

# BRIDGE PROJECT

Building resilience to reduce  
polarisation and growing extremism  
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## Polarisation in pluralist democracies: Considerations about a complex phenomenon

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Polarisation can be understood as a process of sharpening differences between groups in society that can result in increased tensions. It is a potential amplifying cause of the diverse psychological and social factors that make people vulnerable to radicalisation.

In order to effectively prevent radicalisation we need to understand the dynamics of polarisation: how do 'us-and-them thinking', social division and hostility gain ground in our communities? And how can we effectively intervene into such extremist dynamics and build bridges to foster social cohesion?

The overall objectives of this project are to raise awareness among local actors and strengthen their capacity to reduce individual and collective vulnerability to radicalisation while at the same time mitigating the phenomenon of polarisation.

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## I. Introduction

Polarisation is a complex phenomenon that is part of pluralist democracies. In recent years, however, an erosion of social cohesion has become apparent in many countries. In the USA, the election of Donald Trump as president has further divided an already polarised country. In the UK, Brexit has led to two hardly reconcilable camps. In the 2016 election campaign for the federal presidency, Austria experienced an unprecedented confrontation between moderates and nationalists in such a consensus-oriented country. In France, the yellow vest movement has led to further divisions. The list could be continued with Brazil, Poland, India and many other examples. The causes for this polarisation are manifold. It can have structural reasons and/or ideological reasons. Very often structural reasons can feed ideological action. It can be democratic or anti-democratic in its goals and methods. It is driven by several factors (structural or ideological) and systematised by different actors. In this article I try to approach the complex phenomenon of polarisation, to look at it in a differentiated way, to define and question it. I conclude by suggesting ways in which to steer polarisation in a constructive democratic direction.

## II. A definition of polarisation: What is it and how can we identify it?

The term ‘polarisation’ is often used these days, but it is not always clear what exactly is meant by it. Sometimes it is used synonymously with other terms or even confused with them. Such terms are ‘fragmentation’, ‘division’, ‘conflict’ or ‘fission’. I cannot go into all differences or similarities here, but I will try to extract the core definition of polarisation and draw conclusions from it. Fortunately, we can draw on a range of preliminary work on the polarisation debate. But I should first make an important observation: polarisation and conflicts are an inherent part of democracies and pluralistic societies. They are therefore not to be viewed negatively per se or even to be fought, eradicated or prevented. The question at which point they become dangerous will be discussed in more detail later.

In 1996, political scientists Paul DiMaggio, John Evans and Bethany Bryson wrote a paper about whether Americans’ social attitudes had become more polarised (1996). They gave the following definition: “Polarization (sic.) is both a state and a process. Polarization (sic.) as a state refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum. Polarization (sic.) as a process refers to the increase in such opposition over time.” (DiMaggio et al. 1996, 693). Polarisation is thus the distance between different (political) opinions. If these opinions move apart, we can see a process of polarisation. If the distance between the opinions is already very large, we see a state of polarisation. However, it is not so easy to determine how large this difference must be in order to speak of polarisation. Dutch philosopher Bart Brandsma argues that it has to do with the construction of an opponent, an extreme form of “us versus them” thinking. It is based on a negative idea of the ‘other’ (Brandsma 2020). In this understanding, the phenomenon has to do with identity constructions: “Polarisation is defined as a thought construct based on assumptions of identities – the identities of others, who are pictured as being ‘different’. The phenomenon involves communication and thinking based on ‘us and them’; ‘others’ are perceived or presented as being different and a problem or a threat to the group. Perceived differences are exaggerated in simplistic narratives about others, neglecting that which the two groups have in common.” (RAN 2017, 3). Discrepancies are articulated in an antagonistic way and the public is divided into growing camps, while the moderate centre loses ground (Kleiner 2016, 354 f.).

Based on these aspects, we can assume some characteristics of polarisation. DiMaggio et al. describe four principles of polarisation: dispersion, bimodality, constraint and consolidation

(1996, 693 f.). However, these principles raise further questions. Thus, as a starting point and a rough orientation I suggest the following features.

### Discrepancy of opinions

Two clearly identifiable and profiled opinions are facing each other. These opinions are not compatible and configure themselves in an either/or relationship. The opinions of an environmentalist and those of a climate change denier are very far apart. A supporter of patriarchal social relations is miles away from a feminist. Thus, as the term polarisation implies, the positions about a topic are poles on a spectre of opinions.

### Group formation

The two opinions are represented by two different groups whose members are aware of the discrepancy and feel they belong to one of the two groups. As long as these opinions are reflected in lifestyles that do not meet and about which people are unaware, we cannot speak of polarisation. What is needed is an awareness that one's own opinion is a pole on a spectrum that can contain many opinions and that one's own position is represented by a group that is in some way visible. Often these groups give themselves a name, or names are attributed to them that indicate an ideological meaning. Groups often define themselves as movements. The opposing group representing the other pole of the spectrum of opinion is often perceived or classified as radical or extremist. State institutions and representatives who represent the opposite pole are often portrayed as corrupt elites. This group formation and attribution is an important part of a polarisation process, regardless of whether there is an empirical basis for the negative attribution or not.

### Purism

Relative positions are not considered by the two groups. A conciliatory position is rejected. The groups that form the poles in a polarisation process cannot take a middle position because their opinions are too far apart. Opponents of the death penalty cannot negotiate the death penalty. Their position is non-negotiable. The same applies to human rights activists. The historical fighters for democracy could not negotiate their goal with those who wanted to preserve their authoritarian power. Someone who fights for women's rights cannot soften or weaken the goal of equality. Conversely, authoritarian forces that oppose emancipation do not budge an inch. The positions at the poles are therefore basically non-negotiable for the representatives of these poles.

