



## **Extremism from the perspective of a system approach**

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### **Abstract**

Extremism is seen as a complex, multilevel, and multicomponent phenomenon. The problems of modern science in understanding extremism are revealed. The following bases of extremism as a system phenomenon are singled out: social factors, latent extremism, and extremist acts. It is demonstrated that a system approach makes it possible to shape a notion of a subject as a system, to identify patterns of the manifestations of the given phenomenon, and to translate them into concrete practices.

**Keywords:** security, extremism, system approach, latent extremism, extremist outlook



Modern Russian society is witnessing a considerable level of extremism. By denying basic vested rights and freedoms of citizens or by opposing the established order of socio-regularized and legitimized relations, extremism is a threatening phenomenon to society.

Extremism is an equally urgent problem for many countries irrespective of their political and socioeconomic advancements. Worldwide experience shows that as a way and a means of handling socioeconomic, political, religious, ecological, and other issues extremism can emerge in almost any country including industrially developed and politically stable ones. As Dontsov and PereLygina (2011) put it, "A great threat to social stability is posed by periods of acute social crises and shocks, upheavals, and revolutions, which have brought about drastic changes in social structure, together with the resulting very profound crises of historical consciousness and also of 'time out of joint,' the crisis of the historical continuity of culture" (p. 43).

It has become a rule to explain the decrease in the number of conflicts involving state participation in the late 1990s and the early 2000s by the increase of international efforts at peaceful conflict settlement (Human Security Centre, 2006a, 2006b). However, despite the decrease in several indicators of military activity, threats to security have not disappeared, but, on the contrary, they have increased according to various independent parameters. Total human losses caused by all kinds of political violence have been virtually unchanged since the beginning of the 2000s. According to Stepanova's data, "Those forms of armed violence that do not only decrease in number but are on the uptick — terrorism, interconfession and other forms of intercommunity violence — and are less lethal than, for instance, conventional wars, are first and foremost directed towards civilians" (Stepanova, 2008). The general level of the infringement of human rights worldwide is not decreasing either. "The public mind has not yet adjusted to the perception of modern risks. The current dynamic of social sentiments reflects a growing level of expectations of uncertainty" (Zinchenko & Zotova, 2013, p. 110).

The concept of extremism (from the Latin *extremis*, ultimate, and the French *extremisme*) is used to define a stance (regarding ideology, intentions, actions) corresponding to extreme opinions. According to documentation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) extremism is a form of political activity that, directly or indirectly, denies the principle of parliamentary



democracy. In Russia the legal definition of acts treated as extremist ones is provided in article 1 of Federal Law 114-ФЗ: "On counteracting extremist activities." In compliance with amendments of April 29, 2008, the following activities are among those referred to as extremist: forcible changes in the constitutional structure and corruption of the integrity of the Russian Federation; public justification of terrorism and terrorist activities; incitement of social, racial, national, or religious enmity; propaganda about exceptionalism, the superiority or inferiority of an individual owing to his/her social, racial, religious, or linguistic background or attitude toward religion; violation of the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of an individual as a citizen depending on his/her social, racial, religious, or linguistic background or attitude to religion (Zinchenko, 2011).

The psychology of extremism itself is a subject of special interest. Psychology researches extremism in its multiaspectual form of origin and its multivariant forms of passing into society as a sociopsychological phenomenon expressed by the actions of individuals and groups.

In a position paper entitled Addressing Extremism, Coleman and Bartoli (2003) emphasize that "extremism is, in essence, a complex phenomenon in spite of the fact that its complexity is difficult to detect and to understand. The simplest way is to define it as an activity (as well as beliefs, attitudes towards somebody or something, feelings, actions, strategies) of an individual which are far from being common, generally accepted ones. In conflict circumstances there is demonstration of tough conflict settlement. Nevertheless, the way to mark activities, people and groups as 'extremist' along with the way to find out what is 'common' or 'generally accepted' is always a subjective and political matter" (p. 2).

In studying the content of the concept of extremism one should pay attention to a number of problems. First, despite the seemingly clear and obvious simplicity of the concept, in the scientific environment there are different understandings of this phenomenon. This lack of conformity in defining extremism is characteristic of the entire world community, and tough debates about the correctness of the diagnostics take place worldwide on a regular basis. Therefore, one can speak about the multifaceted nature of the meanings and interpretations of extremism. Considering the vagueness and imprecision and, consequently, the great potential to interpret extremism too widely, there appear great possibilities for



terminological manipulation, for classifying any action beyond those generally acknowledged and allowed by the rules of a certain society or a state as extremist. Each party treats this phenomenon on the basis of its own position.

