

INTELLIGENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN PREVENTING SOCIETAL RADICALIZATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE DANISH MODEL

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Abstract:

This article examines the role of public trust as a potential mechanism for preventing societal radicalization, with a particular focus on the national Danish model for preventing radicalization and violent extremism. The present study employs an instrumental case study methodology selected because the research question concerns a complex, context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be meaningfully examined through variable-based quantitative approaches alone. Denmark was chosen as the unit of analysis on the grounds that it represents a paradigmatic case of institutionalized trust-based prevention, offering theoretically transferable insights for low-trust societies. Data were drawn from policy documents, academic literature, and comparative institutional analyses, and were examined through a qualitative thematic framework linking trust, social cohesion, and radicalization prevention.

Public trust—defined as citizens' confidence in governmental and public institutions—has been increasingly recognized as a key factor in fostering social cohesion and resilience against extremist ideologies. By exploring the relationship between public trust, social cohesion and the processes that contribute to radicalization, this article aims to investigate whether promoting greater trust in the public sphere can serve as an effective preventive measure against social radicalization, polarization and violent extremism in low trust societies. In this context, the aim of the article is to analyze whether there are any lessons to be learned from high trust societies in order to address the socio-political factors that favor the emergence of radical ideologies and behaviors in societies with low trust, such as Romania.

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Drawing on theoretical frameworks related to trust and social integration, this study explores how Denmark's approach to preventing radicalization integrates trust-building measures into its policies and initiatives. The results suggest that promoting trust in state institutions and democratic processes can function as a protective factor against radicalization, by strengthening a sense of social belonging, alleviating grievances, and reducing individuals' susceptibility to extremist narratives. By critically assessing the strengths and limitations of the Danish model, this study contributes to the broader discussion about the effectiveness of trust-based approaches in preventing radicalization policies. The article concludes by highlighting the public policy implications for low trust European states that aspire to develop prevention strategies that emphasize institutional legitimacy, transparency, and citizen engagement.

Keywords: radicalization, violent extremism, public trust, preventing radicalization, societal radicalization

Introduction

Public trust has become a buzzword in public policy research. In the academic literature, public trust is conceptualized from multiple perspectives, highlighting its complexity and relevance in relation to the functioning of democratic institutions. Thus, Mansoor defines public trust in government as the level of confidence that citizens have that authorities “will do what is right, act appropriately and honestly in the name of the public interest” (Mansoor, 2021). In addition, Beshi and Kaur (2020) emphasize that public trust also reflects the general degree of satisfaction of the population with political decision-makers, suggesting a direct link between citizens' perception of the effectiveness of government and the support given to it (Beshi and Kaur, 2020). Therefore, public trust in the government refers to the public's expectations of their political leaders and the performance of government agencies in how they engage, behave, and fulfill their responsibilities.

According to Smith and Brooks (2013), there are at least three levels of trust: public trust, institutional trust, and specific trust (Smith and Brooks, 2013). Public trust refers to the “common societal feeling of trust towards institutions and public leaders,” while institutional trust represents the “feeling of trust in a certain organization”. Specific trust is

the “feeling of trust in a particular organization in relation to a particular issue” (Smith and Brooks, 2013).

High-trust societies are typically characterized by all three types of trust mentioned by Smith and Brooks (2013). In these societies, public trust is high, as citizens generally have confidence in the overall functioning of society and its institutions. Institutional trust is also strong, as people trust key institutions, such as government, the legislative system and also the media, to serve the public interest and function in an efficient manner. In addition, specific trust is prevalent, as individuals tend to trust certain organizations or entities, especially those involved in specific sectors or issues such as health, education, or business. Together, these levels of trust contribute to social cohesion, collective responsibility, and a sense of security, as citizens believe that institutions and individuals will act honestly, fairly, and in their best interest (Ronn et al., 2025).

Traditionally, Scandinavian societies are defined by a high level of public trust (Ronn et al., 2025)¹. These societies typically have efficient institutions that are perceived by their citizens as trustworthy (such as the legal system, political authorities and the media), greater political stability, and resilience to social divisions and radicalization (Ronn et al., 2025).

Societies with a high degree of trust are valuable case studies that deserve to be analyzed in order to extract principles, traits and transferable lessons for the states with a poor social cohesion, low levels of public trust, social radicalization and violent extremism. Academics link increased public trust with pro-social behaviors (Uslaner, 2000), more solid democracies (Newton, 1997; Putnam et al. 1994), and lower crime rates (Uslaner, 2002).

On the other hand, a low level of trust is widely considered an obstacle to social cohesion (Bargsted et al., 2023), which can lead to the emergence of “us versus them” narratives, fueling contempt and the phenomenon of “othering” in a process of social polarization, radicalization of ideas and violent extremism (Bardsley et al., 2021).

¹ Ronn et al. (2025) use the term social trust to refer to public trust, defined by the authors as the public’s confidence in state institutions and the collaborative relationships between citizens and the state.

Evidence shows that trust in governments has declined over the past 50 years (Prats et al., 2024). The OECD study on the determinant factors of trust in public institutions reveals a worrying trend across 30 countries, with 44% of individuals reporting low or no trust in their national government, compared to 39% who express moderate or high trust (OECD, 2024). This discrepancy signals a growing problem, underscoring the urgent need to explore effective strategies for strengthening public trust, strategies that target the causes of distrust. A notable aspect of the survey is the increase of political polarization, fueled in part by misinformation, which can intensify social divisions and lead to political disengagement.

While governments have traditionally been perceived as the central actors responsible for maintaining public trust and social cohesion, this assumption no longer fully holds. In the contemporary, globalized and digitally networked environment, non-state actors—especially digital platforms—increasingly shape the frameworks within which citizens interact, form opinions, and pursue their needs (Crouch, 2004; Applebaum, 2020). Recent theoretical perspectives highlight a structural and cultural transformation of democratic systems that deeply affects the foundations of public trust. Colin Crouch (2004) introduces the concept of *post-democracy* to describe societies where democratic institutions persist formally, yet real power increasingly shifts toward economic and corporate elites, leading to the erosion of citizen participation and transparency (Crouch, 2004). In this context, civic engagement declines as citizens become political consumers rather than active participants in deliberation, while governance itself evolves into a form of perception management, where image and emotional appeal outweigh substantive ideas and policy debate. In parallel, Anne Applebaum (2020) illustrates how the cultural and emotional dimensions of this process—polarization, disinformation, and the nostalgia for authoritarian order—undermine liberal values and rational public discourse (Applebaum, 2020). Taken together, these analyses suggest that the crisis of trust is not merely institutional, but systemic: the authority once concentrated in governments is now dispersed across private, technological, and transnational actors who shape public discourse and social cohesion.

In this context marked by a rising distrust, Romania is often classified as a society with low levels of public trust (Globsec, 2024; INSCOP, 2023; Voicu et al., 2020), citizens showing considerable skepticism towards social and political institutions². This widespread distrust in political and social institutions is not just the subjective perception of Romanians, but reflects dissatisfactions based on empirical realities. The persistence of systemic corruption, the lack of accountability of the political class and the constant failure of institutions to respond effectively to the needs of citizens have contributed significantly to the erosion of public trust and the creation of a climate of distrust. This relationship with reality has created a perception of distrust that has been perpetuated over time and is reflected in various indices of civic engagement and public trust, with Romanians consistently reporting low levels of trust in the government, the media and other citizens. Such a climate of distrust affects social cohesion and hinders the proper functioning of democratic institutions and public processes, already altered by its preexisting systemic problems.

Given the low levels of trust in state institutions in Romania, highlighted by various surveys (IRES, 2024; INSCOP, 2023), it is necessary to explore and implement effective strategies to increase public trust. In a context where the lack of public trust can undermine social cohesion and affect the proper functioning of democratic institutions, it is essential to identify solutions that respond to the needs of Romanian citizens and promote transparency, accountability and open dialogue between authorities and society. Such an approach could have a positive impact on political stability and sustainable economic development of Romania. In this sense, rebuilding public trust is not just an administrative objective, but an essential component of the strategy to prevent social tensions and systemic vulnerabilities that can foster radical manifestations. Public trust-building initiatives can play a key

² A survey conducted by IRES in 2024 highlights a low level of trust in state institutions in Romania among young people (aged between 18 and 35 years old) in state institutions in Romania. According to the data, 63% of young people do not trust the President of Romania, and 58% have a similar attitude towards the Government and Parliament. These results suggest a significant crisis of trust among the younger generation towards political authorities, which may reflect a mismatch between their expectations and current political realities (IRES, 2024).

role in mitigating social polarization, radicalization and right-wing extremism. Lack of trust in state institutions can create fertile ground for radical ideologies, which exploit citizens' frustrations and grievances, amplifying social and political divisions.