### Political struggle

The two groups try to draw the undecided to their side. This leads to a battle of opinions with the aim of asserting one's own opinion and weakening the opposing position. In polarisation, therefore, a political dimension is needed, a certain public sphere. The groups already mentioned appear in the media debate and fight for political power. There are many examples where minorities hold opinions at the poles of a spectrum, but do not enter the political debate. This is true, for example, of many religious groups. Just think of Jehovah's Witnesses or Scientology. They meet the first three criteria: Their opinion is far from others, they form their own group and hold purist views. Nevertheless, they are not part of polarisation processes simply because they renounce public political struggle.

Measurement or analysis options exist in all four areas. Opinion polls can be used to measure the discrepancy of opinions, the belonging to one of the groups or group identification, the purism of opinions as well as the willingness for political commitment. Voting behaviour, political participation, protest or the readiness to accept or use violence can also provide

information on the degree of polarisation, as can an analysis of discourse. The latter is without doubt a particularly important factor for an in-depth analysis of polarisation. Further indicators of political polarisation are the number of extreme parties, their ideological focus, voting patterns and political behaviour (cf. McNeill-Wilson et al. 2019, 7; Schmitt and Frantzmann 2016). A number of indicators have been developed and categorised from the BRaVE EU project (McNeill-Wilson et al. 2019, 12 f.). The European BRIDGE project has developed a set of tools to measure and monitor polarisation at the local level (Boyd-MacMillan et al. 2019).

In addition, there is the analysis of risk factors for polarisation processes, which are related to structural inequalities, among other things. An important aspect in the analysis of polarisation is also the extent to which groups form and define themselves, and the extent to which they are defined by the opponent. The role of the media must be given special consideration here. Usually, the tabloid media and the yellow press are a driving force in many polarisation processes. And in recent years, new media have been added, which have virtually taken a turbo function.

### III. Risks and reasons for polarisation: Structural or ideological

The question of why phenomena such as polarisation or conflicts occur at all is answered differently by different social theories. Aristotle considered the existence of masters and slaves to be a law of nature. In the Middle Ages, rulers argued that their supposed divine right was based on a natural hierarchical order. As long as most subjects shared this view of the world, uprisings and broader processes of polarisation could be put off. Nevertheless, they occurred again and again with regard to questions of justice, even in communities legitimised by natural law or religion. The slave revolt of Spartacus is only one of the most prominent examples. And since the Enlightenment and above all the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the view that society and civilisation lead to inequality and that every person has equal rights from birth spread around the world. From that time on, structural inequalities have no longer been uncontested. The history of Europe since the Enlightenment has indeed been a history of conflict and polarisation, with many struggles for power and influence. The revolutions of 1789 and 1848 were fights for freedom and equality. Political ideologies such as liberalism and socialism and their real manifestations are closely linked to processes of polarisation and cannot be explained without them. Theoretical considerations of social inequality have become more differentiated. Marx and Engels saw the history of mankind as a history of exploitation (Marx/Engels 2016). More than 100 years ago, other, non-Marxist, thinkers have argued that social groups have a tendency to inequality. Political scientist Robert Michels even identified an iron law of oligarchy (Michels 1968). Since then, many new theories have emerged, with or without reference to the Enlightenment or socialist ideas, with contemporary feminist and postcolonial studies being particularly noteworthy. All this shows that structural inequality, both in social theories and in political reality since the 17th century, has not been accepted without contradiction, but has become an ideological issue. This resistance to inequality continues today to give rise to democratic, emancipatory struggles that would be inconceivable without polarisation.

Structural and ideological reasons are very closely linked. The way in which they are connected and mutually dependent or beneficial is not easy to observe. Whether a social structure produces a social consciousness of a certain character or whether ideological debates lead to structural realities is a profound question of political theory. In any case, polarisation usually has a structural and an ideological dimension that are interrelated. Sometimes, there is a manifest structural inequality that gives rise to ideological struggles for more equality or is used as a justification for them. Sometimes, ideologies based on an idea of authoritarianism seek to reduce equality and deny other people their rights, i.e. to change structures towards a

stronger hierarchy. In contrast to Brandsma's assumptions, I assume here that polarisation is not always and only based on constructed identity debates, but can actually have structural inequalities as its starting point. And they are often interwoven with ideological issues. Ideologies are a set of values and normative ideas about how a society should be. They can have a democratic orientation as well as an authoritarian one. They can be based on the equality of people or they can question it.

Let us first take a look at structural reasons for polarisation. Within European societies, socio-economic inequality, inequality in gender relations, in opportunities for religious or ethnic minorities or in access to political rights are particularly relevant. Inequality factors can be identified at the legal and political level. However, they can also occur in a non-legal form and manifest themselves as social exclusion factors.

In other words, groups or individuals may be **excluded from certain rights**, such as the right to vote. They may also be in possession of these rights, but may be **excluded by social factors** such as ethnic background, religion, educational background, gender, origin or age, etc. Indeed, we can see many polarisation processes in the history of Europe that have to do with such structural exclusive mechanisms and with the discrimination of certain groups. From the French Revolution to this day, the fight for equal rights has polarised societies. The struggle of members of the 3rd estate for civil rights divided French society in the 18th and 19th centuries, but did not yet change the oppression of women (Losurdo 2019). In Europe, it is only in the 20th century that women obtained the right to vote, and their role continues to polarise in many States to this day. The same applies to the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities and their rights. However, not all inequality factors of a structural kind automatically lead to conflict or polarisation.

The exclusion of children from the right to vote and their disadvantages in many other areas of life hardly entailed any polarisation processes in the past, because there seemed to be a broad consensus that this inequality is justified. In the last few years, however, increasing numbers of teenagers are demanding their political rights, which triggers a partly aggressive rejection from others. One example is the activities of Fridays for Future, which, for the first time in history, are being carried by young women and teenagers under the age of 18 – a population group that has not yet been actively represented in any of the historical social movements for equality. Exclusion from rights and from chances for groups or individuals is thus one risk factor for polarisation. In the analysis and management of polarisation, one should therefore not make the mistake of dismissing each of its forms as illegitimate or dangerous. This could cement existing inequality and hamper any social development processes. Neither the theorist nor the politician or the practitioner can avoid the question of what the causes of polarisation are and to what extent the concerns of the polarising actors are justified. In other words: the normative question must be answered.

