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Assessing Radicalization Risks in the Adolescent and Youth Environment

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Abstract

Introduction: representatives of socio-psychological science focus their attention on the problem of radicalization due to the social demand to prevent this phenomenon in the adolescent and youth environment. The development of tools for assessing radicalization risks is a very important tool for early diagnosis. *Purpose:* theoretical and analytical research to critically analyze current models for assessing radicalization risks. *Results:* considerable attention is paid to the analysis of tools for assessing radicalization risks, used in penitentiary systems of different countries. In addition, risk assessment models in a wider population are discussed. *Conclusion:* the conducted study shows that it is necessary to consider the radicalization process through the prism of such a theoretical tradition that would be adequate to the study of the phenomenon itself (radicalization, being a process of terrorism legitimization, is understood as a phenomenon occurring in a group context). In addition, the model for assessing radicalization risks should be based on a theoretical tradition that would receive a solid experimental test.

Keywords: terrorism; radicalization; risk assessment; radicalization risk assessment models; adolescent and youth environment; explanation levels in social psychology, social identity.

5.3.9. Legal psychology and security psychology.

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Introduction.

Among numerous definitions of terrorism that exist in the literature, we will consider the following: “actions of non-state actors associated with the threat or actual use of illegal force or violence to achieve a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation” [1, p. 496]. Terrorist activity violates the fundamental prohibition of violence, directed at unarmed, innocent citizens, existing in different cultures and religions [1].

Radicalization is understood as the process leading to the commission of an act of terrorism and legitimization of terrorism [2]. A significant addition to the above definition of terrorism is an indication that terrorist activities are carried out by a group, similarly, it is important to understand that the process of radicalization is a process occurring in a group context.

The above indicates the importance and relevance of studying radicalization process mechanisms, as well as identifying predictors of involvement in terrorist activities. Only this kind of knowledge can be used as the basis for a risk assessment model. The purpose of the theoretical and analytical study proposed in this paper is to critically analyze current models for assessing radicalization risks.

The core.

Critical analysis of models for assessing radicalization risks.

Risk assessment (in the most general sense) can be defined as an attempt to “forecast the probability of a future, usually negative event, by considering factors that are believed to be associated with the probability of an event” [3, p. 283]. Mental health spe-

cialists use such tools to decide on risks of an individual committing a particular type of violence [3; 4]. The analysis of the tools used to assess risks in case of radicalization and transition to terrorist acts indicates that they are based on the same logic [4].

On the one hand, the advantages associated with the use of risk assessment tools are obvious, since the identification of individuals vulnerable to the process of radicalization is a way to prevent radicalization. The earlier this happens, the greater number of positive effects it has. Considering stage-by-stage radicalization models analyzed by M. King and D. Taylor [5], we observe that the radicalization rates vary from stage to stage and the mechanisms involved in this process differ.

On the other hand, there is a number of serious obstacles to assessing or forecasting risks of committing terrorist acts by an individual taking a radicalization path. One obstacle concerns the problem of forecasting in psychology in general [6]. Still, turning to step-by-step radicalization models, it becomes obvious that not all individuals who begin the process of radicalization reach its end [5; 7]. This is especially vividly demonstrated in the model proposed by F. Moghaddam, where radicalization is defined as a progressive process realized through the passage of 6 stages (or levels). The passage of each stage brings an individual closer to terrorism, making this action more legitimate [5; 7].

An attempt to forecast person’s action is most likely based on the postulates of the theoretical model or regularity and requires special care in application [4; 6]. This leads to another obstacle of an ethical nature: making a forecast may mean that an individual is giv-

en a kind of label regarding the risk of committing terrorist acts [4].