To fully understand the strategic potential of public trust in preventing radicalization, an in-depth analysis of how this trust is formed and transformed depending on risk perceptions, social experiences and institutional performance is necessary.

Public Trust: Theories, Trends and Implications

Trust is closely linked to the public perception of risk, being formed based on the subjective perception of reality, the causes of events, the values affected and the sources of information on risks. Public trust is based on a critical assessment of political actors and institutions, influenced by short-term changes in their performance, credibility and integrity.

Thus, it can be shaped by a series of events such as political uprisings, economic crises, corruption scandals or ideological adjustments of governments (Bargsted et al., 2017). At individual level, attributes such as wealth, education, and health status can serve as indicators of public trust, as people with higher socio-economic status tend to exhibit higher levels of trust in both the social and political spheres (Bornand and Klein, 2022). This is also reflected by the study³ of sociologists Voicu, Rusu and Tufiş (2020) which provides empirical evidence supporting the link between socio-economic status and the level of public trust in Romania. The study confirms that people with a higher socio-economic status tend to exhibit higher levels of public trust (Voicu et al., 2020). On the other hand, Hwang's study (2023) shows how perceptions of inequality, which can be influenced by one's socioeconomic status, play a significant role in shaping trust in society⁴.

³The study is based on complex sociological research and data collected from 1993 to 2018.

⁴ The study uses data from 46 countries to show that trust in institutions that administer fair justice and protect property rights is directly correlated with economic development. This research emphasizes trust in social systems as an institution-dependent characteristic.

Although Hwang's study does not explicitly confirm that higher socioeconomic status leads to greater public trust, it supports the broader understanding that perceptions of inequality are linked to trust levels, aligning with research on the relationship between socioeconomic factors and public trust (Hwang, 2023).

Some studies suggest that institutions serve as foundational forces in the formation of social attitudes and behaviours. For instance, Sønderskov and Dinesen (2016) found that, in Denmark, public trust positively influences social trust⁵, the general trust that individuals have in others, but not vice versa (Sønderskov and Dinesen, 2016). Seifert (2018) arrived at similar conclusions for Switzerland and the Netherlands (Seifert, 2018). Newton et al (2018) also suggest that societal trust and political trust⁶—that part of public trust that denotes the

⁵Social Trust/ societal trust refers to the general trust that individuals have in others within their society, including people they may not know personally. It reflects the belief that most people are honest, reliable, and cooperative, and that society is fundamentally trustworthy. Social trust is often seen as a key element of social cohesion and the functioning of everyday life, as it encourages cooperation and positive social interactions.

⁶Political Trust specifically relates to the trust individuals have in political institutions, leaders, and the broader political system. It encompasses belief in the legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness of governmental institutions, as well as confidence that political leaders act in the public's best interest. Political trust is crucial for the stability and legitimacy of political systems, as it influences citizens' willingness to engage with and comply with political decisions and policies (Miller, 1974; Norris, 1999; Zmerli, 2014). Newton and Norris (2000) define political trust as the public's confidence in the ability and integrity of political institutions, particularly in the government (Newton and Norris, 2000). Trust is seen as an indicator of the public's belief that the government is competent, responsive, and works in the interest of its citizens. The authors emphasize that high levels of political trust are crucial for a stable and functioning democracy. Zmerli (2014) expands on the idea of political trust by defining it as a belief in the legitimacy of political institutions and a sense of confidence that political actors, including politicians and bureaucrats, act in the public's best interest (Zmerli, 2014). Zmerli also stresses the importance of political trust as an essential component for democratic stability and the effective functioning of governance, where trust facilitates political participation, compliance with laws, and overall societal cohesion. In both cases, political trust is seen as a cornerstone for the health and stability of democratic systems, as it enables citizens to feel that their governments and political systems are legitimate and worthy of their support. In the context of the three types of trust identified by Smith and Brooks (2013)— public trust, institutional trust,

confidence individuals place in political institutions, leaders, and the larger political framework—may be correlated, given that both are shaped by a number of individual factors that characterize privileged groups in a society (Newton et al., 2018). While these studies advance the understanding of trust dynamics, they remain limited to affluent and developed societies characterized by low inequality, expansive welfare states, and high levels of trust (Delhey and Newton, 2005).

Although, the connection between social and political trust does not make the object of the present study, the mechanisms of consolidating trust at societal level are so profound that the above-mentioned association reveals itself as we explore the processes of societal trust building. Research suggests that institutions play a central role in shaping social perceptions and behaviors (Bargsted et al., 2022). The effectiveness of political institutions and the policies they implement can directly impact the levels of trust in a society. According to Rothstein and Stolle (2008), three socio-psychological instruments can be distinguished through which institutions can foster trust: inference, incentives, and consequences (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Through the mechanism of inference, citizens who perceive public officials as fair and impartial will infer that other members of society are also trustworthy, thus strengthening social capital. From an incentive perspective, when institutions are efficient and impartial, individuals have fewer reasons to engage in unethical behavior, leading to an overall increase in honesty and cooperation. In terms of consequences, institutions that set clear rules and apply effective sanctions discourage opportunistic behavior, thus facilitating a climate of mutual trust. In addition, according to Spadaro et al. (2020), trust in state institutions contributes indirectly to

and specific trust — political trust is directly related to public trust, playing an essential role in the functioning and stability of democratic regimes. Political trust can be seen as a subtype of public trust, being specifically related to citizens' perception of the government and the way it fulfills its role in society. Thus, high trust in government is an indicator of a society with high public trust, and a decrease in political trust may reflect a crisis of public trust. Thus, political trust can be considered an important component of public trust and institutional trust, having a direct impact on social cohesion, political stability, and the efficiency of democratic processes. High levels of political trust contribute to the better functioning of democratic institutions and strengthening the link between citizens and the state.

the development of social trust by instilling a sense of security, which reduces perceived vulnerability and fosters interpersonal relationships based on trust (Spadaro et al., 2020). Thus, in the complex process of building trust at societal level, efficient and fair institutions represent an essential factor for promoting a climate of stability and social cohesion.

Other scholars advance the idea that social trust influences political trust through projection⁷ (Seifert, 2018) or cooperative expectations⁸ (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020). The before-mentioned studies were based on surveys conducted in Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2020) on one hand, and Denmark (Sønderskov and Dinesen, 2016), the Netherlands and Switzerland, on the other (Seifert, 2018). Therefore, it is clear that the relationship between social trust and political trust in strong democracies is bidirectional and intricate, where each reinforces the other. Social and political trust are both causal factors and symptoms for a strong social cohesion. More recent empirical studies support this bidirectional relationship. For example, Bargsted et al. (2022) conducted a four-wave panel survey in Chile, a society characterized by low trust levels, and found that political trust positively influences social trust and vice versa. Their findings suggest that this positive relationship transcends different political settings and does not require a minimum threshold of trust to emerge (Bargsted et al., 2022). Further exploring this dynamic, Muringani et al. (2024) examined the interrelation between social trust, political trust and economic development in European regions. The authors hypothesized that social trust serves as a foundation for political trust, proposing that in societies with high general trust, this feeling extends to governmental and political systems. They argue that socially trusting individuals are more likely to accept the legitimacy of political institutions, thereby fostering political trust (Muringani et al., 2024).

⁷ The experiences and knowledge accumulated by individuals through everyday social interactions function as a general heuristic, influencing the perception and degree of trust shown towards public officials.

⁸ Individuals with a high propensity to trust are more inclined to anticipate cooperative behavior from others, which increases their likelihood of perceiving collective political institutions as legitimate.

These studies collectively highlight the reciprocal nature of the relationship between social and political trust, emphasizing their mutual reinforcement across varying societal contexts. The reciprocal relationship between social and political trust plays a critical role in shaping societal stability and cohesion, particularly in relation to phenomena such as social polarization, radicalization and violent extremism. When social and political trust reinforce one another positively, societies tend to exhibit greater civic engagement, institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. However, when either form of trust erodes, it can trigger a cycle of fragmentation and distrust, creating fertile ground for polarization and extremism.

In contexts of declining political trust—often due to corruption, perceived injustice or ineffective governance—individuals may become increasingly sceptical of democratic institutions and processes. This scepticism, in turn, weakens social trust, as citizens grow wary of those who hold opposing political or ideological views, leading to heightened social polarization. As divisions deepen, marginalized or disillusioned individuals may become more susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism, seeking alternative sources of identity and belonging outside mainstream political and social structures.

As individuals increasingly align with groups that reflect their disillusionment and perceived marginalization, this alignment often leads to the reinforcement of in-group biases and the vilification of out-groups, further entrenching societal divisions. Consequently, individuals within polarized societies are more susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism, as membership in extremist groups can fulfil needs for identity, purpose, and community that they perceive as lacking in mainstream society. These groups often exploit existing distrust, presenting themselves as the only credible alternative to a failing system. In such scenarios, the breakdown of mutual trust not only fuels polarization but also creates conditions conducive to radicalization and, ultimately, violent extremism.

