



# 7.1 Country Brief: A social psychological perspective on trends of extremism in Austria

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## About the Project

D.Rad is a comparative study of radicalisation and polarisation in Europe and beyond. It aims to identify the actors, networks, and broader social contexts driving radicalisation, particularly among young people in urban and peri-urban areas. D.Rad conceptualises this through the I-GAP spectrum (injustice-grievance-alienation-polarisation) to move towards measurable evaluations of de-radicalisation programmes. We intend to identify the building blocks of radicalisation, including a sense of being victimised, being thwarted or lacking agency in established legal and political structures and coming under the influence of “us vs them” identity formulations.

D.Rad benefits from an exceptional breadth of backgrounds. The project spans national contexts, including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Israel, Turkey, Georgia, Austria, and several minority nationalisms. It bridges academic disciplines ranging from political science and cultural studies to social psychology and artificial intelligence. Dissemination methods include D.Rad labs, D.Rad hubs, policy papers, academic workshops, visual outputs and digital galleries. As such, D.Rad establishes a rigorous foundation to test practical interventions geared to prevention, inclusion and de-radicalisation.

With the possibility of capturing the trajectories of seventeen nations and several minority nations, the project will provide a unique evidence base for the comparative analysis of law and policy as nation-states adapt to new security challenges. Mapping these varieties and their link to national contexts is crucial in uncovering strengths and weaknesses in existing interventions. Furthermore, D.Rad accounts for the problem that radicalisation processes often occur in circumstances that escape the control and scrutiny of traditional national justice frameworks. The participation of AI professionals in modelling, analysing and devising solutions to online radicalisation is central to the project’s aims.

## Executive Summary

This country brief summarises the survey findings for Austria. It then embeds the survey findings within a national and cultural context for each country. The aim of these summaries is to situate the findings within their respective socio-political and socio-cultural contexts. The literature review and rationale for the proposed model, analysis of the full dataset, and discussion can be found in the full 7.1 report, which also contains the country briefs.

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# 1. Results

The sample for Austria consisted of  $n = 292$ , of which only 3.77% of participants replied that they did not know their political attitudes. As such, these participants were excluded, resulting in a final sample of  $n = 281$ .

## Descriptives

### Breakdown by age and sex.

Mean age (SD)	Sex					
	Male		Female		Other	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
24.56 (4.47)	137	46.92	154	52.74	1	0.34

### Breakdown by religious affiliation.

	N	%
Christian	176	60.27
Agnostic/Atheist	53	18.15
Muslim	37	12.67
Other	24	8.22
Buddhist	1	0.34
Hindu	1	0.34
Jewish	0	0.00
Bahá'í	0	0.00
Sikh	0	0.00

**Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country?**

	N	%
Yes	64	21.92
No	207	70.89
Don't know	21	7.19

### Breakdown of belonging to a group that is discriminated against.

**On what grounds is your group discriminated against?**

	N	%
Religion	23	35.94
Language	17	26.56
Gender	15	23.44
Sexuality	15	23.44
Colour or race	13	20.31

Nationality	12	18.75
Ethnic group	11	17.19
Age	4	6.25
Disability	4	6.25
Other	2	3.12

Note: participants were allowed to select multiple groups. As such, proportions will not necessarily add to 100%

**Breakdown of different organizations participants reported being members of (active or inactive) or not.**

	Active		Inactive		Not a member	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Church or religious organization	70	23.97	120	41.10	102	34.93
Sport or recreational organization	132	45.21	57	19.52	103	35.27
Art, music or educational organization	80	27.40	68	23.29	144	49.32
Labour union	51	17.47	84	28.77	157	53.77
Political party	33	11.30	66	22.60	193	66.10
Environmental organization	40	13.70	62	21.23	190	65.07
Professional association	33	11.30	69	23.63	190	65.07
Humanitarian or charitable organization	55	18.84	57	19.52	180	61.64
Consumer organization	40	13.70	58	19.86	194	66.44
Self-help group or mutual help group	40	13.70	63	21.58	189	64.73
Women's group	33	11.30	57	19.52	202	69.18
Other organization	17	5.82	37	12.67	238	81.51

**Breakdown of different political actions participants reported taking in the last 12 months.**

	Yes		No		Missing value	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Contacted a politician or government official	56	19.18	205	70.21	31	10.62
Worked in a political party or action group	38	13.01	223	76.37	31	10.62
Worked in another ideological organization	39	13.36	225	77.05	28	9.59
Displayed a campaign badge/sticker	44	15.07	205	70.21	43	14.73
Signed a petition	147	50.34	113	38.7	32	10.96
Took part in a lawful public demonstration	66	22.6	190	65.07	36	12.33
Boycotted certain products	95	32.53	152	52.05	45	15.41
Posted or shared anything about politics online	91	31.16	164	56.16	37	12.67

**Predictors of realistic threat**

Increased social dominance orientation was linked to greater perceptions of migrants as a realistic threat. Additionally, increased perception that one's national ingroup was more deprived economically than migrants was also linked to increased realistic threat. Greater experiences of anomie were also predictive of increased perceptions of threat. Regarding political ideologies, more right-wing political attitudes were also found to predict increased perception of realistic threat. Although we did not hypothesize a relationship between vulnerability and realistic threat, reporting greater social alienation was linked to lower perceived threat from migrants.