Besides, the logic of building a risk assessment model is not new, the obstacles outlined above on the way to make a forecast should be taken into account in order to find a more reliable and subtle tool for assessing radicalization risks

Traditionally, there are three approaches to risk assessment. On the one hand, we are talking about an approach in which experts who make decisions about risk assessment appeal to their professional experience and knowledge of the individual's characteristics. Such an expert assessment has shortcomings associated with various kinds of biases, effects of social perception, subjectivity in decision-making [4]. On the other hand, it is possible to distinguish between an approach based on risk assessment using a number of indicators, on the basis of which an integral indicator of an individual's risk is calculated with a help of a certain algorithm. This approach has some advantages, in particular, procedures and criteria are explicated here, on the basis of which decisions are made about risks, vulnerability of the subject, and probability of committing an act [4]. At the same time, as a serious drawback of this approach, one can see the theoretical construction that underlies the assumption on the basis of which a system of empirical indicators for measuring risk is being developed.

Finally, it seems possible to talk about an intermediate variant if the previous approaches are interpreted as a kind of continuum poles. The third variant combines the first two, which allows, up to a certain limit, to overcome shortcomings of each approach and use available advantages. Backing the stance of K. Sarma, we can argue that it is the third approach that turns out to be the most flexible and adequate in the situation of uncertainty (characterized by a lack of information when making a decision about risks) [4].

Current models for assessing radicalization risks have certain specifics, since they have been primarily used in the penitentiary system of some countries. Special programs to train penitentiary system employees give the

opportunity to use various tools for assessing radicalization risks. As a result, decisions are made about the reintegration of convicts [4]. In addition, radicalization in prisons is an urgent problem, repeatedly discussed in literature [8, pp. 138–153]; the application of the tool for estimating radicalization risks helps develop and implement a monitoring system among convicts.

A monitoring system to identify the youth outside penitentiary institutions vulnerable to radicalization is developed to a lesser extent [4; 9]. Reflecting on the possibilities of using the currently available experience of risk assessment, we will undertake a critical analysis of relevant models used mainly for convicts in places of deprivation of liberty [4; 10; 11]. Tools and their mechanisms used by security specialists can be identified. Besides, some models are designed to assess risk in the general population (aged 12–14). Such risk assessment tools are of interest in the logic of our theoretical and analytical research. What is more, consideration of advantages and shortcomings of these models helps us work out a more effective system for assessing radicalization risks in the adolescent and youth environment.

Radicalization risks are estimated on the basis of one or another model [10; 11]; we will consider each of them.

The VERA-2R model (Violent Extremist Risk Assessment 2 Revised) is designed to estimate the likelihood of extremist behavior associated with violence to further elaborate and use an appropriate control system. It is applicable to evaluate all ideological types of extremism (political, religious, social) among young people and adults. Thirty-four indicators are grouped into 5 domains: 1) beliefs, attitudes and ideology; 2) social context and intention; 3) history, actions and capacity; 4) commitment and motivation; 5) protective and risk-mitigating indicators. There are 11 additional factors (criminal history, personal history, mental distress). An expert makes a decision on the basis of indicators on the scales. Severity of each parameter can be estimated as low, moderate, and high. The model assumes that risk and protection fac-

tors are dynamic and changeable formations, hence repeated measurements are required to track individual dynamics [10; 11].

The ERG22+ model (Extremism Risk Guidelines 22+) [10; 11] is designed to assess the likelihood of extremist behavior associated with violence to further elaborate and use an appropriate control system. This model is suitable for assessing risks in case of any type of extremism (political, religious, social) among those convicted of extremism (of any kind). Due to the screening system of the model, it can be used in relation to those who have not been convicted of extremism, but can be vulnerable to radicalization. The system includes 22 risk factors organized into three domains: 1) engagement; 2) intent; 3) capability. At the same time, the “+” sign in the model name suggests that a number of additional parameters can be used when making a decision [10; 11].

The RRAP model (Radicalization Risk Assessment in Prisons) [11] is aimed at assessing a vulnerability degree and extremism risks to develop follow-up measures. The target population consists of convicts prone to extremism (political, religious or social) associated with violence. This tool integrates information received at various levels of the penitentiary institution hierarchy, namely: 1) information received from the management; the key here is to obtain data on situational factors of radicalization; 2) information given by ordinary employees (security guards, educational department representatives, etc.). Monitoring convicts' behavior, it is possible to record changes in it that indicate the process of radicalization (a kind of transition from the cognitive level to the behavioral); 3) information received from convicts themselves (screening tool). Thus, the decision is made on the basis of accumulating all the information. In general, the model includes 39 items grouped into 9 domains [11].