Second, extremism is seen exclusively as being of a negative character. Lev Levinson, in particular, believes that "the ambiguity of extremism is, first of all, generated by the possibility of embracing a wide scope of activities that fall in the category of this phenomenon. That is why there is no point in banning extremism as it is. Extremism is not a crime; it also involves Green Peace, peace marches, in a word, it includes everything travelling out of the limits of 'the commonly accepted'" (quoted in Belasheva, 2002, p. 3). From Tukumov's point of view it is not correct to diagnose extremism exclusively as a socially dangerous and, as a result, an illegal phenomenon because in this case one would have to admit that many extreme acts and views could be considered violations of public order and fall under criminal or administrative jurisdiction (for example, public hunger strikes, protest marches) (Tukumov, 2004, p. 10).

The third problem concerns the treatment of extremism as an activity (A.A. Khorovinnikov, I.A. Abdulaeva, V.A. Sosnin, R.N. Getts, I.M. Gregor, K. Nash, N. Mann, E. Curtis, and others). In practice extremism is not always accompanied by actions, and it cannot be defined on the basis of one of its elements — namely, extremist activity. Vekhov, in particular, argues that extremist attitudes, beliefs, views, and ideas are more widely spread in society than explicit aggression and hatred; extremist views can be found in all segments of society. This "nonactualized" extremism, when "dissipated" in public consciousness, creates a basis for social tension. It is of equal importance that while forming the background of everyday life, in which routine individual activities take place, this latent extremism affects the socialization and world perception of the youth, thus reproducing itself in future generations (Vekhov, 2011, p. 26).

Finally, the concepts of extremism, terrorism, and fanaticism are intermingled and are seen as inescapable companions by many researchers. In Yakh'ev's opinion, fanaticism and extremism are similar in character and in their ways of achieving goals as they both tend to use extraordinarily violent and destructive acts — that is, terrorist methods. This similarity leads to mixing up fanaticism and extremism and to intermingling both with terrorism. In order to avoid mixing up extremism and terrorism Yakh'ev points out that extremism entails a specific, extreme type or method of social action



and includes such features as goals, ideology, action motivation, means and ways of action. Terrorism involves just one action type or method. It is much narrower in its logical sense, although it undoubtedly has been adopted as an everyday extremist weapon. But terrorism does not exhaust the arsenal of extremism as a social practice (Yakh'ev, 2008).

"Extremism cannot be compared to a virus which mankind has happened to catch. It is its internal disease, primarily generated by disharmony in social, political and cultural development" (Pain, 2002, p. 117). Extremism ruins the spiritual foundations of society and threatens Russia's security; society should keep a close eye on it. High social tension in the world poses a challenge for scholars to identify the reasons for its growth and to find ways to neutralize it within the frameworks of the sociopsychological program. Therefore, considering such a complicated phenomenon as extremism as a system of interrelated elements seems to be a reasonable way of knowing it.

In the course of debates on the "Cross-ethnic world: Who makes an appeal for a hatchet and why?" in the newsroom of the New Times on August 12, 2013, E.L. Pain, professor at the Higher School of Economics, head of the Centre for the Study of Xenophobia and Extremism Prevention, Institute of Sociology, the Russian Academy of Sciences, emphasized the rise in the level of extremism. He substantiated his statement by referring to the General Prosecutor's Office data, according to which "from 2008 to 2012 extremism increased by five times, and about 70% of the cases involved the fuelling of interethnic, international enmity" (Al'bats, 2013). Examining the causes he named the growth of protest sentiments in society mutating into another state. "It is characteristic of us to swing between ethnic mobilization and political mobilization. Until 2012, a greater part of mobilization proceeded in the ethnic form. When the Bolotnaya and Sakharov [cases] occurred, political goals seemed to have the potential of uniting different groups of people. ...As soon as the political process went away everything resumed its natural course. On the one hand is xenophobia; on the other is the consolidation of ethnic groups (Central Asian nationals specifically) as a reaction to their illegality" (Al'bats, 2013).

However, sociological survey results show that the problem of extremism is not central in the Russian consciousness. On January 18-22, 2008, the Yuriy Levada Analytical Centre (Levada Centre) carried out a representative poll involving 1,600 interviewees. The question was: "What do you think presents a key internal threat for



Russia?" Most of all, Russians were anxious about "arbitrariness and irresponsibility typical of uncontrolled authorities" (20%), "economic problems, lower economic growth rate" (19%), and "political instability" (16%); only 5% of the respondents indicated political extremism (fascism, Muslim radicalism, ultranationalism) as the most important (Levada Centre, 2008).

