

# On the need to develop a unified terminological approach to the concept of ‘extremism’

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the issues of understanding the term ‘extremism’. The research results showing that in society (among both ordinary citizens and representatives of law enforcement agencies), despite the existing bias against extremism, there is no clear understanding of the meaning of this term are presented. Consideration of extremism without taking into account the meaning and context of the term itself leads to a narrow understanding of the phenomenon and its consequences. This has led to extremism being described in such terms as ‘terrorism’ and ‘radicalisation’ or ‘polarisation’, which require responses (such as counter-terrorism measures and military action) from governments to combat this form of extremism. In our opinion, this approach is not entirely correct and, in some cases, can lead to negative consequences, since the problem of extremism has rather deep roots and an understanding of the social and psychological origins of this phenomenon is required for its effective solution. An analysis of its context provides additional insight into possible solutions to combat extremism. This may prompt governments to take action to ensure a more sustainable approach to countering extremism.

**Keywords:** extremism, extremist activities, radicalisation, extremist ideology

## 1 Introduction

A kind of payment for the modern freedom of society and diversity in public life is the emergence of radical social groups focused on violence. For such a threat, the concept of extremism is being increasingly used, which first entered into political discourse, and then into legal and administrative practice, and finally into scientific circulation.

The problem of extremism exacerbated by the crisis of ethno-legal values affects almost all modern countries including Russia.

Radical political ideologies of hatred, the rapid spread of terror and genocide are one of the key challenges facing humanity. Lack of social stability – from economic crisis to natural disasters – plays a large role in the promotion of extremist behaviour.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the currently existing scientific and legal definitions of the concept of ‘extremism’, as well as, on the basis of the analysis, develop possible options for improving the legal mechanisms to counter this phenomenon. The

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hypothesis is that by understanding the term ‘extremism’ for what it really is, it will be possible to find comprehensive solutions to combat this problem.

## 2 Materials and methods

To solve this problem, an extensive analysis of scientific literature and publications focused on extremism was carried out; in addition, the existing legal definitions of extremism and extremist activities were analysed. The major focus was put on works that provide an in-depth analysis of understanding of the extremist activities and extremist ideas in society, as well as the social and political consequences of the current counter-extremism policy.

## 3 Results and discussion

First of all, it should be noted that initially the research into extremist ideologies, that support terrorist actions, was closely related to various anti-terrorist strategies and was carried out precisely within the framework of counteracting the commission of terrorist acts on the territory of a particular state [1]; however, the emergence of the Islamic State, which thousands of people joined around the world, showed that a more detailed research into the processes that turn ordinary law-abiding citizens into terrorists is needed. A new concept of countering extremism arose, according to which the law enforcement agencies of countries had to resist not specific illegal actions but primarily the spread of ideas leading to the radicalisation of an individual. Measures to combat terrorism have been redirected to processes that can be eliminated by deactivating ideas leading to radicalisation [2, 3]. The key international, regional and local anti-terrorist programmes gave priority to the prevention of radicalisation and the spread of extremist ideas. This meant improving the fight against terrorism by focusing on not manifestations of violence but its pre-emption through the identification of signs of ideological radicalisation. Thus, anti-terrorism entered the pre-criminal space, and prevention became its key concept and practice by changing the scope of its implementation.

Political, religious and other forms of extremism are a global threat that challenges various state and international structures and causes great human and financial losses. Therefore, preventive measures have become even more important, as security and control measures against terrorism have been less successful than expected. The phenomena mentioned are complex, and there is no consensus on terminology in various areas of research [4].

Studies conducted earlier by various scientists have shown that there is no clear understanding in society of what the concept of ‘extremism’ includes. For example, the majority of young people do not have a clear idea of what extremism is (67%). 22% of participants admit the lack of knowledge about extremism in general. It should be noted that 14% of the answers covering the content of the concept of ‘extremism’ indicate a misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation by the respondents. Extremism was taken for extreme sports; a specific lifestyle was identified with ‘extreme’. However, about half of the respondents characterise extremism as one of the pressing challenges.

Young people consider extremism as a phenomenon inherent in the areas of political and national interests (33% of respondents noted these areas); some perceive it as an attribute of religious struggle (28%) [5]. A similar picture with the understanding of extremism can be seen in other age groups [6].

In summarising the definitions of the ‘extremism’ concept given in the reference literature, one can see that the content of the definition includes the political component of

extremist activities, which, in our opinion, does not reflect the full breadth of manifestations of extremism at the present time.

In the existing definitions of extremism, in essence, the emphasis is on the extreme radicalism and harshness of actions. However, the problem is that the boundaries of this extreme nature of extremist behaviour and the content of its actions depend on specific cultural and historical conditions, which, in turn, are determined by society. Consequently, ‘extremism’ means a violation of the state’s monopoly of violence: in each case, it is the state that determines what extremism is. As a consequence, extremism, especially Islamic extremism, is often identified with such terms as ‘terrorism’, ‘war on terror’ and ‘Islamic radicalisation’ [7]. However, these three terms are subjective in relation to the views of a particular state and exacerbate the inability to find a holistic solution to the problem of extremism.

If we consider the understanding of extremism in terms of violation of human rights and freedoms, then such an interpretation of this term is usually regulated in various kinds of regulatory documents of a global, state and regional nature. For example, in the Concept of Cooperation between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which establishes the actions of the participating countries in the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, the definition of this concept is formulated as follows: ‘extremism is any act aimed at the forcible seizure of power or the forcible retention of authorities, as well as the forcible change in the constitutionally established state order, as well as a forcible encroachment on public security including the organisation of illegal armed groups for the above purposes or participation in them, and prosecuted in accordance with the national law of the Parties’ [8]. In the federal law No. 114-FZ ‘Counteracting Extremist Activities’, this concept includes ‘violent change in the foundations of the constitutional order and violation of the integrity of the Russian Federation’; incitement to social, racial, national or religious hatred based on the superiority of a person or group of persons on the relevant grounds and infringing on the rights, freedom and legitimate interests of a person; infringement of human freedom, which consists in ‘obstructing the exercise by citizens of their electoral rights <...>, combined with violence or the threat of its use; <...> mass distribution of deliberately extremist materials, as well as their production or storage for the purpose of mass distribution, etc.’ [9].