Public trust has been analysed from multiple disciplinary perspectives—including political science, sociology, psychology and criminology—by the academic literature on radicalization, social polarization and violent extremism, often as a factor influencing

individuals' perceptions of legitimacy, governance and social inclusion. Still, the connection between public trust on one side, and radicalization, social polarization and violent extremism, on the other, is insufficiently explored by the existing body of research. Below are the main ways in which public trust has been examined in relation to radicalization, social polarization and violent extremism.

Public Trust, Radicalization and Social Polarization

A limited number of studies have investigated the role of public trust in preventing radicalization, emphasizing that individuals who trust state institutions are less likely to turn to extremist ideologies. Scholars argue that trust in democratic governance, law enforcement and social institutions fosters social cohesion and provides legitimate avenues for expressing grievances, thereby reducing the appeal of radicalization (Hegghammer, 2017). Studies indicate that when trust in democratic institutions declines, individuals become more vulnerable to populist and extremist rhetoric, leading to heightened polarization (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This polarization can manifest in political extremism, social fragmentation and the weakening of democratic norms. Conversely, strong institutional trust has been linked to resilience against divisive ideologies and a greater willingness to engage in democratic dialogue and compromise (Putnam, 2000).

Research suggests that declining trust in institutions correlates with increased acceptance of extremist narratives that portray the state as corrupt, oppressive, or illegitimate (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016). Dalgaard-Nielsen emphasizes that trust in institutions is a critical factor for the success of countering violent extremism efforts because when governments or law enforcement agencies fail to build or maintain trust, this can lead in turn to resentment, alienation and the perception that institutions are not addressing the real issues (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016). Also, when citizens trust state institutions, the prevention and countering efforts are perceived as legitimate.

Other authors explore how feelings of precarity are associated with conspiracy beliefs, mediated by public trust. Their findings suggest that individuals experiencing economic and social instability are more likely to distrust institutions, leading them to endorse conspiracy

theories. This dynamic can contribute to the spread of extremist narratives that exploit such beliefs (Adamus, et al., 2024). Moreover, van Prooijen et al. (2022) found that suspicion of institutions reduces trust between strangers, within-group cooperation, commitment and prosocial behavior, while increasing prejudice. This erosion of social cohesion can lead individuals to seek belonging in extremist groups that promise solidarity and purpose (van Prooijen et al., 2022).

Given these considerations, the mechanisms underlying radicalization and social polarization are profound and complex, and cannot be limited exclusively to a single cause. These processes are influenced by a multitude of interconnected factors, including low public trust, social and economic instabilities, as well as collective dissatisfaction and frustrations generated by social inequalities or lack of opportunities. In a society where institutions fail to effectively respond citizens' needs or to promote a climate of trust and transparency, tensions may arise that facilitate the marginalization of some groups. These groups, faced with social and economic exclusion, can end up radicalizing, and the deepening polarization contributes to the consolidation of a climate of hostility and division. These problems, in essence, erode the foundation of today's society, which often seems to disregard the well-being of the individual, endangering social cohesion. Thus, the phenomenon of radicalization can only be understood in a broad context, which encompasses a variety of factors that interact and amplify each other.

From Trust Erosion to Radicalization and Violent extremism

The erosion of public trust is increasingly recognized as a contributing factor in the process of radicalization, particularly among marginalized communities. Perceived injustices, such as ethnic and religious discrimination, police brutality and political exclusion, contribute to declining confidence in state institutions, thereby heightening individuals' susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Köhler, 2017). In such contexts, radical groups strategically exploit these grievances, positioning themselves as viable alternatives to the state by offering ideological justifications for opposition to the government (Köhler, 2017). This process not only deepens societal polarization but also reinforces cycles of distrust, creating an environment where

radicalization can thrive. Addressing this issue requires institutional reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance to restore public confidence and counter the narratives advanced by extremist groups. While the before-mentioned studies provide valuable insights⁹, generalizing their findings globally requires caution, as radicalization processes are shaped by specific cultural, political and historical factors. Effective counter-radicalization strategies must therefore be context-sensitive and tailored to the unique dynamics of each society.

Public trust may be eroded when individuals perceive or are faced with the absence of governmental action for combating discrimination and poor integration, which, in turn, is believed to increase the risk of radicalization (King and Taylor, 2011; Wilner and Dobouloz, 2010). According to Pressman (2006) “it is generally accepted by experts that failed integration, frustration within the host society, identity issues, and conflicting values with western democracies are contributing factors to radicalization.” (Pressman, 2006). Indeed, it is well-documented that these factors contribute to radical behaviors (Pauwels and Schils, 2016).

The relationship between public trust and violent extremism has been examined in studies on radicalization pathways and counter-terrorism policies. Scholars argue that trust in law enforcement and judicial institutions plays a critical role in determining whether individuals resort to violence as a means of expressing their grievances (Vidino, 2020). When individuals perceive counter-terrorism measures as fair and non-discriminatory, they are less likely to support or engage in violent extremism (Cherney and Murphy, 2016). On the other hand, excessive securitization, profiling, and repressive policies can further erode trust in institutions, inadvertently fueling radicalization rather than preventing it (Schmid, 2013). A study on three Danish Communities examined factors that influence community resilience against violent extremism and concluded that standing up against violent extremists or seeking help when a close relation is suspected of engaging with

⁹ Research on radicalization and disengagement has been conducted in diverse national contexts, including Colombia, Northern Ireland, and Spain, examining cases such as paramilitary demobilization, the transition of IRA members to peaceful political participation, and the disengagement of former ETA members (Bjørge and Horgan, 2009).

extremism requires a certain level of trust in institutions. This implies that low public trust may hinder individuals from taking actions that counteract extremist influences (Dalgaard-Nielsen and Schack, 2016).

Interestingly, academic research suggests that terrorist attacks can temporarily increase trust in institutions due to a “rally-around-the-flag” effect, where people respond to crises by showing greater support for political leaders and institutions (Fenn and Brunton-Smith, 2021). However, more recent studies have found that there is no significant overall effect of jihadist terrorist attacks on institutional trust when looking at aggregated data, challenging previous assumptions that such attacks systematically generate rally effects (Nagel et. al., 2024). The authors warn against overgeneralizing findings from highly publicized cases (e.g., Charlie Hebdo in 2015) and emphasize the need for context-specific analyses.

Trust-Building as a Strategy to Prevent Radicalization

Academic literature also explores policies and initiatives designed to rebuild public trust as a means of preventing radicalization and violent extremism. In the academic literature, trust-building strategies can be classified into two main categories: strategies for strengthening inter-institutional trust and strategies for increasing citizens’ trust in institutions (public trust). Both types of strategies are essential for strengthening social stability and preventing phenomena such as radicalization or violent extremism, as trust in institutions directly influences the efficiency of public policies and the level of social cohesion.

The first category aims to improve collaboration and coordination between different government institutions and non-governmental organizations, through mechanisms such as sharing responsibilities, decision-making transparency and the exchange of good practices (Ellis et. al., 2020). Studies have examined community-based approaches, such as Denmark’s Aarhus model, which emphasizes dialogue, mentoring and multi-agency collaboration to foster trust between vulnerable individuals and state institutions (Lindekilde, 2012).

The second category focuses on increasing the legitimacy of public institutions in the perception of citizens, through measures such as ensuring fairness in decision-making processes, reducing corruption

and promoting social inclusion (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Research on deradicalization programs suggests that trust-building efforts, including fair policing, inclusive governance, and transparent communication, can improve cooperation between communities and authorities, reducing the risk of radicalization (Schmid, 2016). Enhancing institutional transparency and procedural fairness has been shown to improve public perceptions of government legitimacy (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Trust is also fostered through inclusive governance and civic engagement, where citizen participation in decision-making processes increases institutional accountability and strengthens social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Additionally, reducing corruption and ensuring ethical governance are crucial, as studies indicate that low corruption levels are directly correlated with higher public trust (Bjørnskov and Svendsen, 2013). Inter-institutional collaboration and power-sharing further contribute to trust-building by creating cooperative and effective policy frameworks (Ellis et al., 2020). Furthermore, long-term investments in education and media literacy can help counter misinformation and reinforce trust in democratic institutions (Norris, 2011).

Overall, public trust should play a more important role in academic discussions on radicalization, social polarization and violent extremism. While strong public trust can serve as a protective factor, its erosion—due to perceived injustices, discrimination, or excessive securitization—can act as a driver of radicalization and extremism. Therefore, policies aimed at strengthening institutional legitimacy and fairness are critical for fostering social resilience to radicalization. By adopting these evidence-based strategies, societies with historically low levels of trust, such as Romania, can gradually strengthen institutional credibility and foster a more resilient social environment.