Structural causes for polarisation processes are thus very often inequalities in terms of socio-economic issues, political participation, opportunities, quality of life or education. Where these causes play a role and encounter ideological positions, polarisation can arise. The different ideologies that emerge and clash in European societies today are more or less compatible and more or less irreconcilable. If one assumes that liberal democracy, capitalism and globalisation are regarded as hegemonic and complementary ideological elements of the present, then a number of alternative ideologies face them. According to political scientist Claus Leggewie, we can identify counter-ideologies that are more and more successful or at least visible (Leggewie 2003). Some of them are oriented towards dialogue and want to achieve more inclusion or equality by democratic means. Others are ideologies of inequality that seek to overcome democracy. The range of ideological inspiration is wide. It can come from a leftist, Marxist-oriented corner, or from a nationalist, white supremacist or other corner. It can be religiously motivated, ecological, feminist or other. In terms of goals, not all of these ideologies are oriented towards equality or more democracy. Nationalist approaches are of course based on the primacy of one's own nation, usually also on its superiority and thus on a natural inequality

that “needs to be restored”. Also, religious fundamentalist movements assume that one's own world view is of higher value and therefore has to be enforced and dominant. The criticism of moderate and recognised religious communities, on the other hand, is not aimed at their own superiority, but at equality with others, and demands it where it does not exist. Feminist and leftist movements also tend to be egalitarian ideologies and their struggle is directed against structural inequality. The currently known most active ecological movement Fridays for Future is also mostly oriented towards more equality, although their focus is on the environment.

We must thus bear in mind that polarisation processes can arise from structural inequalities. They can be ideologically justified in different ways. In any case, the question is always which form of society is perceived as the best one. Different groups struggle to assert their world view. An ideology can question or defend existing power relations. Therefore, we cannot just dismiss every polarisation process as dangerous, unless we want to defend the status quo forever. We have to be clear in what we want to defend, achieve or avoid.

#### **IV. Goals and methods of polarising actors**

The normative or ideological goal that serves as our starting point is a democracy that is as inclusive as possible, in which all population groups and individuals have equal opportunities to participate. I understand democracy as a form of state and life in which power is equally distributed, in which every individual has an equal say in political decisions and can autonomously decide about his/her own life. The core of democracy is the right to equal freedom and the right to revolt against authoritarianism. To be allowed to say no to oppression and injustice without being sanctioned is an incontrovertible principle (Pausch 2019). Democracy is therefore not reducible to citizenship or to a political entity in the narrower sense. Ideally, it can be applied to all social interactions and organisations, at work, at school, in associations, etc. Only those who experience democracy in their everyday life can be convinced democrats on a political level. Quoting Albert Camus, one can say that democracy is not the government of the majority, but the protection of the minority (Camus 1997). Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas emphasises that in a democracy everyone who is affected by a decision can co-decide equally (Habermas 1995). Exclusion mechanisms that restrict participation in discourse and the decision-making process must be analysed and eliminated. It is clear that the approach to this ideal is very difficult. I have described democracy elsewhere as a Sisyphean task, because it is always to be renewed and never comes to an end. The same applies to polarisation processes. It cannot be assumed that these can ever be completely overcome. However, they can be steered in a democratic direction.

The path to such a democracy should also follow democratic principles. Since democracy does not strive for a utopian final state in the future, but is based on negotiations in the here and now, it can only pursue its goals democratically, i.e. reject the use of violence against persons. This does not exclude violence as a last resort for self-defence, but it does exclude violence as a systematically used means of enforcing one's own goals. The democratic goal is therefore equal freedom and equal rights for all people. The democratic method is dialogue, criticism of and non-violent revolt against inequality and authoritarianism, and humanist solidarity.

Actors involved in a polarisation process can be democratic or undemocratic both in terms of their goals and their methods. We can assume four possible constellations.

**Table 1: Goal and methods of polarising actors**

		Goals	
		Democratic	Undemocratic
Methods	Democratic	Goals and methods are democratic	Democratic methods for undemocratic goals
	Authoritarian	Authoritarian methods for democratic goals	Authoritarian methods for undemocratic goals

The table shows four possible forms of polarisation actors. They can be democratic both in their goals and in their methods, i.e. they can act without violence and try to achieve majorities through dialogue or by democratic elections and public pressure. Dialogue with the convinced representatives of the opposing pole will be difficult, but polarisation actors are usually concerned with the struggle for a majority. The women's and the civil rights movements in the USA are democratic both in their aims and methods. Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela are heroes of the democratic struggle for more equality and thus also for an inclusive democracy.

A second form is democratic in its goals, but uses violence to achieve them. Historical examples of this are the various parties of the French Revolution or socialist or anarchist terrorist groups in Russia and other parts of the world in the 19th century (Losurdo 2019). The liberal revolutions of 1848 can also partly be assigned to this type as some actors of the Arab Spring or freedom fighters in various countries. For most social movements, sooner or later the question arises of how to position themselves in relation to the use of violence. In France, this issue already split the left-wing elites in the 1950s. Camus, on whom I base my theory of democracy, has always rejected violence, while Sartre considered it legitimate in order to eliminate intolerable inequalities (Aronson 2017). Today, similar discussions are taking place in the wake of the Yellow Vest protests or in the context of Extinction Rebellion.

A third group of actors pursues undemocratic goals, but uses democratic means such as elections or referenda. There are many examples in history and in recent years where authoritarian parties or individuals get into governmental responsibility through elections and then change the constitution for their own purposes, cut opposition rights, silence critical media and install authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes. The Nazis came to power through democratic elections in the German Weimar Republic. Different presidents in presidential systems in South America and Africa undermined democracy step by step after being elected. Similar developments can be found today in Turkey and Russia, but also in Hungary, Poland and other older or younger democratic states. In the United States, authoritarian tendencies characterise the presidency of Donald Trump and lead to strong polarisation. In these cases, authoritarian parties or individuals at least partly use or misuse democratic methods for undemocratic goals. At some point they start to ignore or delegitimise democratic means in all their forms (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018).