The purpose of **the IR46 model (Islamic Radicalization)** [10; 11] is to detect signs of radical Islamist behavior and readiness for committing violent acts. It is limited only to Islamist extremism, while being addressed to individuals from the general population; it is

aimed at those who show signs of extremism. The age of the target group is 12 years and over. Forty-six indicators correspond to two spheres: ideology (20 indicators) and social context (26 indicators), while both spheres operate simultaneously, in each case either one or another outweighs [10; 11]. At the same time, the model takes into account the thesis that the process of radicalization unfolds over time, passing through stages (initial stage, social alienation stage, jihadization – the stage when an individual accepts the need to use violence, finally, at the last stage there is a transition to extremist actions or jihad). Risk indicators are dynamic and can change, so the model is more aimed at assessing the current state than at forecasting. The repeated use of indicators shows the dynamics of individual's radicalization risks.

The RADAR-iTE model (Rule-Based Analysis of Potentially Destructive Perpetrators to Assess Acute Risk – Islamist Terrorism) is the most specialized one for the penitentiary context, since it is aimed at seeking out Islamists who are ready to commit violent acts, i.e. we are talking only about Islamist extremism. The target population is those already considered to pose a very high risk (well-known terrorists) who are about to be released from prison. The assessment process is carried out in two phases: 1) gathering of all available information about the extremist individual by a penitentiary system employee; 2) a questionnaire (73 questions) concerning a convicted person (an individual with a high risk level). It includes questions concerning personal and social life events and social network, as well as proof of jihad-motivated travel, history of violence, etc. [11].

All these models appeal to different explanatory constructs: for example, it is an ideology in the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment, an identity in the Extremism Risk Guidelines, and a social environment of the individual in the RADAR-iTE model [11]. The Islamic Radicalization model was initially based on the ideas of F.M. Moghaddam [7]. Attention is drawn to the fact that the mismatch of empirical facts and the theoretical framework led to the rejection of the logic of 6 stages of the model

leading to the commission of a terrorist act, which, from a theoretical point of view, turns out to be debatable.

The Violent Extremist Risk Assessment model combines proposals of some models and theories, including the model of M. Sageman, theories of A. Bandura and A. Kruglanski [10; 11]. In the Extremism Risk Guidelines the theoretical framework combines ideas belonging to various conceptual schemes: the theory of reasoned action by A. Ajzen and M. Fishbein [10], the theory of authoritarian personality by T. Adorno [10], and the social identity theory by H. Tajfel [12; 13].

The models differ in the number of risk factors on the basis of which a decision is made about radicalization risks. In the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment and the Islamic Radicalization, it is assumed that an expert making a decision about radicalization risks relies on additional risk factors [11]. Protection factors vary from a small number of fixed variables (Violent Extremist Risk Assessment) to an unlimited number (Islamic Radicalization) [11]. Along with critical comments, it is worth mentioning that risk factors are considered as dynamic and changeable formations, which makes all these systems tools for monitoring radicalization risks

All these instruments are intended for professional use and require special training to make decisions [11]. The analysis of models for assessing radicalization risks, used mainly in the penitentiary system of a number of countries [10; 11], suggests that these tools require the most serious theoretical and methodological understanding and experimental verification.

Finally, we can talk about some other models that go beyond the penitentiary system. They are of particular interest, since we plan to work out a model for assessing radicalization risks in the adolescent and youth environment.