Understanding the Danish Model to Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism

In the present section, we have opted to provide an introductory overview of the main actors and initiatives of the Danish model for preventing radicalization and violent extremism, as well as the theoretical foundation on which this model is built. Our study employs an instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018;

Flyvbjerg, 2006), selected because the central research question—*how* and *why* trust-building mechanisms function as preventive factors against radicalization—requires context-sensitive analysis that quantitative approaches cannot adequately capture. Denmark was chosen as the unit of analysis through paradigmatic case selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006): it represents a well-documented, institutionalized example of trust-based prevention, making it theoretically informative for low-trust societies such as Romania. Following a most-different systems logic (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), the analysis draws on primary and secondary documentary sources—national policy documents, governmental evaluations, RAN publications and peer-reviewed literature—examined through a qualitative thematic framework. The aim is analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018): to develop transferable theoretical propositions about the role of institutional trust in preventing radicalization.

Denmark features some distinctive characteristics, serving as a pertinent example of a high-trust state¹⁰ with a notably lower prevalence of radicalization and social polarization. According to the Global Peace Index 2024, Denmark is ranked 8th among the safest countries globally (Global Peace Index, 2024), and the Global Terrorism Index 2024 also classifies Denmark as one of the relatively safest countries in the world and Europe as well. The index reflects a low score for Denmark in terms of terrorist incidents, indicating a stable environment with relatively few threats compared to its neighbours.

Conversely, according to the Danish Intelligence Service (PET, 2024), the terrorist risk level is classified as significant¹¹, having increased in 2024 from 3 to 4 on a 5-point scale, thereby indicating clearly defined internal challenges related to terrorism. Moreover, the assessment of the Danish Centre for Terrorism Analysis frames the terrorist risk from Islamist militants as significant (CTA, 2024). The

¹⁰ According to OECD survey, in 2023, 75% of Danes reported high or moderately high trust in the judicial system, other people (75%), the police (69%) and national parliament (47%), while 44% of Danes reported high or moderately high trust in the national government, above the OECD average (39%) (OECD, 2024).

¹¹ The risk level was raised following calls by al-Qaeda to carry out terrorist attacks in Denmark (against the backdrop of the acts of destruction of the Quran in 2023) (PET, 2024).

Danish Defence and Intelligence Service (DDIS) states that the most likely form of terrorist attack could come from lone actors or small groups inspired by organizations such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, using easily accessible methods (bladed weapons, firearms or improvised explosive devices etc.) (DDIS, 2023). Due to these considerations, our selection process enabled the identification of Denmark as a European state that, despite facing internal security challenges, effectively mitigates the terrorist threat.

Furthermore, the Danish model of radicalization prevention is recognized in the academic literature as a holistic and effective framework based on inter-institutional collaboration, inclusive governance and community involvement (Hemmingsen, 2015) (OSCE, 2019). Empirical evidence—despite being limited—suggests that this approach has been effective in mitigating the risks associated with violent extremism, as Denmark has successfully curbed radical tendencies despite its growing cultural and religious diversity (Bakker, 2013).

The Danish prevention and counter-radicalization model emphasizes extensive coordination among governmental institutions, social services, schools, the healthcare system, police and intelligence services. The Danish preventive architecture was developed in practice through learning-by-doing and trial-and-error methods. Thus, the model was adapted throughout its development in accordance with the collection of practical experiences and the progress of scientific research. The approach was developed between different actors in a two-way process. Local practitioners received guidelines from the state and after testing them in real conditions provided feedback, which was later used to refine the guidelines. Alternatively, local practitioners have developed concrete initiatives or methods that they have tested in practice, subsequently being adopted at the state level and replicated in other local contexts (Hemmingsen, 2015). This reflects how the Danish state's approach and its concrete methods are continuously developed both top-down and bottom-up, a process that has enabled its continuous adaptation to changing threat and risk perception.

An example of a bottom-up Danish initiative is the contingency plan¹² for the intervention of people traveling to and from Syria and Iraq, developed through the already existing cooperation between the city of Aarhus¹³ and East Judland police at the end of 2013 (Preben, 2015). The success and positive results achieved, particularly in the reintegration of individuals returned from conflict zones, led to the adoption of the approach at national level in 2014. The Danish government adopted elements of the Aarhus model in its National Action Plan for the Prevention of Extremism and Radicalization (Preben, 2015). Aarhus served as an early and successful local initiative that inspired the development of the Danish national model. As a consequence, *Life Psychology* discipline¹⁴ on which the Aarhus model is based implicitly

¹² The plan was based on guiding and counselling individuals who wanted to travel to Syria or Iraq and aftercare for returnees, including debriefings, medical care, and psychological consultations and mentoring. It also provided guidance and mentoring to relatives and involved dialogue with local communities.

¹³ There are several reasons why the initiative was adopted in Aarhus. In Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, there has been an increase in radicalization especially among young people with an immigrant background. Aarhus also has a disproportionately high number of individuals who have traveled to conflict zones (around 30 people). Aarhus relies on local community ties with a long tradition. The city had pre-existing structures that allowed close relationships between schools, social services and the police (SSP). Furthermore, East Judland Police played a key role in developing the model through a preventative and proactive rather than punitive approach. Last but not least, the local authorities recognized the need to address radicalization not only from a security perspective, but also as a social problem that required rehabilitation and support.

¹⁴ *Life Psychology* discipline was developed by the Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences at Aarhus University. This represents an interdisciplinary approach that integrates personality psychology, social and societal psychology with social sciences (politics, sociology, jurisprudence) and humanitarian (culture, religion, ethics) in understanding radicalization processes, risk factors and resilience (Bertelsen and Ozer, 2025). The main premise from which *Life Psychology* starts is that individuals aspire to a good enough life. Having a good enough grip on life involves dealing with the tasks that life throws at you, which depends on having the skills to handle them. Another assumption is that every individual, regardless of gender, cultural background, abilities or disabilities, life history, and social situation, faces the same fundamental tasks. A good enough life involves the possession of general skills and generic which

forms the basis of the Danish national model. The discipline is grounded in the principle that any policy or strategy should prioritize the inclusion and empowerment of an individual's life skills. By focusing on this approach, individuals are enabled to develop, educate themselves, and cultivate fundamental human skills.

Similarly, to its local pilot phase, Aarhus model, the national Danish model has been built on pre-existing structures in Denmark which were originally developed for other purposes like ordinary crime prevention¹⁵. The approach is entirely based on a set of fundamental premises that range from understanding the "welfare state"¹⁶ to understanding crime and how human behaviour can be changed.

facilitates the management of the basic tasks of life (Bertelsen, 2015). General because all individuals must develop the same basic life skills that match the basic tasks of life (Bertelsen and Ozer, 2025). Generic because each fundamental life task will surface in infinite individual, social, cultural and societal variations (implying that the specific management of a particular variation of a fundamental life task must be generated from the corresponding fundamental life skill).

¹⁵ Denmark is a country with a long-standing tradition of using approaches based on multi-institutional cooperation and information sharing in order to launch preventive measures as early as possible. Since 1977 there have been networks between schools, social services and the police (SSP) in most municipalities (Hemmingsen, 2015). These networks were intended to prevent the commission of crimes by minors. Since then other networks have been developed for other target groups. In 2009 networks involving the police, social services and mental health services (PSH) were developed to prevent young people with psychiatric problems from committing offences. Similarly, in 2010 networks of the police, social services, penitentiary and probation service (KSP) were initiated in order to prevent individuals released from prison or other institutions to reoffend (Hemmingsen, 2015). All these already established networks have facilitated cooperation and information sharing in order to prevent violent extremism and radicalization. Thus, the Danish model involves the use of already existing structures and components that have a tradition of multi-institutional cooperation, not just the development of new initiatives.

¹⁶ The term welfare state (Titmuss, 1974) is frequently associated with the modern interventionist state with a market economy that focuses on healthcare, increasing the level of education, regulating the labor market and social security. Wilensky H. and Lebeaux C.N. distinguish the residual welfare state and the redistributive-institutional one. In the former, the state seeks to limit its commitments only to marginal groups, and the latter is universal in its obligations to the state and considers the entire population. Titmuss R. (1974) uses these concepts and introduces an intermediate type

Furthermore, the Danish model heavily relies on early prevention. As a matter of fact, early prevention is an integral part and present in Danish society at all levels and social aspects. The area of crime prevention as well as social and healthcare problems in Denmark are often framed in the “Prevention Pyramid”¹⁷ which identifies different stages (general, specific and targeted) in which different types of activities are carried out in order to prevent future problems or exacerbate existing ones (Hemmingsen, 2015). In the area of violent extremism and radicalization prevention, the general level¹⁸ targets in particular young people and individuals considered opinion leaders. The focus is on awareness (Hemmingsen, 2015). The specific level¹⁹ targets individuals or groups classified as non-violent extremists. At this level, the emphasis is on reinforcing the capacity of the individual and his environment in order to prevent the aggravation of sensitive aspects.