### Direct predictors of extremism

Holding a stronger belief in inherent group hierarchies (social dominance orientation) was linked with greater support for extremism. A stronger online group identity was also found to directly predict increased support for extremist attitudes. In terms of relational factors, perceiving that one's economic status was more deprived relative to migrants (individual relative deprivation) was linked with greater support for extremist attitudes. Regarding political ideologies, populism was linked with increased support for extremism. In terms of vulnerability, increased social alienation was linked with increased support for extremist attitudes.

### Indirect predictors of extremism

Increased social dominance orientation indirectly predicted decreased support for extremist attitudes via decreased populism. However, the total indirect effect of social dominance orientation on extremism was not significant, meaning that rather than having an indirect influence on extremism via other variables, greater social dominance orientation mainly predicted increased support for extremist attitudes directly.

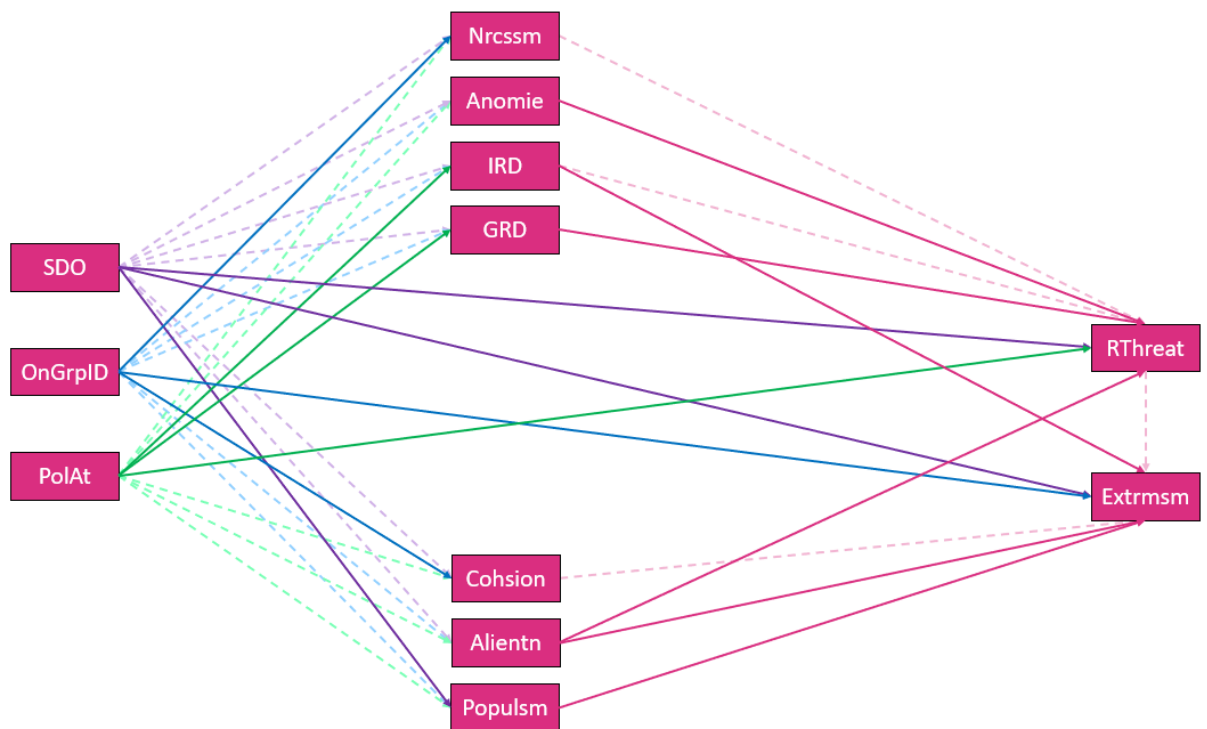
Online group identity did not have any indirect effects on support for extremist attitudes. Similar to social dominance orientation, a stronger online group identity directly predicted increased support for extremist attitudes.