The last form of action in polarisation processes is undemocratic in both its goals and methods. It uses violence to destabilise democracies and install authoritarian regimes. Most of the actors we have in mind when we talk about violent extremism or violent radicalisation and terrorist action represent this form: violent Jihadism and right-wing-extremism are its most important and most violent examples in today's European societies.



## V. Pernicious polarisation and the end of dialogue

Now, I have stated several times that polarisation is not per se negative or dangerous. The distinction between methods and goals shows that actors can be distinguished in their positioning vis-à-vis democracy. With this distinction I try to take up and refine what Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer mean by the difference between pernicious and benign polarisation (McCoy and Somer 2018, 234). They argue that benign polarisation can be a vehicle for democratisation, a more just and fair society with equal opportunities for all. It can thus be defined as democratising polarisation. Very often this is started as a bottom-up process initiated by social movements. When they recognise and fight against injustice or oppression, the first thing to be expected is a hardening of positions, as the ruling or privileged groups feel threatened and will reject their demands. If public pressure of the social movement becomes strong enough, the polarisation develops into democratisation. When the result is an improvement in the quality of democracy, McCoy and Somer would speak of benign polarisation.

Pernicious polarisation develops as a process, which ultimately leads to the use of violence. Its most extreme stage would be authoritarian rule or civil war. While various researchers argue that pernicious polarisation operates on a single political division (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019), there are some empirical indications that at least suggest an overlap of different divisions. In such a case, the political differences lead to distrust and hardening and spread quickly among supporters of each side. As Brandsma points out, there is a strong group formation and 'us vs. them' thinking.

Slater and Arugay (2019) show the aggravating role of political elites. Ruling elites who are unwilling to share their power blame polarisation processes on those who advocate greater equality, freedom and democracy. This also happens in democratic states. Blaming protesters as radicals or extremists can sometimes be a strategy of authoritarians or governing elites to delegitimise their opponents. Pernicious polarisation develops into ever stronger group formation and an end to discourse.

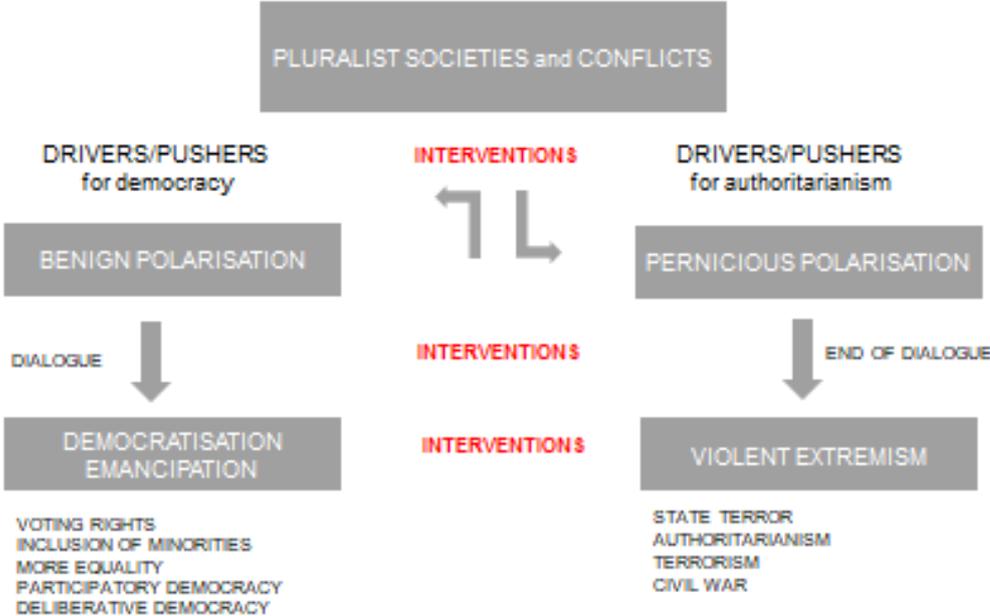
Populists play a central role here. In many cases of pernicious polarisation, a top-down process is instructed by political leaders or groups because they expect a political benefit. 'Divide et impera' (divide and rule) was already known as a political strategy in antiquity. Social divide can help politicians to stay in power. They delegitimise opponents and critical voices and use the media, which are of crucial importance in polarisation processes, to their ends. Of course, the messages must be spread in some way. However, this is not as democratic journalism should be, about information and the exchange of opinions, but about manipulation and propaganda. Populists therefore like to make use of the tabloid and mass media and often even own them. Pernicious polarisation is thus closely linked to monologue-like, manipulative communication strategies. Contradiction or other opinions either do not occur at all or are presented as illegitimate and denigrated. The expression 'fake news' is increasingly becoming a political fighting term in this context. It is undisputed that fake news are regularly and systematically spread in the tabloid media and in political propaganda. However, the strategy of polarisers has chosen precisely these terms to hold them against opponents. This makes it difficult or even impossible for the general population to distinguish between real fake news and fake fake news. The situation is similar regarding the term 'democracy'. Actors in pernicious polarisation processes often present themselves as the "true" democrats and associate the so-called "people". They accuse their opponents of being elitists, aloof and thus undemocratic, which in turn leads to the concept of democracy as a whole being diluted and discredited. When a polarisation process slides off in an anti-democratic, dangerous direction, there are usually actors on at least one side who deliberately encourage this and ridicule the democratic dialogue. They rely on various forms of monologue, shortening their messages and sharpening them to yes-no and either-or dichotomies. They leave the middle-group no room

for manoeuvre and push for positioning. Sayings such as “Those who are not for us are against us” are symptomatic of this strategy.