The psychological content of the extremism phenomenon cannot be reduced to a separate feature or characteristic; it is a complex, multilevel, and multicomponent phenomenon that possesses several "key dimensions." A system approach makes it possible to thoroughly explore the structure of such a phenomenon. As the author of the tensor theory of complex systems, G. Kron argues that "the object is cut into sections with the purpose only of finding out how to assemble them into one again" (1978, p. 177).

A system approach as a methodological principle for studying complex objects was formulated in the natural sciences in the 1960s–1970s (P.K. Anokhin, S. Beer, I.V. Blauberg, B.M. Kedrov, G. Klir, V.N. Sadovskiy, A.I. Uyomov, Y.A. Urmantsev, E.G. Yudin, L. von Bertalanffy); it later proved its fruitfulness both scientifically and practically in different areas. The general principles of the system approach were perceived by outstanding psychologists in this country, and they then demonstrated the biosocial essence and system character of the human mind (P.K. Anokhin, L.M. Bekker, B.F. Lomov, V. S. Lomov, V.S. Merlin, K.K. Platonov). In accordance with the system character of the human psyche, approaches to complex and system research were worked out.

Ideas about a complete understanding of the psyche in the unity of its biological, social, and strictly psychological manifestations were implicitly present throughout the formative stages of the domestic school of experimental and pathological psychology, in St. Petersburg in particular (V.M. Bekhterev, A.N. Bernstein, A.F. Lazurskiy, S.L. Frank, M.Y. Basov), but the methodological essence of this integrity could be fully realized only in connection with the development of the system approach in psychology. For this reason, a distinct methodological reflection of system analysis applied to psychological problems and their handling through scientifically, not intuitively, substantiated methods of the system approach is becoming topical (Figure 1).

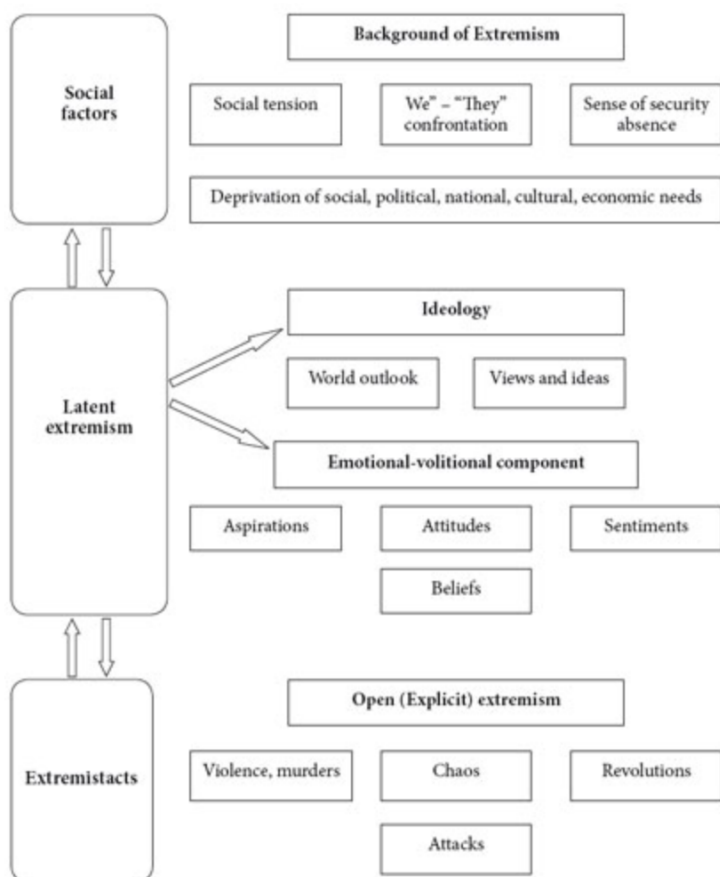


Figure 1. Extremism from the perspective of the system approach

Thus, on the basis of the work of foreign and domestic psychologists it is possible to identify and to group conventionally the following foundations of extremism.

## Social factors

### Security

At the beginning of the third millennium the psychological understanding of security is being determined by global changes associated with the sophistication of social structures, the growth of uncertainty, and the unpredictability of the future of humankind. Modern society has entered a new era of "mega risks"; some researchers (U. Beck, A. Giddens, N. Luhmann, and others) classify it



as the "risk society." This classification is confirmed by Castells's statement that the basic social structures in the age of information are social movements (Castells, 1999).