Thus, in accordance with the regulatory documents of international and Russian legislation, the concepts of ‘extremism’ and ‘extremist activities’ are differentiated. To a greater extent, the concept of ‘extremism’ reflects the general motives and motives that guide extremist organisations, that is, ‘violate rights and freedoms’, ‘shake the constitutional order’, etc., without reflecting the ideological component of extremism. The content of the term ‘extremist activities’ specifies actions to achieve these goals and their nature.

A somewhat different picture is emerging in the scientific and educational literature, our study of which showed that there are many opinions of scientists about the understanding of this term, among which we can distinguish definitions with an emphasis on the presence of ‘extreme views and measures’, or with an emphasis on ‘vigorous activities’. For example, V.Yu. Golubovsky interprets the term “extremism” as a belief in extreme views and measures, a denial of the existing traditional state norms of morality and rules of conduct on the part of individuals or groups of individuals. A similar definition is formulated in the study by N.N. Afanasiev. The author believes that this term should be understood as ‘adherence to extreme interpretations’ that is based on not only intolerance to a different point of view but the lack of a sense of proportion in its manifestation. Usually, a person operates with distorted and hypertrophied ideas about reality. This ‘combination’ leads to the expression of disagreement in the language of aggression and violence [10].

Another point of view is noted in the studies of N.G. Baryshnikov, A.Kh. Valeeva, S.M. Sityaeva, S.V. Yarichuk and others, according to which violence in its extreme manifestations and aggressive forms is extremism. However, the author emphasises that the use of violence is sometimes necessary to ‘resolve various extreme situations and is permissible in self-defence, in the context of suppression of crimes and offences etc.’ [11]. A.Yu. Golovin, T.A. Aristarkhov. Thus, under the term ‘extremism’ they understand ‘certain activities’ based on the rigid assertion and imposition of their views, ideas and judgments [12].

Worthy of separate attention is the scientific and educational research on the disclosure of the content of the term ‘extremism’. For example, in her research into the development of the methodological guidelines for the work of the supervisor on the prevention of youth extremism, T.N. Petrova believes that extremism is a ‘phenomenon associated with the manifestation of aggression, but at the same time it has its own distinctive essential features and is not limited to her <...> Extremism is an extreme form of intolerance combined with aggression and violence as methods of expressing intransigence towards another, this is the ‘aristocracy of aggression’, and explains this by the fact that in the general array of aggressive manifestations, extremist ones are less common than others, and differ in ‘consciousness special mission, radical self-denunciation, its own code of conduct’ [13]. However, the position of T.V. Romanova is closer to us in this area. In her work, she formulated the following definition of this concept, ‘extremism is an extreme form of intolerance combined with aggression and violence as methods of expressing intransigence towards another’ [14].

A slightly different definition of the concept of ‘extremism’ is given by E.P. Sergun who believes that ‘extremism should be understood as adherence to a whole system of views, concepts, ideas or ideas based on political, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity against an individual, any social group, nation or state, without having an external expression. As soon as the extremist views of an individual are implemented in the outside world in the form of illegal acts, one should speak of extremist activities. In this case, we see a further de-objectification and diversification of the categories ‘extremist views’ and ‘extremist activities’, which is quite important for the modern classification of crimes of this area.

Thus, having studied and analysed the various concepts of the term ‘extremism’ in the regulatory framework, in the scientific and educational literature of various authors, we can draw the conclusions as follows:

1) as the closest concept expressing the genus of the concept of ‘extremism’, usually, ‘beliefs’, ‘views’ and ‘ideology’ are used. In our opinion, it is appropriate to use the term ‘ideology’, since ideology is a ‘set of social ideas, theories, views that reflect and evaluate social reality from the point of view of the specific interests of certain social groups, parties and classes’ [15]. It is obvious that the ideology of extremists is based on extreme and radical beliefs;

2) the definitions of the concept of ‘extremism’ formulated in regulatory documents and studies in the field of law, mainly contain an indication of the target of crime (state system, nationality, ethnic group, religious denomination and race).

Thus, by extremism we mean an ideology based on political, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity against an individual, any social group, nation or state and directed against the foundations of the constitutional order and security of the state, as well as violation of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of man and citizen. Extremist activities can be understood as activities associated with tough, aggressive assertion and the imposition of one’s ideas, up to various violent actions.

## 4 Conclusion

Currently, in the legal framework, as well as on the pages of scientific and educational literature, there is no consensus on such terms as ‘extremism’, ‘extremist activities’ and ‘prevention of extremism’. The lack of a unified terminological approach to these concepts has a negative impact on not only the development of theoretical issues in this area but also has a very negative impact on the practice of counteracting these negative phenomena in society.

In summarising the above and correlating the obtained definitions of such terms as ‘extremism’, ‘extremist activities’, ‘prevention of extremism’ as well as taking into account the characteristics of youth extremism, we can draw the following conclusion that the prevention of extremism, in our opinion, should primarily consist in counteracting radical ideology (its dissemination, cultivation, initiation, etc.). Obviously, neutralising the prime cause will not allow extremist activities to ‘finally mature’ and be realised in the form of an illegal action (actions). Whereas prevention measures will be aimed at directly countering extremist activities in all its various manifestations.

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