The IVP model (Identification of Vulnerable People) is aimed at identifying individuals vulnerable to recruitment for extremist actions [10]. The target population is individuals who may be prone to radicalization (this tool is applicable to a wide audience). The model

includes two rows of indicators. Common risk indicators include the following: 1) cultural and/or religious isolation; 2) isolation from family; 3) risk-related behavior; 4) sudden change of religious practice; 5) rhetoric related to violence; 6) negative peer influence; 7) isolated peer group; 8) hate-related rhetoric; 9) political activism; 10) basic military training; 11) travel/residence abroad. The second group of indicators (the so-called "red flag" indicators): 1) rhetoric related to death; 2) membership in an extremist group; 3) contacts with known recruiters/extremists; 4) advanced military training; 5) participation in foreign military operations [10]. The model is intended for the use by specialists in the field of education.

The MLG model 2 (Multilevel Governance 2) involves identification of individuals who are ready to commit violent acts as part of a group, including terrorism, i.e. we are talking about any variant of extremism. The target audience is individuals from the general population (aged 14 and over), members of any groups. The model includes 16 main risk factors grouped into four areas: individual, individual-group, group and group-social [10].

Finally, **the TRAP-18 model (Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol)** is aimed at identifying individuals who are ready to commit an ideologically motivated and intentional act of violence against a person or group of persons. The target population is individuals who are ready to participate in ideologically motivated violence (identified by law enforcement officers). On the one hand, this model is more focused on single terrorists; however, on the other hand, it can also be applied to cases of terrorist activity in a group.

As noted above, among those models used in the penitentiary system, some can also be used in a wider population.

The controversial use of these risk assessment models is due to a number of features: even leaving aside ethical issues (although the models mention compliance with the ethical codes of psychological associations of certain countries [10]), there remains an open question about radicalization mechanisms these models rely on. Do they proceed

from the concepts that have been tested in experimental studies? At best, these evaluation models rely on a combination of ideas belonging to a number of theoretical models [10; 11]. At worst, the models are descriptive, based on a number of observations. In our opinion, the problem in the strategy of the synthetic theoretical framework is that these theories are individually empirically or even experimentally tested, but their fragmentary use requires appropriate consideration at the theoretical and methodological level, since the theories themselves belong to different levels of socio-psychological explanation, from intra-individual to ideological [14]. Experimental verification is necessary to establish causal relations.

Among other things, it is disputable whether the decision made is accurate, there are effects and phenomena of social perception that distort perception at the interpersonal level, complicating the accuracy of assessments, and a fundamental attribution error is allowed.

Along with the models discussed above used to assess radicalization risks in the general population, it is worth mentioning that in a number of countries in educational institutions and organizations working with young people, indicator systems are used to assess the vulnerability of individuals [4]. One system was developed as part of the SAFIRE project based on consultations with anti-radicalization specialists (N=28). This system includes indicators (21 signs) grouped in this way: 1) identity and identity search; 2) ingroup and outgroup differentiation; 3) social interaction that promotes violence, combined with distancing from the usual environment (friends and family); 4) image transformation; 5) association with extremist groups [4]. The system is based on the method of observing individuals' behavior.

Another example of such a system is a practical guide aimed at diagnosing the degree of vulnerability to radicalization. The first level includes features of the cognitive-emotional spectrum that make a person vulnerable to the influence of a terrorist group. The second level is a number of signs that indicate

an individual's willingness to use violence, combined with the dehumanization of certain categories targeted by terrorist groups. The third level concerns infliction of harm (we are talking about knowledge, skills and abilities, free access to appropriate equipment) [4]. In general, we can talk about some allusions with step-by-step radicalization models [5].

Not diminishing the significance and importance of available risk assessment tools, nevertheless, we will make a number of critical comments. On the one hand, in both cases, there is neither clear description of psychological radicalization mechanisms, nor of a theoretical model that would substantiate this terrorism legitimization process. On the other hand, in both cases it seems possible to state the presence of certain allusions to the social identity approach, focused on psychological processes (social categorization, social comparison and social identification) that clarify how people's social identity differs from personal identity and how social identity is formed and operates [15, pp. 379–398].

