dynamicpolitical and psychological foundation of any ideological-political structure [6].

Political radicalism plays a destabilizing role in the society. The number of underlying reasons for radicalism is increasing particularly in transition societies. Radicalism may turn into extremism and terrorism, which are among the uttermost and exceptionally harmful forms of radicalism for any society.

The Preamble to the *Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism* (2005) stresses that "… acts of terrorism have the purpose by their nature or context to seriously intimidate a population or unduly compel a government or an international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act or seriously destabilise or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization" [7].

It is on those features that many national laws on fighting terrorism focus. Article 5 of the *Republic of Armenia Law on Combating Terrorism* (2005) defines terrorist act as "first-hand perpetration of a crime of a terrorist nature … by means of actions that entail human casualties, infliction of extensive property damage or socially dangerous consequences" [8].

Several already adopted international Conventions, viz. *International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism* [9], *International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism* [10] and *International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombing* [11] contain working definitions of specific kinds of unlawful actions that the said international legal instruments aim to combat. However, they do not provide clear definitions of terrorism, terrorists or terrorist acts.

A real or imagined increase in social injustice and inequality, the growing scope of poverty, unemployment and corruption, the dismantling of the system of social guarantees, legal insecurity of person and property, refusal from democratic reforms, the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, weak rule-of-law State and civil society, the disintegration of a traditional value system, latent and explicit normative conflicts, the lack of access to effective political and educational institutions, etc. are objective factors that generate and sustain radicalism and extremism.

Radical sentiments are generated also by the impossibility to change the current state of affairs through democratic methods, by the absence of channels for venting out discontent and by unwillingness on the part of State entities and political actors and counterparts to take the expressed discontent into consideration. The inability of ruling elites to effectively solve the society's pressing problems and to find ways out of protracted crises and emerging or worsening conflicts is yet another factor that contributes to radicalization of disaffected social strata, groups or individuals.

Another root cause for radical mood is xenophobia, a phenomenon that perceives ethnic, religious and even social 'otherness' as a threat thereby giving rise to fear and hatred and provoking a reaction of intolerance, rejection, exclusion or alienation. The extremist forms of xenophobia pose a particularly grave danger. In the experts' opinion, "those forms include adherence to extremist views that call for radical intolerant actions, discrimination, segregation and deportation, racism, fascism and violence as well as group and individual behavior through which those views materialize" [12].

One of the factors that boost radicalism and support extremism is unjustified and unlawful use of violence by State agencies as well as violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms of individuals and groups that are suspected and/or accused of committing terrorist acts and/or of holding membership in a banned extremist organization, etc. Thus, the European Parliament *Resolution on the prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisations* stresses: "… it must be ensured that the right balance is struck between public safety and respect for fundamental rights, including the rights to security, privacy, and freedom of expression, religion, and association" [13].

In his *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* Report (2015) the then UN Secretary-General directly addresses Governments with an appeal to be respectful of the rule of law and to act in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law, as well as international humanitarian law, if applicable, in their efforts to address violent extremism. "Certain rights are non-derogable even in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation" [14].

It is a well-known fact that in their fight against real or supposed terrorists democratic countries sometimes fail to abide by international legal norms and by the requirements of their domestic legislation. Recent events in Armenia can be mentioned when a number of media outlets and defense attorneys publicly claimed that the defendants in the criminal case of the *Sassnatsrer* (the "Daredevils of Sassoun") radical group were subjected to violence and torture in detention centers and even in the courthouse.

In fact, State entities are sometimes compelled to break the

law and thus they set a precedent of disrespect for supremacy of the law and for inalienable human rights thus unwittingly contributing to the dissemination and perpetuation of radical views that solution of any problems and resolution of any conflicts lie outside the realm of law and legality. After all, violations are committed by staff members of law-enforcement agencies and authorized State entities who should be guardians of the law. It is this reality that gives rise to and sustains legal nihilism thereby providing a fertile ground for dissemination of radical and extremist ideas and views.

3. Radicalization of the Society: The Case of Armenia

For Armenia, with its uniform population in terms of ethnicity and religion it is primarily youth that comprises the so-called 'risk group.' Of all various kinds of radicalism in Armenia, it is political radicalism, which is especially prominent among young people, that poses the greatest risk. The balance between personal and public interests is currently changing, the former becoming predominant. Sociologists and political scientists point out that in the course of the socialization process not only uncontrolled components have become more prominent but also young persons' value orientations have changed considerably. That, in the final analysis, brings forth protest activities on a larger scale [15].