It may not be a coincidence that such a new category as security, which is closely tied up with the category of risk, found its place in psychology. In the post-Cold War period a bipolar world supported by superpowers — the USSR/USA equilibrium — disappeared, giving rise to totally new types of threats to security (Polikarpov, 2001). Nowadays scholars and policymakers are discussing issues of political, economic, military, informational, conceptual, psychological, and cultural security that should be addressed on the basis of the nonlinear nature of world-wholeness.

Security in modern daily life, which is interrupted by explosions, catastrophes, and terrorist acts, is becoming one of the scarce benefits of existence; security is the result of cooperative efforts involving authorities, intelligence services, and the rest of people who save society from terrorists and other robbers of security. "The attitude toward security can be mediated by the context a person reads into this notion and can differ in regard to ways of achieving it" (Dontsov, Zinchenko, & Zotova, 2013, p. 99). As a rule, we start to fight against a lack of security only after one more tragedy has happened. Measures to prevent and foresee this dreadful phenomenon still require great efforts on the part of psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists, and ethnopsychologists, who not only should find the answer to the problem and carry out monitoring but also should formulate concrete recommendations for state and nonstate organizations. People have a common interest at the least because they face global risks shared by the majority. Contingent worlds of interactions and communications are made up of events common for this or that group of people (Smirnov, 2003, pp. 29-30). If we comprehend reality in this way, we can assume that people's striving for security not only is one of the conditions of coexistence but also indicates their readiness for co-being, meaning-making, and interaction. Zotova indicates that "it is in human nature to feel security/insecurity on the basis of alarming signals, the perception of sense organs, instinctive reactions, and intuition; that is, in this light security (insecurity) means an individual subjective idea of whether there are threats to existence or not" (Zotova, 2012, p. 111).

## **Social tension**

Different factors provoke extremism: increasing social tension, socioeconomic crises, a drastic fall in the living standards of the





majority of the population, deformation of political institutions and power structures, cross-ethnic conflicts, a desire of specific social groups to speed up the search for solutions to their problems, inadequate political ambitions, and so forth. The emergence of social tension is enhanced largely by the inability to satisfy social, economic, political, national, cultural, and other vital human needs, interests, and rights.

Thus, in Ol'shanskii's words, "mass industrial production based on scientific and technical advancements fathered a particular life dynamism that is reflected in, among other things, a rapid increase in human needs" (Ol'shanskii, 2002, p. 151). The author remarks that this circumstance is seen both in the material and in the spiritual, social, and political spheres. At the end of the 1960s mass youth turbulence in the West demonstrated that the time was ripe for new desires. Later, the fact that all youth protest movements brought about new facets of the counterculture confirmed this conclusion. Ol'shanskii also emphasizes that not only have needs grown but so has the opportunity to meet them. Life dynamics, the deepening of integration processes, and the shortening of transportation and information distances generate both new demands and their seemingly easy supply. The modern world has at its disposal considerable riches and creates all of the new needs.

## **The "we-they" dichotomy**

Extremism does not recognize dialogues, as in its essence it is a form of one-dimensional, "mono-hemispheric" thinking (the "we vs. they" principle).

The identity of extremism is based on the oppositions "our-others'," "we-they." This "uniting" ideological factor encourages the creation of collectives of likeminded people who have a clear idea of an enemy to fight against using all available means and methods. This antagonistic image ensures a "blind" commitment to extremism and to what the foe personifies (Gritsenko & Lukyantsev, 2012).

Kozyrev believes that the search for an enemy can be treated as the intention to shift the blame to other shoulders, an aspiration to "attribute" one's own sins and selfish impulses to somebody else. "To justify their collaboration with fascist Germany and its crimes during World War II, pro-fascist forces in some Baltic countries made an attempt to cast the Red Army as a 'conqueror' instead of as a 'liberator,' i.e., making it a foe" (Kozyrev, 2008, p. 38). In fact, extremists' specific corporate identity is built on these principles. "The establishment of such a group, however, has the same



principles and peculiarities as a classic organization; their characteristic corporate culture can be considered a set of attitudes maintained by its members with regard to the organization itself, the content of its activities, its external environment, its leadership and other members" (Perelygina, 2011, p. 352).

## **Latent extremism**

The above-mentioned factors act only as provoking ones; the probability of the emergence of actual extremist activities is determined by how their influence is deflected through the prism of sociopsychological features: value/meaning dominance, attitudes, social notions, stereotypes, need/motivation tendencies, and so forth. Irrespective of provoking factors different types of extremism can have similar psychological mechanisms.