Lastly, the targeted level includes individuals already engaged in criminal behaviour or assessed to be at imminent risk of involving in such behaviour. At this level only exit and intervention strategies apply consisting of programs specially developed for each individual by the Danish Intelligence Service in cooperation with the Prison and Probation

of welfare state, called the industrial achievement-performance model, in which welfare needs can be satisfied based on merit, work performance and productivity (Titmuss, 1974).

¹⁷ The pyramid of prevention, in a general sense, uses three levels to organize preventive efforts, respectively general, specific and targeted to target different populations (Hemmingsen, 2015).

¹⁸ Activities include but are not limited to strengthening resilience, educating about opportunities in Danish society through the education system, facilitating dialogue on controversial topics, strengthening critical thinking by including knowledge about handling and critical use of the Internet in primary school curricula, outreach and training of frontline professionals (Hemmingsen, 2015).

¹⁹ Activities may include guidance to individuals through mentors, coaching on education, career, relationships or other factors that can improve the individual situation, guidance on accessing services available to all Danish citizens. It is also possible to intervene at the level of relatives by creating networks of parents or relatives, counseling offered to the parents or relatives of those concerned.

Service, municipalities and/or local police. Mentoring and coaching programs are also developed, as well as assistance with therapy, accommodation, medical help, and individual guidance on access to facilities available to all Danish citizens.

Another principle of the Danish model is that from its very beginning it pursued two agendas: on one hand, ensuring the security of society against terrorist attacks, and on the other, the responsibility of the state towards the individual's well-being which determines the commitment to protect the individual from harmful/self-harming behavior (Hemmingsen, 2015). "Ensuring citizen's well-being" involves a wider focus on preventing extremism and radicalization, which includes managing social issues such as education, immigration and integration. This dual nature on which the Danish model is based is present both nationally²⁰ and locally, reflecting an understanding of the fact that preventing radicalization and violent extremism with repressive measures is not enough.

At the national level, the main actors are the Danish Intelligence Service PET and the Center for the Prevention of Extremism, that cooperate and, to some extent, coordinate or at least advise the local efforts (PET, 2024; Hemmingsen, 2015). At the local level, the 98 Danish municipalities and 12 police districts cooperate in a forum called "info house". There is a total of 12 "info-houses" in Denmark, one for each police region.

²⁰ At the national level, the security agenda is ensured by the Ministry of Justice, the Prison and Probation Service, the Police and PET, the Danish national security and intelligence service. The institutional actors whose mandate is the "welfare" agenda are the Center for the Prevention of Extremism, the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, the Ministry of Children and Education, the National Agency for Education and Quality (PET, 2024, Hemmingsen, 2015).

The “info-house”²¹ serves as a collaborative framework between law enforcement and municipal authorities²², aimed at the early identification of individuals at risk of committing extremist-motivated offenses, thereby enabling the timely implementation of preventive measures (Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, 2024; PET, 2024). Essentially, mixed teams of police officers and social workers are located within “info houses,” which exchange information²³ on potentially radicalizing individuals in all directions, for example with schools. This means that either teachers or parents can go to these “info houses” and report their concerns, or the employed police officers and social workers can reach out to schools if they learn about problematic cases through

²¹ Info houses are established in all 12 police districts to assess concerns about radicalization/violent extremism, to coordinate cooperation between all relevant actors and to address specific or general preventive efforts developed by the police or municipality (Hemmingsen, 2015). The “info house” collects the existing concerns and evaluates if they are justified and if have mandate in that specific case. If there are reasons for concern, it determines if the concerns are related to the “welfare” area in which the state intervenes with support in the area of immigration, integration, education, career counseling, mentoring, etc. or “security” which is the prerogative of the Danish national intelligence service. After the evaluation, the cooperation format decides if measures should be taken and by whom. If the concerns are related to security, the case falls under the responsibility of the PET. Other times, the case returns from the PET to the “info house” when there is no risk to Danish security and passes to the responsibility of the police or the municipality. There are specific or general initiatives. General initiatives are available to all citizens and include career counselling, therapy or housing assistance. Specific initiatives are designed specifically for each individual case. The case rests with an actor the individual knows and trusts, such as a specially trained mentor, soccer coach, or teacher. This is established within the concrete evaluation of each case.

²² These are the police, municipal social service providers and administration and centers of excellence on extremism and radicalisation. Staff members from the Danish Prison and Probation Service and the psychiatric sector participate on an ad hoc basis (PET, 2024).

²³ The exchange of information required for such collaboration is governed by the Danish Administration Justice Act which states that the authorities may share information about a person if necessary for cooperation in crime prevention or for cooperation between the police, social services and psychiatric and mental health authorities in their efforts to help socially vulnerable people. However, the information cannot be shared for the purpose of criminal investigation (Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, 2024).

police channels (Zeiger and Aly, 2015). This indicates a high level of trust between citizens and institutions, which plays a crucial role in the success of the Danish model. This mutual trust reduces resistance to interventions, fosters stronger community resilience, and enables institutions to implement preventive strategies more effectively and with greater legitimacy.

The Danish “info-houses” consist of two types of inter-institutional collaborations, each with their own distinct role. There is the “info-house network” where coordinators and other authorities exchange information at a general level regarding local challenges and trends, and the “info-house municipality” where concrete cases are managed. In the “info-house municipality” the authorities cooperate to prepare a holistic assessment of the reported concern based on an analysis of each individual situation based on risk assessment on one side and individual well-being and resilience, on the other. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify the specific needs of each individual that must be addressed to facilitate disengagement from extremist ideologies. Throughout the process, recommendations are formulated concerning the key challenges and strengths that should be targeted to effectively support the individual’s progression away from extremism.

In cases where prevention and disengagement efforts are warranted, the competent authority²⁴ initiates a support intervention. The intervention will often be based on the legal possibilities offered by social legislation, labour, health and other relevant legislation to provide the individual with tailored support. When appropriate, parents or other people from the network of people²⁵ may also be involved in the intervention process. A potential component of this support may include the involvement of a mentor or parent coach, drawn from the nationally designated body of professionals specifically trained to work with vulnerable individuals and their families (Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism, 2024). Naturally, “info-houses” are very well integrated into all aspects of local social life and can count on a very short and efficient communication path with local or civil society partners to provide the necessary support.

²⁴ For example, the municipality in collaboration with one or more institutions.

²⁵ This network includes coaches, mentors, parents, depending on the case.

Being highly effective in distinguishing security-relevant cases—which require judicial or police intervention—from those that call for social assistance measures, the Danish model can be regarded as a traditionally developed contact and communication hub within the police, particularly concerning youth radicalisation. Due to the very low level of public distrust, police officers are able to freely engage and interact with civil society and other partners (Zeiger and Aly, 2015).

Rooted in a long-standing tradition of collaboration among the police, social services, and civil society at the community level, the Danish model has proven highly effective. However, its successful replication in other contexts is unlikely, given the extended period required to cultivate a comparable degree of institutional legitimacy and trust. While the Danish model is often viewed favourably by other countries due to its effective police-led coordination and centralized oversight by governmental authorities, its implementation elsewhere would likely provoke significant public distrust and criticism. This is largely because similar levels of institutional control exercised by police forces may not be perceived as legitimate or acceptable in different socio-political contexts (Zeiger and Aly, 2015). In the following section we will address these criticisms facing the Danish approach. Our analysis is based on a critical review of existing academic literature, public policy documents and concrete instruments applied by the Danish authorities in radicalization prevention interventions in Denmark. The goal was to reach a comprehensive understanding of how Danish institutions have applied an integrated framework for preventing radicalization, emphasizing the promotion of public trust and inter-sectorial collaboration as essential tools for reducing the vulnerability of its communities to extremist ideologies.

Critical reflections on the Danish Model to Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism

The Danish model to preventing violent extremism and radicalization has been widely praised in the academic literature. In an analysis of the Danish model, it is noted that its development has undergone key improvements, including the professional refinement of initiatives and techniques, as well as organizational maturation

(Lindekilde, 2014). This has resulted, among other things, in the creation of individual-level interventions grounded in a solid psychological foundation, alongside local cooperation structures that establish the organizational framework necessary for training frontline personnel.

Similarly, in our view, the Danish model primarily represents a manifestation of advanced organizational development and institutional maturity. The multi-institutional cooperation structures within the Danish model reflect a shift away from the notion of competing institutional ideas and visions, replacing it with a focus on preventing radical and extremist acts. One of the strengths of the Danish approach is its flexibility, as it incorporates various types of professionals who approach specific cases and challenges from different perspectives.