About 3 years ago, protest actions in Yerevan and in other cities and towns of the country against hikes in electricity rates triggered considerable interest internationally. At the same time it was obvious that many experts clearly found it difficult to provide adequate assessments. Indeed, the protest actions against hikes in electricity rates aroused widespread interest resulting in numerous comments and opinions and in various approaches to the events. One group of commentators tended to see a Kremlin's hand behind the events, another group contended that those were Americans' intrigues, while some others would point in a different direction. However, several years ago we already stated that a new generation is coming to the forefront in Armenia. We also pointed out that the society is sitting on a ticking bomb and unless the socioeconomic, psychological and moral climate starts to change for the better and the position taken by the powers that be is revised the social upheavals will become unavoidable.

At present, the forecasts made by sociologists several years ago materialize as evidenced by the reality. One can see that a new generation is coming to the forefront. It is a first generation of 'non-Soviet' young persons who were born and who grew up in independent Armenia. Today they are 22-23 years of age. These are different Armenians and they will be building different Armenia.

While older persons too took part in protest actions and rallies, activity and initiative came from young people, the initiative and actions originated with young people, with a new generation in independent Armenia. Meanwhile, it is very important to understand the society's overall attitudes towards this phenomenon. Many people perceived the developments with enthusiasm, even with a modicum of euphoria. They would say, look what a wonderful youth we have, look how knowledgeable and well-organized they are, as they even sweep the streets after rallies. Many people admired those young persons, and it is not bad at all.

The problem, however, is that any social confrontation and civil disobedience have their inner logic of evolution. We should look ahead and try to figure out what might happen in a near future. The situation may deteriorate progressively because radicalization is the most likely scenario in the dynamic of social confrontation. We would not like to witness in a couple of years how in the streets of Yerevan cars are put on fire, shop windows are smashed and shops are looted. Such scenario is quite likely. By staging rallies and protest actions the public at large expresses protest. If the Government is sufficiently wise, it tries to enter into a dialogue, to find solutions and to reach a compromise. However, we are well aware that it is impossible to meet all the demands made by the public. It is obvious that the Government cannot meet all the demands. Therefore, a trend of aggravation of confrontation emerges as a result. The Government may make some concessions but only to some extent. The general public will then start resorting to more radical measures to draw Government's attention to their demands [16]. Thus, for instance, when the rally participants saw that the authorities' reaction is weak, they decided to take more strident steps and blocked one of the main arteries of the capital city. Under the circumstances a scenario with bad consequences was very likely because it fit into the logic of unfolding confrontation. Since it was not possible to meet all the demands put forth by the crowd the radicalization of the situation is triggered [17]. When the authorities resorted to force to disperse the protest action participants using methods that fully complied with the standards of conduct of police forces in Europe, next day even more people took to the streets. In other words, the radicalization of the process was triggered and it is good that Armenian policemen retreated.

It all began as a purely social protest. However, there are always forces that want to manipulate it to their own advantage. It is no secret that at some point anti-Russian sentiments started to surface. Some groups tried to direct that process against Russia, while some other groups attempted to impress on the public the idea that the process was instigated by the West. Of course, an overtly anti-Russian vector and a Russophobic component cannot be ignored. The disregard of that fact is a lapse on the part of Russian and Armenian authorities. In the Armenian society there are quite a few Europe-oriented people and some liberals-Westernizers would like to use the protest movement for their own ends.

The radicalization of social processes and relations and dramatic differentiation into the notorious 'golden billion' and the mendicant part of the planet's population are underway the world over. Frustration has been building for a

long time and at some point it may peak.

No Government can solve all the problems at once. Even if, for example, one or two taxes are to be abolished, will that be sufficient to eliminate poverty in the country and to solve the problems of corruption and extreme polarization in the society? There are so many socioeconomic problems in Armenia that social explosions will occur from time to time. And each time, when the authorities take temporary measures which provide only a piecemeal solution and thus perpetuate the problem. Unfortunately, in Armenia the power is in the hands of the oligarchic apparatus that for the most part serves the interests of the wealthy. It is not surprising that the situation gives rise to discontent of all other social groups that by far outnumber the wealthy.