Such strategies can lead to an escalation of the polarisation process. A first escalation degree of polarisation is reached when representatives of the different opinions break off or refuse discourse. Conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl describes this as level 2 on a 9-part scale of conflicts. In a second stage, the conflicted parties foster stereotypes, ‘create facts’ and think that it is of no use to talk to the others (Glasl 1982).

While top-down polarisation almost always takes a dangerous and anti-democratic direction, bottom-up polarisation is often the result of unequal distribution of power. Social movements of the last few centuries, particularly in Europe, have shown that they have contributed strongly to democratisation and continue to do so. The question of the willingness to use violence and the use of violence is central but not always easy to answer. A social movement that fights against an authoritarian regime or systematic inequality can hardly count on dialogue but it can be said that whenever dialogue is ended and violence prevails, pernicious polarisation must be assumed. However, it is not those who stand up for more democracy but those who reject dialogue and democratisation that can be considered pernicious polarisers.

Glasl’s escalation ladder can help analysing polarisation processes. In the first and second stage, tensions lead to emotional debates. This can be seen as a normal process in pluralist societies and as an inherent element of democracies. At the third stage, the positions are hardening and actions are taken. Dialogue is already difficult, us-versus-them thinking starts. Parties put each other under pressure and a process of pernicious polarisation begins. In Glasl’s model, a solution of the conflict is still possible through interventions. In the further process and without intervention, the conflict becomes increasingly aggressive and violent at the end. While questions of power and structural inequality receive less attention in Glasl, they are central to understanding and dealing with political polarisation processes. The difference between a pernicious and a benign polarisation can be represented process-like as shown in the graph below.



In pluralistic democracies, conflicts are normal and cannot be resolved definitively and for all times. It can therefore be assumed that conflicts will always occur for ideological and/or structural reasons. Where democracy functions well and is widely accepted, such conflicts are negotiated through dialogue. This does not mean that a compromise, let alone consensus, can

always be reached, but that there is a high level of acceptance of the conflict negotiation procedures, which then legitimises the outcome. Ideally, through democratic dialogue, the outcome will also gradually become more democratic. Where conflicts, ideologies or inequalities are fuelled by so-called pushers and the poles are gathering more and more followers, the dialogue will come to an end. There is the danger in the air that the conflict resolution mechanisms of a society will no longer function and be considered legitimate, and that violence will occur.

The decisive factor is whether dialogue can be maintained in case of social conflicts in a democracy or whether larger sections of society withdraw into a hardened position and no longer communicate with one another. According to the above scheme, which distinguishes between the method and the goal, a pernicious polarisation would be undemocratic in at least one of the two dimensions – either in the goal or in the method by ending the dialogue or both in the goal and in the means. Benign polarisation, on the other hand, would ideally be democratic in both areas. It leads to dialogue and ends in a more inclusive, fairer democracy. This does not mean that the clashing poles in the spectrum of opinions suddenly start talking to each other, but that the group that uses democratic means and pursues democratic goals can gather a broad majority behind it and push back the opposing pole that refuses dialogue. Therefore, it is clear that polarising groups, ideological fanatics or populist actors can hardly voluntarily change their attitudes or be convinced of the better argument or equality aspirations. The incompatibility of the extreme positions will therefore not be overcome, but the democratic option may prevail.

Certainly, there are examples where it is not clear which side has democratic or undemocratic ambitions. Certainly, there are examples where both poles pursue undemocratic goals and/or use violent means. In these cases, pernicious polarisation must be assumed. Even if reality is always more complex than theoretical models or schemes, an accurate analysis of the actors in polarisation processes is of utmost importance. Their goals and methods, interests, internal organisational structure and functional logic as well as the distribution of roles are decisive parameters for analysis and strategy in dealing with them. These different roles in polarisation processes will be discussed in more detail below.

## VI. The roles and functions in a polarisation process

The distribution of roles in polarisation processes can be analysed in different ways. A recourse to different typologies is possible. Bart Brandsma identifies the following roles: pushers drive polarisation forward with monologue-like slogans and absolute truth claims. They act similarly to populists as described by scholars like Cas Mudde (Mudde 2016). In other words: Populists can be described as a type of pusher. Joiner joins the pusher, quickly takes sides, spreads their opinion and increases the range. The silent middle ground is undecided, tries to remain neutral, but is increasingly infiltrated. The bridge-builders' role is to mediate between the groups. Finally, Brandsma identifies the scapegoats, who are the target of the pushers and joiners and attacked by them.

Types can also be derived from the broad spectrum of social movement research. Bill Moyer et al. describe four roles of activists in social movements and distinguish the citizen, the rebel, the reformer and the change agent (Moyer et al. 2001). The rebel type is particularly relevant in polarisation processes. This type criticises grievances. He or she points out the difference between reality and ideal and can do so in the sense of democratic or benign polarisation. When we assume that polarisation can have a positive, democratic effect and goal, there can be a type of democratically oriented rebels who are not to be classified as dangerous. According to the theory of democracy described above, the rebel even distinguishes himself from the authoritarian, the populist or the extremist by avoiding violence. He/she uses other means, which can, however, polarise: Open contradiction, irony, art, demonstrations, strikes and other

forms of alternative participation (Pausch 2012). The role of a rebel in social movements corresponds to a bottom-up polarisation. Examples are Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg. They direct their rebellion against governments, they polarise and remain peaceful. They reject violence.

Democratically oriented rebels are thus a type that plays an important role in bottom-up polarisation. In top-down polarisation they are populist, extremist, mostly authoritarian pushers. Both the rebel and the pusher need people to join them. Brandsma calls them joiners (Brandsma 2020). We could also call them followers. Within this group, further divisions of roles and hierarchies develop. We know from the analysis of revolutions, such as in 1789 (French Revolution), 1848 (Liberal Revolution) and 1917 (October Revolution), that small networks develop as leadership elites within social movements. In top-down polarisation processes, which emanate from populists, it is not different and probably even more evident. The roles are distributed (Staggenborg 2015).