## **Ideology**

The "inward" or subjective plan of what is seen from the outside as extremism can be characterized as glorification or messiahship. Extremists, guided by their ideas of the world and society, are convinced that these ideas have to be implemented. Because no one but they seem to be able to do so they think their intentions are a kind of mission to be realized at all costs.

Extremism is characterized by absolutism, negation of another point of view, and uncompromising stands. In this connection an appeal to feelings, emotions, beliefs, and convictions substitutes for an appeal to reason and common sense.

Extremists have specific personal forms of thinking: a craving for "principled" judgments at all times and in all places leads to completely abstract premises and conclusions that do not take into account the complexity of reality and thus relieve extremism-driven individuals of the special difficulty of assessing the real situation.

Krasikov speaks about a particular "extremist" world outlook. He considers extremism a set of worldviews, a specific form of consciousness. "Extremism is first and foremost a specific worldview or a coordinate system. It expresses the identity of certain groups of people who find themselves in direct disagreement with the norms and values of a dominating culture. Such an identity reveals itself in various ways: a defiant life style, different clothing, jargon, etc." (Krasikov, 2006, p. 25).



## **Cognitive specifics**

Extremism is connected with a perception deficiency and with a conflicted world picture in particular. According to Afanas'ev (2001, p. 20), extremism "grows out of an excessive perception of social phenomena." "Cognitive psychic functions provide information processing: its separate estimation parameters, selection of its most significant items, their retention and usage in generalized notions" (Dontsov & Zotova, 2013, p. 78).

Haslam and Turner (1995) believe that extremism is an autonomous category basis for alternative decisions. Extremists see the world as "black-and-white, without shades of grey" (p. 368). Therefore, the majority of extremists are marked by a bipolar view of the world and society, by their contrasting of, for example, "Ithey," "the reds-the whites." This characteristic results in aggression toward and intolerance of those who oppose their opinions (Gayvoronskaya, 2012). This is the logic of emphasized conflict and a sharp dichotomous contrast of extremes: ours and others', truth and lie. Notably, everything that differs from extremist beliefs is indiscriminately declared a lie. Everyone who does not share extremist beliefs indiscriminately becomes an enemy (Yakh'ev, 2009, p. 396).

It is also worth noting that "schemes concerning the perception of different objects and phenomena are designed depending on the extent to which these objects are meaningful for this or that culture, thus attracting attention to essential information and influencing what first comes into the minds of representatives of different cultures" (Dontsov, Drozdova, & Gritskov, 2013, p. 71).

## **Extremist activities (pronounced extremism)**

The range of typical extremist activities is quite wide. The following acts are referred to in publications as illegitimate, aggressive, violent: creating chaos, sabotage, blackmail, hostage taking, murders, robberies, mass turbulence, vandalism, and others. In a word, all of them are various forms of terrorist, destructive acts. Acts of internal aggression include self-tormenting, fasting, hermitry, ritual suicide (more often, individual and group immolation) (Yakh'ev, 2010).

Thus, extremism is aggression aimed against the existing social order. It is a natural reaction of various social forces to critical social



situations. In essence, extremism is the struggle of social groups for the survival of their physical existence and cultural identity when they are placed in critical situations by extraordinary means and methods. But this fight is destructive and illusory; it does not ease but dramatizes the critical situation of the given group even more.

Extremism is a complex, heterogeneous social and sociopsychological phenomenon that can be conceived exclusively through the concept of interdependence. A system approach allows us to formulate an idea of an object as a system, identify consistent patterns of its manifestation, and put it into practice. This approach is fully pertinent to extremism, with its variety, multifaceted nature, and polyphony. In order to gain insight into it, it is necessary to consider the unity of its components, properties, and relationships.

Because of its continuous development extremism cannot have a finite number of forms from the point of view of cognition; in the course of its study new features are detected and new notions are formed.

Scientific analysis, especially psychological analysis, of extremism provides an opportunity to work out principles for preventive measures directed toward the nonproliferation of this phenomenon. As shown by the results of sociopsychological activities, the prevention of extremism, in the youth environment primarily, can take several directions: strengthening the role of traditional institutions of socialization and promoting activities aimed at relieving the destructive tendencies typical of marginal groups and youth subcultures. Dontsov and Perelygina (2011) particularly point out that the stability of social space is provided by the effective social policy of a state as a subject of social sustainability.

The topicality of the study of extremism and of the development of scientifically substantiated methods of its prevention is determined, primarily, by the fact that extremism prevention enhances the reduction of the dissemination of destructive ideologies including that of terrorism-oriented ones.

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