Given that the Danish model is primarily defined by cooperative infrastructures (“info houses”) among various institutions across different sectors, we sought to explore how Danish institutions are perceived in terms of trust by their citizens. The landscape of public trust in Denmark is comprehensively examined in the OECD Trust Survey, which evaluates citizens’ perceptions of various government entities. Denmark is recognized for its relatively high levels of trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024). The study found that 44% of Danes reported a high or moderately high level of trust in the national government, surpassing the OECD average of 39%. Notably, Danes demonstrated significantly higher trust in the judiciary (75%) and the police (69%). Satisfaction with daily interactions with public institutions remains high, particularly in the education (74%) and healthcare (65%) sectors. Furthermore, a substantial majority (66%) of Danes expressed confidence in the government’s ability to protect lives during a national emergency, reflecting a general belief in the integrity and effectiveness of public services (OECD, 2024).

This trend reflects a public feeling of trust in Danish government institutions, where day-to-day interactions and perceptions of decision-making processes play significant roles in shaping levels of trust. Danish citizens’ trust in their institutions reflects a solid foundation for the Danish radicalization prevention model, which is based on inter-institutional cooperation. This cooperation is essential to effectively address the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism, as it

enables better communication and coordination between various government agencies and community organizations.

In addition, the Danish model emphasizes citizen involvement and building an open dialogue between the population and institutions. This not only enhances the legitimacy of government actions (Tyler, 2006), but it also helps to reduce the alienation of vulnerable groups, who may be more susceptible to the influence of extremism in contexts where trust is lacking. This participatory approach is supported by OECD data, which shows that a significant percentage of Danes trust that the political system allows them to have a say in government decisions (OECD, 2024).

Thus, trust in institutions contributes to the effectiveness and legitimacy of radicalization prevention initiatives in Denmark, demonstrating that a model based on collaboration and trust can produce positive results in the face of challenges related to radicalization/extremism. On the other hand, the integration of a multi-institutional model in contexts characterized by low levels of citizens' trust in state institutions can prove difficult. Multi-institutional work formats come with their own challenges, such as reconciling the interests of different fields and institutional visions regarding the phenomenon, the degree of trust between the component institutions. A context characterized by the lack of legitimacy of institutions in front of citizens would lead to additional challenges for these formats, thus having their own internal challenges that must be harmonized within the working context. The Danish model capitalizes on Denmark's cultural and social specificities, such as welfare state policies, social equity and community involvement, factors that deeply influence mental health and psychological well-being. This model highlights the central role of welfare systems and public policies in supporting psychological health, exploring the impact of social support networks, access to education, healthcare and community resources on individual well-being. The localized approach of the Danish model allows for a more nuanced understanding of psychological phenomena and effective interventions tailored to the unique needs of the Danish population. Thus, the cultural specificities of the Danish model may lead to different developmental outcomes compared to other socio-cultural contexts. Any translation of

specific elements of the Danish model in another country must consider the socio-cultural differences between the context of origin and the context of destination.

In addition, the Danish model signifies an evolving approach to radicalization, marked by a deeper and more sophisticated comprehension of its multifaceted nature, moving beyond simplistic linear models²⁶ that conceptualize radicalization as a series of clearly identifiable stages through which an individual is presumed to progress during their transformation. It is built on positive psychological concepts such as resilience, well-being and personal strengths (rather than exclusively addressing pathology or mental illness), but also on the holistic and comprehensive understanding of radicalization from the perspective of psychological and social factors. The Danish model considers these dimensions and how they interact to influence the course of an individual's life.

Recognizing the influence of contextual factors, the Danish model considers how different ecological systems, such as family, community and social structures, influence the personal development and coping mechanisms of individuals. Danish interventions include family support programmes, community mentors and psychological counselling, integrating these components to create a resilient and supportive environment that prevents marginalization and, by implication, vulnerability to radicalisation. Thus, the model emphasizes the importance of collaboration between social institutions and a coordinated response, adapted to each ecological level, to support mental health and social cohesion.

The philosophy behind Denmark's approach reflects a view of extremism and/or radicalization as a risk for the vulnerable young people, not as a national security concern or as a threat to the Danish state, the existing order or even a political challenge (Lindekilde, 2014).

²⁶ Linear models of radicalization refer to theoretical frameworks that conceptualize the process as a sequential progression through a fixed series of stages. These models typically suggest that individuals move step-by-step from initial exposure to extremist ideas, through increasing levels of commitment, until fully adopting radical beliefs or behaviors. Such models are often criticized for oversimplifying the complex, non-linear, and individualized nature of radicalization processes.

Consequently, the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism is included in the existing conceptualizations of common law crime prevention, with radicalization being seen as another “parameter of concern” for the mainstream crime prevention system (Lindekilde, 2014).

The focus on the vulnerable individual and socio-psychological explanations of radicalization and violent extremism leads in practice to a focus on the pull factors²⁷ rather than the push factors of the before mentioned phenomena. Thus, the Danish model examines what the individual has to attain from being involved in extremist activities. It aims to address their needs while also highlighting the potential consequences of their choices (eg. education, a job, restored family ties). This reflects an underlying understanding of the target group as being misguided or unaware of their own potential, in the same way that common law crime prevention addresses people vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviours, such as crime or illicit substance abuse. Therefore, this approach places significant emphasis on the role of mentors, coaches and therapeutic interventions, aiming to enhance individuals’ self-awareness and reinforce their personal potential, thereby facilitating their successful integration into the Danish society.

The Danish approach also emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, encouraging the integration of perspectives from psychology, sociology, public health and education to develop a more nuanced understanding of human behavior and well-being. More precisely, once the differing perspectives arising from the varied professional backgrounds (such as psychology, sociology, and public order) are reconciled, these differences can enrich professional insights and facilitate the integration of institutional and expert resources, thereby enabling the development of more effective and

²⁷ According to academic literature, radicalization mechanisms are the product of the interaction between various push and pull factors within individuals. Push factors include social, political and economic grievances, a sense of injustice and discrimination, personal crisis and tragedies, frustration, alienation, a fascination with violence, the search for answers to the meaning of life, an identity crisis, social exclusion, alienation, marginalization, disappointment with democratic processes, polarization, etc. Pull factors include personal quest, sense of belonging to a cause, ideology or social network, power and control, loyalty and commitment, spirit of adventure, a romanticized view of ideology, possibility of heroism, etc.

tailored interventions responsive to both individual and community needs. The Danish model offers a coherent way of working whereby professional differences can be overcome in concrete work contexts through uniform procedures and the work tools.

Moreover, the Danish model is deeply research-oriented, prioritizing studies that can directly influence public policies and national practices to respond to the specific needs of the population. This model places particular emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and programs (Bressan et. al., 2024), promoting continuous and informed adaptation and allowing adjustments based on the data obtained, in order to optimize resources. Furthermore, Denmark is one of the countries most frequently cited as sources of inspiration for innovation and evaluation of programs to prevent and counter violent extremism alongside Germany and the United Kingdom (Bressan et. al., 2024).

On the other hand, the Danish model continues to face its own dilemmas, challenges and criticisms. The Danish approach to preventing radicalisation, often praised for its emphasis on “soft” prevention strategies such as social inclusion, mentoring and counselling, has also been criticized in the literature for a lack of evidence of effectiveness. Critics argue that there is limited empirical evidence to demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of the Danish approach in preventing radicalization (Ragazzi, 2017). Reliance on “soft” interventions such as mentoring and counseling may be effective for some individuals, but these measures lack systematic evaluation, making it difficult to assess impact on a wider scale. Researchers noted a lack of standardized metrics and longitudinal studies, making it difficult to rigorously validate these interventions (Ragazzi, 2017; Lindekilde, 2012).

Indeed, while we consider the Danish model a good practice in the landscape of prevention-focused European initiatives, we believe that empirical evidence of its long-term effectiveness is limited. We also believe that systematic evaluations are needed. Although quantitative evaluations of prevention efforts cannot be carried out, it would be possible to carry out a qualitative study of intervention activities. In doing so, it would be extremely important to emphasize the user’s perspective by interviewing those involved. On the other hand, we do not

agree that punitive measures are necessarily preferable to soft approaches. This discussion is not exclusive to the field of preventing extremism and radicalization, but is a broad debate characteristic of criminal law offenses *lato sensu* where it has been found that longer and harsher sentences do not necessarily lead to the empowerment of the prisoner (Beccaria, 2007). The broader discussion in criminal law is not an argument, but it is obvious that as the terrorist phenomenon acquires new nuances (for example, through digitalization) the classic punitive measures are not enough. At the same time, soft measures are not necessarily ineffective.