With regard to the roles alongside the pushers and the rebels within the leadership circles of political actors, I would suggest the following distinction: Ideologists are people who formulate ideological demands or positions. They can do this through their own writings or by using existing writings. Communicators are those who disseminate these positions through various media, such as speeches, blogs, newspaper commentaries, letters to the editor, contributions in social media, their own radio or television stations, via YouTube, etc. They are the media multipliers of ideology. It can be assumed that the communicators are to a large extent followers of ideology and leadership. Mostly, however, another motive plays a role, namely the expectation of personal gain. For example, media that disseminate the ideologist's position can profit from advertising or simply hope for a higher circulation. In the latter case, ideological affiliation is rather loose and more of a means to an end. Alongside the ideologues and communicators, the recruiters come into play. They have the task of actively recruiting further supporters. Their role overlaps with that of communicators, but is even more specifically oriented towards recruiting. In many cases, they are specialised and trained to use rhetoric to address the undecided and uncertain, who can often be young people. Another role is played by sponsors and stakeholders. They act similarly to some media with the aim of securing or acquiring their own advantage. They include rich entrepreneurs who act as donors. After all, the front-line fighters are those who were recruited to non-verbally enforce the ideologues' concerns, for example by organising and participating in rallies or demonstrations. These roles are not always strategically organised or systematically distributed, but they usually occur when polarisation is involved. Often, several roles are taken over by one person or a few. Sometimes the division of labour is more concrete. For example, the interaction of extreme right-wing and right-wing populist parties with pseudo-philosophical ideologists, paramilitary groups, movements, tabloid media and sponsors is relatively well coordinated and organised. In contrast, bottom-up social movements are often less professionally structured. A populist polariser usually has a far-reaching organisational structure behind him, which he can use to further his polarisation. He draws on extreme right-wing ideologues and religious writings, is supported by tabloid media and rich entrepreneurs, and keeps a large number of front-line fighters and recruiters. In this way, he strives to divide society and draw a majority of the silent middle to his side. Anyone who wants to stand in the way of a violence-promoting polarisation process would do well to recognise these roles.

Based on this, it can be decided where to intervene. Is an ideological debate useful? Should it be scored through counter-speech or through alternative, positive visions? Which media are used to disseminate these alternative positions? How can stakeholders, media or sponsors be dissuaded from their divisive role? How can those actors and stakeholders be involved who want to maintain dialogue and pursue democratic goals? What protection should be given to scapegoats, etc?

## VII. Drivers of polarisation in 21st-century Europe

Before we come to the strategies to avoid pernicious polarisation or move in a constructive and democratically oriented direction, we need to take a look at the factors that currently dominate our societies and drive divisions. As already mentioned, there are structural reasons and risk factors such as socio-economic inequality, discrimination or exclusion. Furthermore, new means of communication have the potential to endanger dialogue, but also the potential to strengthen it.

Actually, it is not a coincidence that polarisation has increased in recent years. The neoliberal economic paradigm and narrative of globalisation has divided society. There has been a considerable widening of the income and wealth gap in recent decades: “The gap between rich and poor in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) countries has reached its highest level over the past three decades” (Cohen/Ladaique 2018, 31). Economists and political scientists such as Joseph Stiglitz (2012), Thomas Piketty (2018) or Colin Crouch (2008) explain how growing inequality undermines the democratic influence of large parts of society. There is a massive loss of confidence in representative democracy, its protagonists and institutions (Perrineau 2007). The story of winners and losers has also become popular. It says that those who are not successful are just not willing, ready or competent enough. The inequality in life chances and access to education is neglected in this narrative that has become increasingly prevalent in Europe and the United States. “Globalization polarizes (sic) the population into groups of winners and losers that do not necessarily follow classical cleavage divisions (...). In a nutshell, losers of globalization are citizens who see their life chances reduced by the effects of globalization while winners are those who consider themselves to have benefitted from globalization” (Teney et al. 2014, 575).

In addition, there is a neo-liberal structure in workplaces and enterprises, in which strong hierarchies of winners and losers dominate and contradiction or rebellion against authoritarianism is usually sanctioned. As a consequence, a perfidious self-exploitation occurs in order not to be on the side of the “losers”. This development goes hand in hand with the acceleration of our entire life: of production processes, of decision-making but above all of capital transfer and communication (Rosa 2012). While democracies are characterised by dialogue in order to be able to communicate and exchange arguments, there is no time for debates in our accelerated, neoliberal circumstances.

Acceleration is thus a driver of polarisation and also one of the reasons why short news services have become particularly popular. Twitter or Instagram are often used for short messages, political propaganda and slogans. Monologue and manipulation replace dialogue and threaten democracy. Simple explanations for complex problems are spread as well as conspiracy theories, fake news or hate speech – and all that within a few seconds. It is thus a combination of structural inequality and new means of communication that drives polarisation processes.

Inequality is also and especially visible in terms of political and democratic participation. Wealthy people participate more often in elections and often have better access to politics than poorer people. Minorities continue to be discriminated against and are hardly visible in the institutions of representative democracy. These circumstances can trigger polarisation processes, for example when social movements are created to eliminate injustices. In such cases, the resistance of the ruling elites quickly forms and can even develop into authoritarian conditions. Conversely, growing inequality also makes those forces more aggressive that want to expand or secure their feeling of superiority and their power in the long term. Finally, the phenomenon of individualisation in the light of socio-economic and political-structural inequality is recently turning into the wish for more security and stability (Fromm 1947). The questioning of traditional identities can increase the desire to belong to a group and to distinguish oneself from other groups. This offers potential for division, which is exploited and driven by populists and polarisers.

