



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

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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 Italy. 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 sociopolitical and sociocultural 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.

Table of Contents

<i>About the Project</i>	2
<i>Executive Summary</i>	3
<i>1. Results</i>	5
<i>2. Situating the findings within the Italian context</i>	8
<i>3. References</i>	10

1. Results

Since only 3.14% of participants in Italy did not know their political attitudes, the variable was kept, and these participants were removed, resulting in a final sample of $n = 308$.

Descriptives

Breakdown by age and sex.

Mean age (SD)	Sex					
	Male		Female		Other	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
24.22 (4.20)	154	48.43	164	51.57	0	0.00

Breakdown by religious affiliation.

	n	%
Christian	208	65.41
Agnostic/Atheist	90	28.30
Muslim	9	2.83
Other	6	1.89
Buddhist	2	0.63
Jewish	1	0.31
Bahá'í	1	0.31
Sikh	1	0.31
Hindu	0	0.00

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

	n	%
Yes	69	21.70
No	229	72.01
Don't know	20	6.29

Breakdown of belonging to a group that is discriminated against.

On what grounds is your group discriminated against?

	n	%
Sexuality	31	44.93
Gender	21	30.43
Age	12	17.39
Other	10	14.49
Nationality	8	11.59
Disability	8	11.59

Religion	6	8.70
Language	6	8.70
Colour or race	5	7.25
Ethnic group	4	5.80

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	75	23.58	142	44.65	101	31.76
Sport or recreational organization	116	36.48	99	31.13	103	32.39
Art, music or educational organization	102	32.08	101	31.76	115	36.16
Labour union	31	9.75	130	40.88	157	49.37
Political party	50	15.72	107	33.65	161	50.63
Environmental organization	81	25.47	98	30.82	139	43.71
Professional association	68	21.38	104	32.70	146	45.91
Humanitarian or charitable organization	76	23.90	112	35.22	130	40.88
Consumer organization	58	18.24	102	32.08	158	49.69
Self-help group or mutual help group	66	20.75	100	31.45	152	47.80
Women's group	80	25.16	100	31.45	138	43.40
Other organization	41	12.89	61	19.18	216	67.92

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	68	21.38	234	73.58	16	5.03
Worked in a political party or action group	29	9.12	268	84.28	21	6.60
Worked in another ideological organization	40	12.58	262	82.39	16	5.03
Displayed a campaign badge/sticker	85	26.73	218	68.55	15	4.72
Signed a petition	190	59.75	109	34.28	19	5.97
Took part in a lawful public demonstration	142	44.65	164	51.57	12	3.77
Boycotted certain products	73	22.96	219	68.87	26	8.18
Posted or shared anything about politics online	168	52.83	133	41.82	17	5.35

Predictors of realistic threat

Holding stronger beliefs about inherent group hierarchies (social dominance orientation) was associated with a greater perceived threat from migrants to one's national ingroup and its access to resources, welfare, and power. In contrast to our predictions, believing one's ingroup to be superior to others (collective narcissism) was linked with a lower perceived threat from migrants. Regarding political ideology, more right-wing attitudes were linked with higher perceived threat from migrants.

Direct predictors of extremism

Holding stronger beliefs about inherent group hierarchies (social dominance orientation) was directly linked with increased support for extremist attitudes. Greater perceived threat to one's

national ingroup from migrants (realistic threat) and perceiving one's national ingroup to be more economically deprived relative to migrants were both linked with greater support for extremism. Regarding political ideology, holding more populist beliefs was linked with increased extremist beliefs. In terms of vulnerability, experiencing more social alienation was also associated with greater support for extremism.

Indirect predictors on extremism

Increased social dominance orientation had indirect effects on increased support for extremist attitudes via increased perceptions of realistic threat and increased group relative deprivation. Still, it also had a negative effect on decreased support via decreased populism. The total indirect effect of social dominance orientation was not significant.

A stronger online group identity had indirect effects on increased support for extremist attitudes via increased social alienation and increased populism. The total indirect effect was significant.