We stand on the threshold of serious developments which, at least from the today's perspective, are fraught with negative consequences. Therefore, the individuals who can generate new ideas and models are badly needed. The young persons who initiated the above-mentioned protest action did a great thing. However, they just do actively what has been done before, whereas it is new ideas and projects that are needed. It is necessary to awaken the creative component in the Armenian society. That component has been and is still around.

The powers that be still have an opportunity to earn the credit of trust through consistent actions. It is quite another thing whether authorities will do that. The authorities do not need the credit of trust as long as they are not particularly dependent on the people. The advancement along the path of democratization for the past 25 years has clearly shown that elections are not effective and that the elections mechanism is inoperative; that is why a democratic turnover does not occur. The powers that be are cleverer and more cunning. They get adapted and set in motion various mechanisms of influencing voters.

The events of July 2016 demonstrated that people's unfulfilled expectations of the authorities brought about radicalization of the Armenian society. For 15 days an armed group held hostages in the seized territory of the RoA Patrol Police regiment in Yerevan. The failure to resolve the prolonged crisis situation led to further tensions and to the growth of radical sentiments. For days on end, hundreds of the city residents staged protest actions near the territory of the seized Patrol Police regiment demanding that the authorities refrain from solving the problem through the use of force. On the night of 7 July 2016, police clashed with rally participants. As a result of the clashes, over 50 people sustained injuries.

4. Conclusions

The process of radicalization of the Armenian society has been going on for a long time. It can be accounted for by the fact that the public at large made certain demands as it had certain expectations for the authorities, while the authorities, in their turn, either reacted slowly, with a delay or did not react at all. As a rule, in situations like that, some social groups may resort to more drastic measures. In any case the authorities should have found a reasonable solution to avoid violent clashes. By default, the situation should be resolved by the authorities and the latter have special forces, methods and equipment for that.

At the same time, everyone would have liked to see a peaceful solution to that situation. The situation would not have resolved itself. As a rule, realistic and well-defined steps are required for the solution. Authorities must take care of that because they are responsible for the situation in the country.

While the authorities kept silent, there appeared individuals who took matters into their own hands. In that situation, taking advantage of the split in the society a third party or external forces could have interfered. Careful observation of the situation and of rally participants' behavior gave grounds to conclude that all sorts of individuals could be there in the crowd. It was quite a diverse crowd of a wide range of participants from people genuinely indignant at the course of events to explicit instigators and agents provocateurs.

Three important conclusions could be drawn from those events.

The first conclusion: an entirely new and different generation has come to the political forefront.

The second conclusion: we should not be overexcited by what happens in the protest movement because the inner logic of the evolution of that process entails its radicalization.

The third conclusion: a new culture has been introduced into the interaction between the authorities and the general public. It is the model within the framework of which the society at large starts realizing that the authorities will not make concessions and will not come to compromises until the general public takes dramatic steps. Of course, this does not bode well for the authorities because the room for maneuver is shrinking.

Success in countering radicalism and extremism is predicated on promotion of tolerance, on support to inter-cultural, inter-religious (or inter-denominational) and inter-ethnic dialogue and on strengthening inclusive and open society as well as on profound and sincere respect for fundamental human rights and on affording equal opportunities to all.

It should be noted, however, that protection of human rights and freedoms and of legitimate interests of citizens in a present-day democratic, rule-of-law State should not be contrasted with *protection* of the foundations of the constitutional order as well as *security* of the State and of the society at large. Therefore, in many countries, including in the Republic of Armenia, the use of basic rights and freedoms for the purpose of violent overthrow of the constitutional order, incitement of national, racial or religious hatred or propaganda of violence or war is prohibited [18].

Only a *comprehensive approach* that combines studies of ideology and practices of radicalism, extremism and terrorism with conducting awareness-raising campaigns, social, economic and political reforms for further

democratization and liberalization of all spheres of the society's life, improvement of living standards and quality of life, empowerment of all social strata, especially vulnerable and marginalized social groups, ensuring equitable interfaith and interethnic dialogue, and pooling efforts at the regional and global levels will give a real chance to win a victory in the fight against those ugly manifestations of social evil.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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