Debates also revolve around the extent to which the welfare state should be allowed to intervene in the lives of citizens. The collaboration between police and social services in the Danish model raises concerns about trust and oversight, as individuals may feel compelled to participate in intervention programs for fear of legal repercussions. Some authors argue that this combination can alienate target communities, as they may perceive the programs as a form of surveillance rather than support (Lindekilde, 2012). On the other hand, admission to such an intervention program is based on the consent of the individual concerned, which is why we believe that these concerns have limited foundation. Unlike the British PREVENT strategy, where measures can be adopted without the knowledge or consent of the individual, in the case of the Danish model access to soft measures is made exclusively on the basis of voluntary agreement.

The success of the Danish approach is based on voluntary participation and the willingness of vulnerable individuals to accept the support of support services. Thus, some authors have indicated that this voluntary basis is subject to self-selection bias and only those inclined to accept help participate in these programs, which may lead to the exclusion of certain individuals who could also benefit from the program (Hemmingsen, 2015), which subsequently limits the impact of the program.

However, despite the agreement of will, we appreciate that partnerships between the police and social services can erode trust and lead to the creation of a perception of surveillance in target communities depending on how they are managed. In this sense, some authors point

out that the Danish model can lead to the stigmatization or ostracism of certain parts of the population, contributing to social polarization and a climate of mistrust which themselves represent a problem even if they do not contribute to radicalization (although it can create the favorable context) (Linkedilke, 2012; Ragazzi, 2017). Raising awareness and creating extensive networks among professionals and members of civil society who have been trained and/or encouraged to identify early signs of concern can prove effective elements in any type of prevention, but also carry the risk of being perceived as surveillance networks of the general population or a part of the population when the network focuses on identifying those who are part of vulnerable communities—typically Muslim immigrants. In other words, awareness and outreach programs implemented precisely to create a space of safety and trust in society, risk having the unintended consequence of creating a society of mistrust which leads to the potentiation of radicalization, not its prevention. However, we appreciate that a continuous effort to delimit the concepts of radicalization and extremism, but also to dissociate these concepts from certain parts of the population can minimize the mentioned risk.

Thus, the whole debate comes down to a discussion in which the concept of trust plays a central role, whether it is trust between institutions, citizens' trust in institutions and the perceived degree of trust. In a society where institutions gain legitimacy through a high level of trust on the part of citizens, the perception of surveillance among communities is considerably reduced; individuals do not feel watched or controlled by institutions they trust. Moreover, the pre-existence of a climate of citizens' trust in state institutions can lead to overcoming the self-selection bias mentioned by some authors previously. Thus, it would be worth exploring ways of how increasing citizens' trust in governments and public institutions could lead to healthier societies in which alienation, marginalization and, implicitly, vulnerability to radicalization are reduced.

Some authors have highlighted ethical concerns over privacy and the risk of self-incrimination for people participating in these programs (Hemmingsen, 2015; Ragazzi, 2017; Lindekilde, 2012). In some cases, information disclosed during counseling or mentoring sessions could be used by the police or security services, creating ethical dilemmas and

thus discouraging individuals from participating openly. The researchers noted that unclear privacy boundaries can undermine trust, which is critical to the success of these interventions (Hemmingsen, 2015; Ragazzi, 2017; Lindekilde, 2012). These ethical dilemmas were over time replaced by regulations that protect the confidentiality of the participants with a special provision included in the Danish Administration of Justice Act that allows the participating authorities to exchange information in order to prevent crimes (Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, 2024).

The Danish approach, like many others, focuses heavily on the individual, as it has its starting point in the radicalization process. That is why some authors have expressed dissatisfaction with the depoliticization of a phenomenon intrinsically linked to terrorism, a fundamentally political and deeply hyper-politicized field (Lindekilde, 2014). This criticism is not raised only in relation to the Danish approach: it is also present in the context of other countries' approaches and in the whole discourse on radicalization (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010).

However, the criticism is not purely intellectual. These authors emphasize that the ways in which we understand challenges influence our ability to devise appropriate solutions. If radicalization is perceived exclusively as an individual problem, an irrational manifestation or the result of misunderstandings, there is a risk of overlooking responses that could be constructive. For example, it could be beneficial to address the political issues within current violent conflicts by offering socially acceptable and non-violent engagement alternatives. At the same time, dialogue with the immediate social environments and groups of belonging of the affected people can be essential to understand their grievances—whether real or perceived, or related to domestic or international politics – and to identify non-violent solutions. At the individual level, socio-psychological processes play an important role as mediators between political outrage, ideology and engagement in concrete actions. Although these processes are highly relevant to individual interventions such as mentoring or de-extremism programmes, completely excluding the political dimension would be problematic. Conceptually and practically, including in the design of individual programs, it is essential to recognize the existence of political agendas, real outrages and grievances.

Over time, complaints have been expressed about the lack of procedural clarity within the “info-house” initiative (Hemmingsen, 2015). However, such criticisms have been addressed through a continuous and systematic refinement of the Danish model, which now has common tools and clear and coherent procedures. The current model ensures a high degree of transparency on the part of the authorities, and the tools used in the preventive process are accessible to the public (<https://stopekstremisme.dk/en>).

Other criticisms that have been overcome are those related to the diversity of professional groups involved in the evaluation of cases of radicalization. Specifically, differences between professional groups, each with their own perspectives and methodologies, can lead to divergent interpretations of essential concepts. For example, notions such as “radicalisation”, “signs of radicalisation” and “resilience factors” are often interpreted differently by a police officer compared to a psychologist, which can lead to inconsistencies in the assessment of vulnerable people. This diversity can compromise the uniform application of preventive measures, as what one professional group considers a risk factor or a protective factor may not be recognized in the same way by another group. Over time, the Danish approach has created clearly formulated common standards that ensure a cohesive and equitable approach across professional groups to limit subjective variation and ensure the effectiveness of interventions. For example, regarding the assessment of individual resilience and well-being, the dimensions to which practitioners must refer when assessing the level of individual resilience are specified in detail (Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, 2024).

The Danish model illustrates how a prevention framework can evolve to overcome initial challenges through continuous adaptation and refinement. While some obstacles have been resolved by clarifying procedures and standardizing tools, other difficulties remain, reflecting the inherent complexity of the process of preventing radicalization. What remains essential is the recognition of existing limitations and challenges, as well as the commitment to constantly seek innovative and adaptive solutions. This open and reflective approach ensures the long-term relevance and effectiveness of the Danish model, while also

providing a valuable example for other states seeking to improve their own prevention strategies.

Whether the Danish model may or may not be a viable solution for other European states seeking to reduce the risk or radicalization and violent extremism, this depends on each state's own national context. While the Danish model has proven effective in preventing radicalization, its direct transfer to other national contexts poses significant challenges. This is particularly obvious in countries where long-standing institutions such as "safe houses" do not exist, and where inter-institutional cooperation and public trust in state authorities remain fragile. In contexts where governance structures are weaker, or where historical and sociopolitical factors have led to low levels of citizen trust in state institutions, replicating this model without significant adaptation may prove ineffective. Therefore, any attempt to implement similar approaches must consider that interventions are tailored to the specific realities of each national setting.

A critical starting point for research in the field of radicalization prevention should be the exploration of mechanisms to enhance citizens' trust in state institutions. In contexts where this trust is weak or fragmented, preventive efforts risk being perceived as coercive or ineffective, ultimately undermining their intended impact. Therefore, research should focus on identifying context-specific strategies for fostering institutional credibility, such as transparent governance, consistent community engagement and inclusive policymaking. By addressing the root causes of institutional distrust, policymakers can create a more resilient societal framework, reducing the vulnerabilities that extremist narratives seek to exploit.

Essential Insights for Preventing Radicalization in Low-Trust Societies

Amid rising concerns over radicalization and violent extremism, the urgency for effective prevention systems has become increasingly apparent. Radicalization is a complex phenomenon, influenced by a number of social, psychological and political factors, which requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to manage its root causes. By analysing the successful models of other countries, such as

Denmark, low trust societies like Romania can draw valuable lessons to strengthen its own prevention systems.

Denmark's approach to preventing radicalization is based on a high level of trust, both in terms of public trust in institutions and in terms of inter-institutional trust, collaboration between the agencies involved, research-informed policies and a focus on the well-being of the individual. This synthesis explores how these elements can be adapted and implemented in the Romanian context, formulating specific recommendations for improving the radicalization prevention framework in Romania.