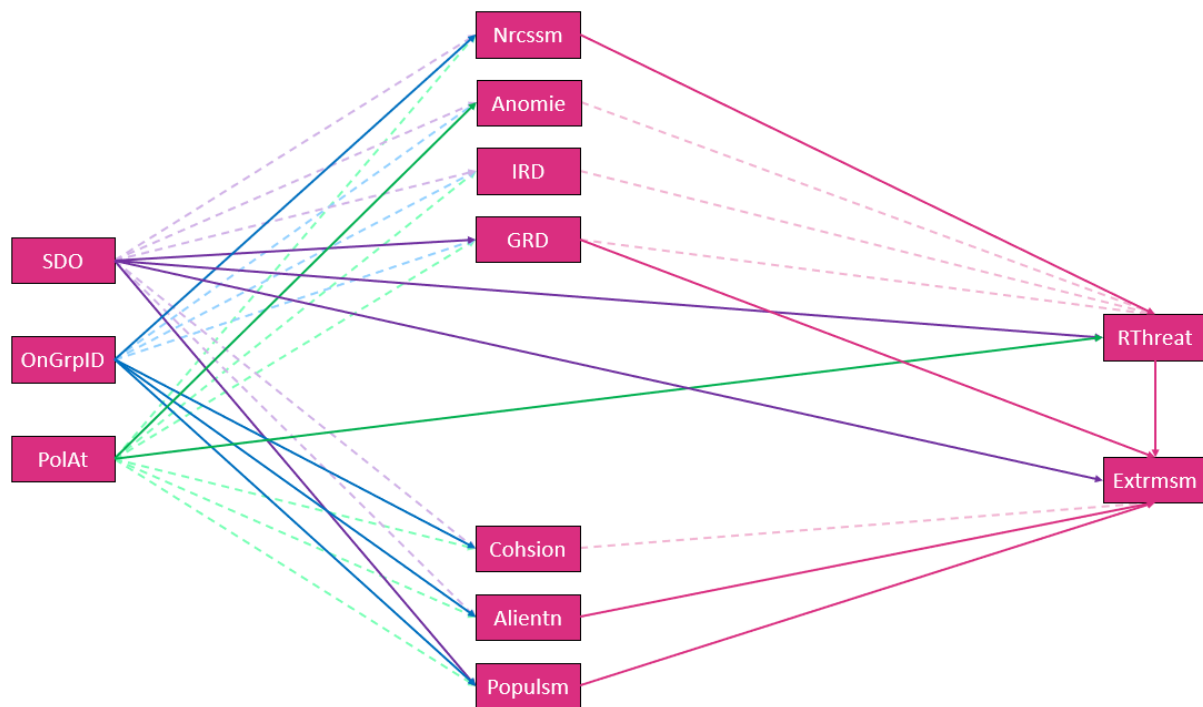
Increasingly right-wing political attitudes had an indirect effect on increased support for extremist attitudes via increased perceptions of migrants as a realistic threat. However, the total indirect effect was not significant.

Predictors of attitudes towards Russian culture, Russian and Ukrainian migrants

Experiencing more social alienation was linked with more negative attitudes towards Russia. Perceiving migrants in general as more of a threat to Italy and its resources was linked with more negative attitudes towards Russia. Additionally, endorsing more extremist attitudes was linked with more negative attitudes towards Russia. In contrast, holding more right-wing political attitudes was associated with more positive attitudes towards Russia. In terms of attitudes towards Russian migrants, feeling more embedded in one's community (social cohesion) and experiencing more social alienation were both separately linked with worsened attitudes towards Russian migrants in the past twelve months. In contrast, greater political trust predicted more improved opinions towards Russian migrants.

Regarding Ukrainian migrants, endorsing more populist ideologies was linked with worsened attitudes in the past twelve months. Conversely, holding more extremist attitudes predicted an improvement in attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants.

Figure 11. Respecified model for Italy



2. Situating the findings within the Italian context

This chapter contextualises the D.Rad Survey findings for Italy. It situates the findings in the current Italian political context, where the centre-right coalition, led by Giorgia Meloni, gained the highest number of votes (approximately 44%) in the last parliamentary elections in 2022. This victory granted the coalition an absolute majority in both chambers. Within the coalition, Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, emerged as the leading party with 26% of the votes. Fratelli d'Italia has been increasingly moving towards right-wing populism under Meloni (Donà 2022). Notwithstanding this rise in the popularity of far-right ideologies, with tangible impacts on the political agenda (AGI 2023) and on society (ilSole24Ore 2023), the most recent 2023 Europol TE-SAT report (Europol 2023) has highlighted how also left-wing extremism seems on the rise. A comparison with the previous year (Europol 2022) can show how the number of arrests in left-wing and anarchist-related offences doubled in one year. Instead, arrests of right-wing extremists dropped by two-thirds in the same period.