## VIII. Dealing with polarization: inclusive democracy, resilience and dialogue

Democratic states consisting of pluralistic societies have developed different methods of dealing with conflicts. This also applies to other levels of government, such as municipalities or regions. It is a mixture of constitutional principles, political cultures or traditions, and proven strategies. Richard Bellamy assumes four theoretical models of pluralistic politics to manage social differences.

The first one is constitutional neutrality, in which compromise is achieved by trimming, which means that the constitution is neutral towards all groups and that world views and religious questions are transferred to the private sphere. “Contentious opinions can still be expressed, but only in private arenas such as pubs and clubs or with friends and family” (Bellamy 2000, 202).

The second model is “Interest Group Pluralism or compromise by trading”. Here, more real power relations and constitutional norms are more relevant. It is about the balancing of interests between groups of real relevance based on majority relationships. “...[W]hen conflicts occur, groups will always be able to force and reach mutually beneficial trade-offs with others” (ibid 2000, 204).

In the third model “Consociationalism and Group Rights” or “Compromise by Segregation”, certain autonomy of or power sharing amongst distinct national, ethnic, religious or other cultural groups is considered to be the best way. “They seek to preserve a group’s control of as many areas vital to its form of life as possible, to protect other aspects against damaging incursions and to ensure the necessary collective decisions are consensual.” (ibid. 2000, 106 f.). Group rights are seen as central although they can also lead to a hardening of group identity and thus to polarisation. Proponents of this model emphasise its strength to stabilise already deeply divided societies. However, Bellamy does not believe in the positive effects of such consociationalism in the long run.

He prefers the fourth model, “Democratic Liberalism: Compromise as Negotiation”, that acknowledges pluralism and the different identities in a society as given but attempts to develop the political community through fair negotiations and dialogue. Society and politics are seen as dynamic processes of negotiation in dialogue between groups and individuals. “The key disposition to foster is encapsulated in the republican formula ‘audi alteram partem’ or ‘hear the other side’. This criterion constrains both the procedures and the outcomes of the political process. People must drop purely self-referential or self-interested reasoning and look for considerations others can find compelling, thereby ruling out arguments that fail to treat all of equal moral worth. They must strive to accommodate the clashes of preferences and principles associated with pluralism by seeking integrative compromises that view the concerns raised by others as matters to be met rather than constraints to be overcome through minimal, tactical concessions. In sum, trimming, trading and segregation must give way to negotiation” (ibid. 2000, 211f.).

This model of democracy is strongly based on participation and dialogue. This also applies to participation theories or the theory of democracy as revolt, which was mentioned above (Pausch 2019). Its basic idea goes further than Bellamy’s model. It emphasises the right of every human being to revolt against injustice, oppression and authoritarianism in all circumstances and promotes a cosmopolitan understanding of democracy (Hayden 2013).

In concrete terms, it follows that pernicious polarisation can be combated on the basis of dialogue and inclusion. Bart Brandsma aims to do this when he talks about four game changers. As a first step, the target audience should be changed. He recommends not to focus on the pushers but on the middle ground. As a second step, the topic should be changed away from identity constructions to a conversation about common purposes and interests.

Brandsma then suggests changing the position. Bridge builders should not act above the parties, but in between the poles and move towards the middle ground. I would like to add here that they should do so only if the goals and methods of both polarising sides are equally democratic. If, on the other hand, there is a polarisation between two groups, one of which is striving for democratisation while the other only wants to secure its own power or seeks authoritarian conditions, then a clear decision should be made. Bridges can then only be built between those who are still willing to negotiate. Bridges to authoritarian or extremist actors, on the other hand, should be torn down. A fourth recommendation from Brandsma is to change the tone and to use mediating speech (Brandsma 2020; RAN 2017).

From the perspective of an inclusive democracy, there is much to add to this. On the one hand, it must be ensured that structural inequality, discrimination and exclusion are combated as risk factors. This can be achieved through democratic innovations that aim to include minorities and make access to political decision-making fairer. There is a wide range of concrete interventions at all political levels. This starts with the most inclusive electoral law possible, for example by lowering the voting age or granting voting rights on the basis of length of residence rather than nationality. For municipalities or regions, the introduction of citizens' councils/assemblies, youth councils or participatory budgeting is another option. Studies show that such innovations can succeed in involving broad parts of the population. There are various ways of reaching people who are not used to political participation, such as support through social work or preparation training for participation processes.

Cooperation between the political level, schools, companies, associations, religious communities, etc. is recommended in order to facilitate dialogue between different age groups and interests or world views. In any interaction, an ideal speech situation should be the goal. The criteria for such a situation are that all participants have the same chance of initiation, participation, quality of interpretation and argumentation in the absence of power relations and deception (Habermas 1995). Of course, it will not always be possible to fulfil this ideal in its entirety, but it is possible to approach it from any starting position. In order to turn political polarisation into a positive direction and for it to contribute to democratisation, it is of the utmost importance to involve citizens in a participatory process.

Also at the level of the nation state, democratic innovations are essential if we want to prevent citizens from turning away from the elites. Representative democracy needs innovations and reforms that bring it closer to citizens. For this reason, Ireland has introduced citizens' assemblies with randomly chosen citizens in 2016 to consider not only different political questions but also big constitutional issues. Further proposals are numerous and extensive. They range from randomly selected and composed citizens' councils with a consultative function, mini-publics (Dahl 1997), to participatory budgeting and electoral reforms of various kinds, with the aim of increasing the input legitimacy of a democracy (Smith 2009). Finally, even the European Union can introduce a kind of citizens' assemblies and other participatory methods to involve citizens from different socio-economic, ethnic, religious or other backgrounds.

Another important strategy in the fight against pernicious polarisation is to strengthen resilience towards hate speech, conspiracy theory, authoritarianism and extremism. In the Brave Project resilience factors were developed, which also include democratic aspects. However, a stronger emphasis on the potential of participation processes and democratic innovations seems necessary. Especially when it comes to resilience, the aspect of democratic citizenship education is of great importance.

