

THE LAST STOP

Violent extremism is the last stop in a long process. It is the most visible type of extremism and it creates deep and painful traces in many people's lives. With hindsight we ask ourselves over and over what we could have done differently. It is not necessarily wrong if we do it to learn, but if we do it to undo what cannot be undone, our starting point is wrong. We do not have time to regret. We have time to act and we must do that all the time, because violent extremism is about people's lives.



It is about the fate of people who we might be able to help. The debate about violent extremism is not necessarily merely about what we are left with in the aftermath of a tragic event, but about what forms people who are willing to take to violence to express their opinions.

In 2011 the Norwegian Government building was bombed in Oslo. Only hours later, politically engaged youth were chased and killed at a summer camp on an island. 77 lives were lost because one man felt that he had to resort to violent extremism. There are no excuses for such actions or any arguments that might justify them. So why did violence become the last recourse? Was there no room for Anders Behring Breivik's opinions in the public debate? Was there no community he could be part of that gave him a sense of belonging? Was there no one who saw the process he went through? I think these questions are universal when it comes to violent extremists. We ask them over and over again when such events take place. No people are born extremists. It's a gradual process whether it is political or religious extremism. I have no professional expertise to provide right and nuanced answers, but by virtue of my personal experience, I think I can contribute to shed some light on this topic.

We all know how it feels to be lonely once in a while. Some feel the loneliness all the time. They miss a community, a sense of belonging, which can strengthen their identity. Sometimes I wonder if people who resort to violence are lonely. No loneliness can justify such actions. Loneliness itself is never the main reason for violent extremist actions. But it is perhaps one of many factors that all together create a human being who no longer acts human. By what crossroads have these people been let down? By what crossroads have they disappointed themselves? Maybe some of them have lived outside the community for many years.

Maybe we are easier formed in communities where we feel a sense of belonging, and maybe that is why people who are lonely have to search for companionship by themselves for a long time. When they find something that resembles a companion, they might easily accept whatever views the companion holds. Therefore, I now ask myself when I meet people who seem alone: "Do they feel excluded? Can we expand the circle a bit, so that there will be space for them? Is it better to let intolerant, abnormal or even extremists' opinions be voiced inside society's circle of open debate, than for the people who held them to be left outside the circle and feel lonely?" The desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves can do a lot to us.

In the last decades, the focus on violent extremism has been primarily on minority youth whose parents immigrated to Europe. The reason why some become extremists has been coupled with the search for identity. This youth grow up in an environment where the expectations from parents and society can be too much to live up to, which makes them seek out others in similar situations. In certain situations this identity feeling can be so strong that it tends towards identity models shaped by extremist groups. Yet, with the example of 22nd of July 2011 in Norway, we see that this search for identity or roots does not only affect this minority small group within society. It is a phenomenon that affects a lot of people in the post-modern society where everyone has the opportunity of self-accomplishment. Thus, it is important to maintain an open mind and sight, because extremism is something people can hide under the surface.

In this gradual process towards extremism, people might see, hear or otherwise notice symptoms. I think we all as individuals can contribute to preventing extremism. We can include more people in our communities; we can debate against extreme opinions, alert family or others that are close to a person who is in danger of acting on their extreme opinions. Politicians need to focus on creating common meeting grounds where there is room for different opinions and people. That is one way different people can meet and develop tolerance and respect for each other. At the same time these are also areas in which a sense of belonging and identity can be built. There, clear guidelines should be created to define what schools, universities and work places must do when they become aware of someone at risk of acting on extremist views.

This is also about keeping more than one thought in the head at the same time. The first one is that those holding extremist views know that there are sanctions for acting upon their views. The second one is that people observing others who are developing extremist views know how to act to prevent them from committing violent actions. Preventing extremism is about setting clear boundaries and making sure the consequences for overstepping them are known. That will make the threshold for resorting to violence higher. Law has to clearly embody the principle that there is room for extreme opinions, but not for extremist actions.

Extreme opinions are not dangerous in themselves. There should be a very high threshold to ban the voicing of an opinion, but the problem arises when the extreme opinions remain in a closed forum where only people with the same views debate. By letting extreme opinions and voices join the larger area of the open debate in society, we contribute to letting different voices out in the light. In an open debate, opinions can be discussed and met by critical and constructive counter-arguments.

Whatever we do, we must always remember that extreme opinions are allowed, but it is when these expressions became violent acts, that the process has gone too far. There is a lot you and I as individuals and as part of a community can do to prevent violent acts from happening. For prevention we need knowledge and we must put aside beliefs and prejudices. The renowned Norwegian author Lars Saabye Christensen wrote: "Ignorance is the greenhouse where the most horrible flowers grow."

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