In the first system an individual is radicalized as a member of a group [16; 17, pp. 75–85], which constructs a certain social reality for him/her, forms a social identity, and as a consequence distances him/her from the usual environment (family and friends).

The second system proposes to determine radicalization by observing the behavior of radicalized subjects with a set of indicators; so, the parameters of one of the levels will become clear in the logic of the social identity approach: for example, groups with extremist and radical views set their members social reality, determine what is right, and what is not. Consequently, group members receive an unambiguous basis for evaluating representatives of the outgroup, dehumanizing them, which, as a result, justifies any actions against these people [18, pp. 19–35].

Despite certain allusions to the social identity approach, in particular, it concerns the search for identity (in fact, social identity), intergroup perception (in- and outgroup differentiation), distancing from close surroundings (family and friends), and connection with

extremist groups can be interpreted as a change of identity; the however, both risk assessment systems are not formulated within the framework of this approach, and do not fully use its capacities, do not rely on the logic and mechanisms of the approach, which would increase the value of these models.

It is worth noting that the recognition of signs associated with radicalization in both systems indicates that an individual has passed a significant part of the path called radicalization (in accordance with the definition used above [2], this is the path leading to terrorism legitimization). In this regard, the technology of risk assessment should be based on diagnostic tools that would allow recognizing radicalization signs at an earlier stage. It can be assumed that the speed of the radicalization process differs at the very beginning and the end of this path. As the analysis of the stage-by-stage radicalization models shows, initially “radicalization events” occur mainly in cognitive terms and at the stages close to the radicalization process completion this process turns into the behavioral plan and the plan of social practices and relationships. This feature is also reflected in the risk assessment models discussed here. So, in both models, visible manifestations correspond to such a point on the radicalization path, when a significant part of the path has already been passed.

These examples clearly demonstrate that a radicalization risk assessment model should have an adequate theoretical scheme, the explanatory power of which correlates with the radicalization process specifics, in which the relationships between variables are conceptualized and based on experimental facts.

The current situation is developing in such a way that the needs of practice for the development of a tool to estimate radicalization risks are still ahead of the possibilities of psychological science. This concerns, first of all, the fact that the risk assessment model, which could be used to forecast the probability of committing terrorist activity, necessarily assumes an experimentally tested theoretical framework, and this, according to the current study results, is still the zone of proximal de-

velopment in the field of radicalization risk assessment.

Conclusion.

A critical analysis of the existing radicalization models helps conclude that it is necessary to consider the radicalization process through the prism of such a theoretical tradition that is adequate to the study of the phenomenon itself (radicalization, being a process of legitimization of terrorism, is understood as a phenomenon occurring in a group context).

The speed of the radicalization process differs at the very beginning and at the end of this path (coming to the legitimization of terrorism). As the analysis of stage-by-stage radicalization models [5] reveals, initially “radicalization events” occur mainly in cognitive terms, then at the stages close to the completion of the radicalization process – in the behavioral plan, the plan of social practices and relationships. It is this transition that is often regarded as “rapid radicalization”, although the behavioral plan of radicalization is preceded by the processes hidden from observation, occurring at the cognitive level.

In the risk assessment models currently used [4], this fact is taken into account. However, they are based on the method of observing behavioral characteristics of a radicalized individual, that is why vivid manifestations correspond to a point on the radicalization path when a significant part of the path has already been passed. The complexity to construct a model for radicalization risk assessment, based on early recognition of radicalization signs, is due to the fact that the focus is on what is happening at the cognitive level of an individual vulnerable to radicalization; each moment of the radicalization process probably has its own cognitive affective features; the diagnostic tool assumes a certain subtlety in order to prevent erroneous judgments about vulnerability of the subject.

The critical analysis of risk assessment models based on at least some theoretical basis allows us to talk about the need to develop such a model, which would proceed from a single approach, and not from a set

of ideas borrowed from a number of theories belonging, moreover, to different levels of the epistemological continuum [14]. Combining ideas will require appropriate theoretical and methodological substantiation of the provisions followed by experimental verification.

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