Increasingly right-wing political attitudes indirectly predicted increased support for extremism attitudes via increased individual relative deprivation. While the other indirect effects alone were not statistically significant, the total indirect effect was. Increasingly right-wing political attitudes, through their relationship with the mediators, indirectly predicted increased support for extremist attitudes.

### Predictors of attitudes towards Russian culture, Russian and Ukrainian migrants

Perceiving one's ingroup to be superior to other social groups was linked with more negative attitudes towards Russia. Feeling less anomie and more trust in the Austrian government were both linked to more negative attitudes towards Russian culture. In terms of attitudes towards Russian migrants, feeling more embedded in one's community was linked with worsened attitudes towards Russian migrants in the past twelve months. Regarding Ukrainian migrants, feelings of anomie and perceptions that one's economic situation was more deprived relative to migrants were both linked to worsening attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants in the past twelve months.

### Figure 3. Respecified model for Austria.



## 2. Situating the findings within the Austrian context at the time of the survey

This country summary contextualizes the D.Rad survey findings for Austria. It starts with an overview of the country context of radicalisation before analysing the main findings of the quantitative survey. According to the latest report of the Directorate General for Public Security (DSN 2023), the year 2022 was characterised by uncertainty and multiple crises, such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the energy crisis and high inflation, and the climate crisis. These crises are seen as “an ideal breeding ground for extremism” as they increase societal tensions and enhance the protest potential vis-à-vis state institutions (ibid., p. 76). The DSN states in its report that it expects the current loss of confidence in state structures to become more pronounced in the next years, whereby the focus areas of the institution lie on right- and left-wing extremism, anti-state associations, and Islamist extremism. Three notable trends have become hot topics: a) cyber security and potential cyberattacks; b) the war in Ukraine and the phenomenon of foreign fighters and foreign volunteers; and c) climate activists that increasingly make use of disruptive actions.

Right-wing extremist groups and anti-state movements have experienced an upswing during the Corona pandemic and successfully used protests against responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to mobilise followers. Bernhard Weidinger from the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW) has critically examined the extreme right's reaction to the large-scale demonstrations in Vienna and points to the exaggerated and ahistorical views expressed by some of the protagonists (Weidinger, 2021). However, the author points to the effects of these mobilisations: “Although mobilisations rarely achieve their immediate goals, they create networks and politicise people, especially if they take place repeatedly and over a longer



period of time. This means that they can have a long-lasting impact and that their effects may come to the fore after a long delay. (...) They thus provide a recruitment pool and sounding board that organised right-wing extremism has hardly ever found on the streets in recent decades.” Indeed, people from all walks of life were taking part in these regular demonstrations in the heart of Vienna which brought about “unlikely coalitions” of esoterics, right-wingers, conspiracy theorists, vaccination opponents and concerned citizens with no pronounced political agenda.

### Analysis of survey results

In the Austrian case, a stronger online group identity directly predicts greater support for extremist attitudes. There is a growing strand of research emphasising the role of social media in shaping extremist attitudes, also in the case of Austria, with the increasing importance of common social media platforms and the diminishing role of forums in the darknet. Nicolas Stockhammer, an Austrian terrorism expert, argues that meanwhile, almost 80 percent of those who radicalise in the context of Islamism do so on the Internet, via social media platforms like TikTok and Twitch (see Mey 2023). There, they find content that is offered in a way suitable for the target audience: The content is always the same, but the presentation is different, and the language of young people is deliberately spoken, according to Stockhammer (ibid.) Identifying with such content strengthens the belonging and attachment to an online group, also against the background that many from this group have never really arrived in Austrian society or are not accepted.

Furthermore, the contact restrictions during the pandemic hit young people particularly hard. It can be assumed that the general affiliation with online groups has been strengthened during that time. The results of the path model further indicate that a stronger online group identity predicts higher collective narcissism, which comes as no surprise. The results in the Austrian case show that a stronger online group identity predicts stronger feelings of social cohesion in one’s neighbourhood. This is in line with research that outlines the interconnectedness of the online and offline spheres. Young people find support and peers online, which can be empowering and foster a sense of belonging, which may result in a positive impact on wellbeing (Smith et al., 2021).

Higher perceptions of anomie predict stronger perceptions that migrants pose a realistic threat to Austria. In studies on anti-migrant attitudes, this is a frequently found result. Hilde Weiss (2004), whose research results show that “the ‘crisis’ of society and the threat posed by ‘the foreigners’ combine to form a collective interpretation of the state of society’. Such interpretations are offered in political-public discourses and adopted – even when there are no mass individual threats and no immediate economic crisis. The claimed intense threat from foreigners is part of an interpretation that refers to change and modernisation, but at the same time, it is vehemently directed against phenomena of change (Friesl, Renner and Wiesel, 2010; Heinz and Glantschnigg, 2023). In Austria, as in many other countries, anomie and xenophobia are interrelated. A society characterised by multiple crises, social inequality and economic instability can lead people to look for easy solutions and possibly resort to rejecting “strangers” to channel their fears, insecurities and frustrations.