The survey shows that having a higher social dominance orientation (SDO) predicts increased group relative deprivation (group relative deprivation) and greater support for extremist attitudes. At the same time, a higher SDO directly predicted stronger perceptions that migrants pose a realistic threat to Italy and its resources. Similarly, increased perceptions that migrants pose a realistic threat to Italy and its resources predicted greater support for extremist attitudes. Furthermore, increasingly right-wing political attitudes predicted decreased anomie. Indeed, the alleged presence of different advantaged groups, lobbies and/or 'the powers that be' (*poteri forti*), as well as a general breakdown of social standards and legitimacy of the political leadership, has been endorsed and exploited several times by far-right politicians, especially before the right-wing coalition won the 2022 elections. The main narratives in this regard concern, for instance, the supposed advantages of immigrants in the request of some

welfare services (ilGiornale 2023), the claimed wealth of those operating in the 'migration business' (ilGiornale 2020), the activities of the so-called LGBTQIA+ lobby (laRepubblica 2022), and the so-called 'Great Replacement'/*sostituzione etnica* (Avvenire 2023). Nevertheless, it is also underlined that members of the governing coalition, particularly Meloni, have softened their stance on other topics, such as Euroscepticism (ilFoglio 2022), after the electoral success.

Regarding online group identity, the survey shows that a stronger online group identity predicted stronger feelings of collective narcissism, stronger feelings of social cohesion in one's neighbourhood and community, stronger feelings of social alienation, and increased populism. These findings again underscore digital environments' polarising and alienating power, especially regarding social media (among others, Tokita, Guess & Tarnita 2021; although there are also dissenting views – see, for instance, Nordbrandt 2021). Indeed, this issue has already been pointed out in D.Rad's report 5.2 (Crepaz 2023).

Social media intensify so-called echo chambers: "environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes" (Cinelli et al., 2021). Group polarisation theory (Sunstein 2002) states that echo chambers can drive groups towards more extreme opinions. Ranking algorithms lead to filter bubbles (Pariser 2011): users are no longer exposed to dissenting views but continue in a reinforcement and polarisation spiral. As Robert Putnam argues (2000: 178), fundamental world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, while the virtual world may be more homogeneous. This characteristic, referred to by Sunstein (2018) as "enclave deliberation", comprises both a blessing and a curse: it allows marginalised populations to create shared safe spaces online, where they can gather and mobilise (see also the agents of de-radicalisation presented below). However, it also leads to more and more polarisation and radicalisation in political discourse and society, with anti-vax communities as the most recent prominent example.

Accordingly, this polarising effect of social media interplays with other survey results, namely that increased feelings of social alienation predict higher support for extremist attitudes and, consequently, that increased populism predicted greater support for extremist attitudes. Although other research is necessary, the survey may suggest a direct path of radicalisation that starts with online polarisation, continues with support for populist ideas and ends with the endorsement of more extremist ideologies.

The survey also shows that increased collective narcissism predicted decreased perceptions of migrants as a realistic threat. This correlation can be explained by resorting to the concept of *radical chic*, *gauche caviar*, *champagne socialist* or to the alleged – although declining – moral superiority of left-wing parties, their ideologies and their rhetoric (ilFattoQuotidiano 2023; Domani 2022; Panorama 2021). Such moral superiority does not correlate with education imbalances between right- and left-wing electorates – as Fratelli d'Italia was first party among both graduated and ungraduated voters (SkyTg24 2022) – but it can be linked to a potential class divide since the former left-wing ruling party *Partito Democratico* has

increasingly been linked to a specific section of the left-wing electorate, namely the (mainly urban) upper middle class (De Sio 2018)

The D.Rad survey on Italy confirms the ongoing polarisation in society and alienation between specific segments of the population and more moderate political elites, as pointed out in the introduction. On the one hand, the extremist rhetoric used by the right-wing coalition to gain support for the 2022 elections has had a lasting impact on public opinion, even after Meloni and her allies softened their stances on many former right-wing core issues. On the other hand, left-wing voting is becoming increasingly embedded in class dynamics, to the point that left-wing parties have lost their representative role for the lower classes (both educated and non-educated) and have become parties of the elite, with an apparent detachment from the most pressing needs, concerns, and fears of the broader population. Against this backdrop, much political communication and debate has shifted to online arenas, mainly social networks, whose algorithms may boost an already polarised and alienated society.

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