The Council of Europe has been working in this direction for some years now, with a focus on Competences for Democratic Culture and citizenship education. With its Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, it aims at more inclusive democracies, at skills such as analytical and critical thinking, co-operation and conflict prevention, knowledge and critical understanding of the world: "(...) education is increasingly recognised as an

essential response to the challenges that our societies are facing.” (Council of Europe 2017, 8). The Council of Europe's recommendations on democratic education can be considered an important element against polarisation. The aim of citizenship education processes is to raise awareness on polarisation, impart skills for democratic participation, knowledge, critical thinking, media competence, but above all to support participation in dialogue and in the decision-making process. People who are aware of political problems, who are aware of the origins and significance of democracy, who deal with the media, and who see through fake news and hate speech are more resistant than others to being appropriated by polarisers and populists. Although many measures may not have a short-term effect, in the medium- and longer-term they are of central importance for the stability of societies.

## IX. From analysis to evaluation: 7 steps to manage polarisation

### Step 1: Analysis of polarisation risk factors, forms and directions

In the first step, local actors should start to analyse the situation. Sometimes, a process of polarisation seems very obvious, but sometimes it is not visible at first sight. Therefore, a polarisation analysis makes sense even in supposedly non-polarised societies, in order to identify possible risk factors early on. The analysis should be based on a good database. Factors of inequality can be made visible through socio-economic data, for example. A widening gap between rich and poor is a first risk factor. Political equality should also be examined using indicators such as transparency, representation and participation. If major groups are underrepresented in decision-making processes, important professions or institutions or are excluded from the right to vote, this can be considered a risk factor. With the help of a participation ladder, it is possible to assess which opportunities for participation exist in a city or local community and which level is aimed at.

Exclusion factors such as discrimination or racism should also be taken into account. Surveys on political opinions and attitudes towards democracy and authoritarianism and loyalties play an important role here. If confidence and satisfaction in local political actors and institutions declines, this is another risk factor. With a well-founded analysis, forms, reasons and directions of polarisation processes can be identified (for a methodological guide to such analyses, see Boyd-MacMillan et al. 2019).

### Step 2: Identification of actors in polarisation processes

In a next step, it is important to identify the actors of polarisation and their internal distribution of roles and functions. Who are the pushers, the bridge builders, etc.? What methods do they use? What are their networks? The identification of actors is not about security monitoring, but about what actors can be involved in a dialogue or are interested in possible interventions and in what way.

### Step 3: Awareness raising

A third step, which builds on the analyses, is awareness raising. The target group here is the general public or those who have a multiplier function or are potential bridge builders. Awareness raising can be achieved through poster campaigns, radio or TV spots, social media and the whole range of communication possibilities. Targeted at specific groups such as teachers or social workers, workshops, lectures, discussions etc. are also appropriate. The aim is to create an awareness of the process of polarisation and possible tipping points. Already in the analysis phase, awareness can be created through surveys or target group-specific contacts. As a rule, however, a longer and more detailed information policy is necessary.

#### Step 4: Voice and participation

In all polarisation processes, there are moderate groups or individuals who have little or no opportunity to raise their voice or prefer to remain silent after disappointments or out of fear. Such voices must be strengthened and brought before the curtain. These may be people who are marginalised or do not feel competent to express their views. They can also be people who prefer to remain silent because of negative experiences, hostility or threats, even though they have a lot to say and are bridge-builders. These people must be given space and support.

The opportunities for participation can be strengthened in many ways: through citizens' councils, mini-publics, participatory budgeting or other forms of participation. The list of examples of democratic innovation is long. Democracy education is also part of it, already at school and in all associations, youth work etc. (for examples of such initiatives and their goals, see Berner/Pausch 2020).

#### Step 5: Institutional cooperation and exchange

The exchange between important actors and institutions should be institutionalised or show certain regularity. It is often difficult to bring actors to the table because they may compete for funding. In other cases, it will be easier. Advisory bodies such as expert advisory boards make sense, provided they do not become an end in themselves. In any case, the exchange between the political level, civil servants, social and youth workers, teachers, police, representatives of associations, representatives of religions, etc. is of great importance in order to fight against pernicious polarisation processes. Regular and constructive exchange and dialogue are of crucial importance.

#### Step 6: Reflect on the past and build the future

As Bellamy says, democracies are not so much about a common culture, religion or history as they are about shaping the future together. Nevertheless, it would be a big mistake to leave aside or suppress historical aspects. One problem is often that the history of a city is only told by one dominant group, while other groups remain virtually ahistorical and find no place in society. It is therefore important to create common places where history and stories can be told, and from different perspectives. A process that deals, for example, with the shaping of the future in a city can begin with an open discussion about the history of the city, its immigrants and its different facets. Building on this, a future workshop with broad participation can be initiated as an open participatory process in which as many people as possible take part. In this way, an urban citizenship can develop, a loyalty to the local area, an image of a common future.

#### Step 7: Regular evaluation

The last step is the evaluation of the measures. The evaluation closes the circle and is the basis for the next round, in which again different measures and steps can be taken. Evaluations should always be careful not only to analyse measurable results and outputs, but also to take into account the opinions and perceptions of the participants, target groups and stakeholders. They should not be designed as a sanctioning instrument, but rather as an integral part of a systematic examination of polarisation processes. The satisfaction of the various actors, their opportunities for participation and their suggestions for improvement should be included.

## X. Conclusion

Polarisation is part of pluralistic democracies. Their actors can be democratic or undemocratic in their goals and methods. Polarisation processes arise from structural and ideological factors. They can improve democracies by making them more inclusive. However, they can also endanger them and turn them into authoritarian regimes. The list of possible innovations is long. In order to reduce the gap between professional politics and the population and to mitigate the risk of pernicious polarisation, we need to introduce, analyse and evaluate different forms of inclusive democracy and strengthen dialogue. Many questions remain open. Further scientific analyses and evaluations are necessary to make progress in the work on polarisation. This is particularly urgent today.

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