Higher populism predicts higher support for extremist attitudes. This again comes as no surprise, given the pronounced presence of populist rhetoric in party politics in Austria. The

best-known populist party is the FPÖ. It was founded as early as 1956 and has gained considerable influence in recent decades, including participation in previous governments. Due to the FPÖ's focus on immigration, nationalism, Euroscepticism and rejection of the Corona measures, the party has gained considerable influence. In current polls, party leader Herbert Kickl is in the lead when it comes to the question of who should be the next chancellor in Austria (next elections on the federal level in 2024). But populist elements can also be found in other (opposition) parties in Austria, which has led to a fragmentation of the political spectrum and a change in the political landscape. Anyway, it is the FPÖ that steers public debates using an aggressive language and hate speech according to linguists and other social scientists (Heinisch, Werner and Habersack, 2020; Wodak, 2018). They fuel xenophobic sentiments, frame immigration as a problem and associate Islam with terrorism (Ajanovic, Mayer and Sauer, 2016).

Increasingly right-wing political attitudes predicted greater individual relative deprivation (individual relative deprivation) *and* greater group relative deprivation (group relative deprivation). Increasingly, right-wing political attitudes also predicted greater perceptions that migrants are a realistic threat. Here, the question arises as to the direction of the influence: Isn't it – at least for the first result – the other way around that a perceived individual deprivation influences political attitudes, i.e., people who feel deprived are more likely to be politically right-wing and prone to populism? This would be in line with election analyses from Austria, which depict that voters for the FPÖ have comparatively low educational levels, and half of them form part of the working class (there is no specific data on income; see SORA, 2019). Regarding salient topics, voters of the FPÖ see immigration as the most important elective motif. This is also mirrored in the party's election campaigns, where the topics of group relative deprivation and anti-immigrant sentiments are often combined. The FPÖ has been repeating this argument like a prayer mill for decades. For example: "More courage for our 'Viennese blood' - Too much foreignness does no one any good" (2010 election poster).

The path model proves that a higher social dominance orientation directly predicts greater support for extremist attitudes. These results align with tendencies in other countries and with the outcomes of the European Value Study (Aichholzer et al., 2019) and the Austrian Democracy Monitor (SORA, 2023), which outlines that satisfaction with the political system and trust in political institutions is decreasing while the desire for a "strong leader" has been rising between 2018 and 2022.

The path model for the Austrian case explained 36.80% of the variability in extremism scores. SDO thereby only had an indirect effect via populism on extremist attitudes. However, while SDO and online group identity did not have a total mediating effect on extremism, a higher SDO and a stronger online group identity both directly predicted more extremist attitudes. Only political attitudes had a total positive mediating effect on extremist attitudes, driven mainly by right-wing attitudes predicting greater individual relative deprivation and, in turn, more extremist attitudes, which is in line with the previous explanations.

Due to the small sample size, it is impossible to discern between urban and peri-urban areas in analysing extremist attitudes. A comparison between those living in large cities (Vienna and capital cities of federal provinces) and those living in more rural communities shows no significant differences in political attitudes, populism and extremism. However, the divide

between urban and rural areas is increasing, and while extremism and violent acts used to be present predominantly in cities, the pandemic has made people take to the streets who did not use to express their political opinions publicly.

Attitudes towards Ukrainians and Russians: According to the results of a Eurobarometer survey (European Parliament, 2022), 74 per cent of the EU population approve of the European Union's support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion. In Austria, the proportion of supporters, at 60 per cent, was clearly below the EU average. The EU sanctions against Russia were approved by 73 per cent of respondents EU-wide, in Austria only by 57 percent. This scepticism in Austria has to be seen in relation to the right-wing FPÖ's stance on the matter, with the party leader Herbert Kickl being against the sanctions targeting Russia and positioning himself as the defender of Austria's everlasting neutrality.

The findings of the D.Rad survey confirm the results of the Eurobarometer. In the past 12 months, attitudes towards Russian migrants have improved slightly. Participants reported that their attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants in the last 12 months did not change significantly. The somehow neutral attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees can be explained by the general socio-political environment that is marked by anti-immigrant sentiments. Furthermore, individual relative deprivation and group relative deprivation increased strongly since the beginning of the war due to inflation and the energy crisis.

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