A crucial element that emerges from the Danish model is the central role of trust (Solhjell et.al., 2022), whether we refer to public trust or inter-institutional trust. In Denmark, the high level of trust in public authorities, including law enforcement and government agencies, contributes significantly to social cohesion and reduces the perception of surveillance among citizens. As a result, people are more willing to cooperate with institutions in combating radicalization, perceiving them as legitimate and supportive, not coercive. In the Romanian context, there is a promising starting point for the implementation of similar strategies, given that trust in the Romanian army and police is relatively high compared to other public institutions²⁸. This trust could be harnessed to strengthen institutional legitimacy and facilitate more effective collaborations between various institutions.

In a society characterized by a low level of trust, such as the Romanian one, strengthening trust between citizens and institutions is an essential element for preventing radicalization, violent extremism and ensuring social cohesion. However, this consolidation cannot be achieved by simply taking over external models, such as the Danish one, without careful adaptation to the local socio-cultural specifics. The transferability of elements of the Danish model *per se* in a low trust society is not possible. The Danish framework is based on a high degree of institutional and social trust, which facilitates cooperation between

²⁸ According to an INSCOP survey, the institutions in which Romanian citizens have the highest degree of trust are the army (70,4%), the church (62,5%), NATO (55,4%), EU (50,3%), the police (48,6%), and those with the lowest degree of confidence are the Government (19,4%) and the Parliament (17,4%) (INSCOP, 2023).

authorities and communities. Also, in Denmark, there is a culture of prevention, where the emphasis is on responsibility and proactive measures to maintain the well-being of the population, which reflects also in the way the Danish state institutions manage the preventing measures of radicalisation and violent extremism. In contrast, in Romania, where the perception of public institutions is often marked by skepticism, interventions must be personalized and anchored in local realities. Keeping in mind that Romania lacks a solid culture of prevention, it is necessary to develop mechanisms for authentic dialogue, decision-making transparency and direct involvement of local actors, so that prevention initiatives are perceived as legitimate and relevant. Also, methods of building trust must be gradual, based on tangible results and long-term collaborations, avoiding generic solutions that do not consider the particularities of a society with a low level of trust.

In Nordic countries, the credibility of government institutions is considered a key factor in promoting social cohesion and preventing radicalisation, alongside other factors such as ethnic homogeneity, wealth and income equality (Delhey and Newton, 2005). The procedural fairness of government institutions—characterized by impartial, fair, and efficient decision-making processes—largely shapes citizens' perceptions of trust in institutions²⁹ (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Researchers have examined the relationship between favorable socioeconomic conditions in the Nordic context—such as equality and low levels of corruption—and the high levels of trust that play a crucial role in sustaining democratic welfare states (Bjørnskov and Svendsen, 2013). These high levels of trust are vital to the implementation of public policies, including those aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE), because they influence how citizens perceive government authority and its legitimacy.

Unlike Denmark, Romania faces persistent challenges related to corruption and socioeconomic disparities, which hinder the direct applicability of the Danish model. Romania's problem is not the public

²⁹ However, as mentioned in a previous section, the direction of causality remains unclear, with ongoing debates about whether a high level of generalized trust contributes to the creation of fair institutions or whether well-functioning institutions generate trust among citizens (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008).

perception of corruption, but the corruption itself, which in turn decreased the level of public trust. In other words, Romania's low levels of public trust are not merely a matter of perception, but reflect documented institutional realities. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2024), Romania scored 46 out of 100, ranking among the three lowest-performing EU member states alongside Hungary and Bulgaria, in stark contrast to the highest-scoring European countries: Denmark (90), Finland (87), and Norway (84) (Transparency International, 2024). This is mirrored in the erosion of institutional trust: a 2023 INSCOP national survey found that only 19.4% of Romanians expressed high or moderately high trust in the Government and 17.4% in the Parliament—figures that have nearly halved compared to 2013 (INSCOP, 2023). The causal relationship between corruption and declining trust is further supported by OECD data showing that Romania's perception of widespread governmental corruption exceeds 80%, well above the OECD average (OECD, 2024).

While certain elements from the Danish model, such as early intervention strategies or community-based approaches, could be adapted, their success depends on tailoring interventions to the Romanian socio-cultural context. Therefore, Romania could increase public trust by solving the systemic problems of Romanian society that led to the reduction of public trust levels. For instance, adopting legal mechanisms in order to reduce systemic corruption is a viable option.

Moreover, trust is a crucial factor in inter-institutional collaboration, essential for effective strategies to prevent radicalization. Successful collaboration between agencies such as law enforcement, social services and community organizations requires mutual trust, respect and clear communication (Cooper et. al., 2016). Trust is particularly important when working with racially, ethnically and religiously marginalized communities who need to perceive the government as fair and just to support measures to prevent violent extremism (Ellis et. al., 2021). However, when services work in isolation, trust must be actively cultivated through efforts to align goals, values and objectives.

In an inter-institutional environment, trust is built on individual relationships rather than organizational ties, meaning that trust is more likely to develop between individuals who understand each other's

professional values (Buchbinder and Eisikovits, 2008). In the context of multi-institutional formats created to prevent radicalization, trust between the various actors is essential in the effective functioning³⁰ of the collaborative environment.

In the Romanian context, strengthening inter-institutional trust is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of efforts to prevent radicalization and violent extremism. Effective collaboration among governmental agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities requires a foundation of mutual trust, which can be fostered through power-sharing, shared learning, and leveraging existing high-quality relationships (Ellis et. al., 2020). While this process demands time and sustained commitment, it is crucial for improving coordination, reducing fragmentation, and ensuring a more cohesive response to security challenges.

In this sense, in-depth research on trust in this area could provide a better understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms and social dynamics that favor radicalization, while also identifying ways of effective intervention. Studies in social psychology and intergroup relations have shown that mutual trust between groups and institutions is essential to preventing conflict and social polarization (Newton, 2001), and in this context, exploring the concept from this perspective could be a key to developing more effective prevention strategies. Thus, future research should examine in detail the role of trust in pivot points for preventing the process of radicalization and how it can be cultivated and supported through public policies that promote inclusion, dialogue and cooperation between diverse social, cultural and religious groups.

Institutional trust sets the basis for a healthy society where the risk of radicalization is diminished. We don't see institutional trust as a solution for all the problems in connection to societal radicalization (e.g. societal polarization, terrorism, violent extremism), but an aprioric condition for preventing risks on one side, and better mitigating security challenges, on the other.

³⁰ It can facilitate intercultural and intergroup dialogue, contribute to strengthening social cohesion and reducing vulnerabilities that can favor radicalization.

Therefore, we have developed a set of Insights for Increasing Public Trust in Preventing Radicalization in Romania that stem from the analysis of the Danish model:

1. Increasing institutional transparency and open communication by developing clear, constant and accessible communication mechanisms between authorities and citizens. This objective could be achieved by establishing strategic communication departments at the level of the main public institutions in Romania, through regular public reporting on the measures taken, without disclosing sensitive information, but explaining the reasoning behind the decisions.
2. Clear separation of social intervention from repressive intervention by creating structures dedicated solely to prevention (e.g. local social prevention units), distinct from public order structures. This way, vulnerable people might feel supported, not hunted.
3. Creating personalized and not standardized interventions because programs perceived as “made for everyone” lose the trust of those who feel that they do not reflect their reality. Prevention and “exit” interventions must be adapted to the profile and context of each individual (education, family, religion, and trauma) and tailored to the unique dynamics of each society.
4. Civic education and media literacy campaigns, as radicalization thrives in areas with a deficit of critical thinking and information. It would be useful to run programs in schools and communities on disinformation, tolerance, analysis of radical messages, and emotional skills in joint projects with educational institutions and NGOs. Also, school curricula could include media literacy and critical thinking courses, especially for adolescents.
5. Pilot locally, then scale up nationally: Solutions should be tested on a small scale, in collaboration with communities, before being applied on a large scale, in pilot projects in medium-sized cities or communities with specific needs, followed by evaluation and adaptation. This would increase legitimacy and reduce resistance to change.
6. Recognizing collective and individual trauma through policies that do not stigmatize, but recognize and address the real suffering of individuals and groups which vary from one cultural context to another. Behind radicalization is often suffering, exclusion, abuse or

grievances. Thus, vulnerable citizens need accessible psychological support, without labelling or fear of legal consequences.

7. Creating multi-institutional collaboration structures that manage in a personalized manner the prevention of individual cases of radicalization and violent extremism, avoiding one size fits all approaches. Although such a multi-institutional format will have to overcome the differences in vision between the various institutional actors involved, as well as inter-institutional competitions, nevertheless, by eliminating elements dependent on the Danish cultural context, it can constitute a valuable starting point for the development of effective mechanisms to prevent radicalization and violent extremism, which in time can undergo improvements.

By promoting transparency, civic education and more effective dialogue between authorities and citizens, such initiatives can help reduce tensions and build a more cohesive society. Building trust can also reduce the vulnerability of marginalized individuals and groups to extremist ideologies, offering them constructive alternatives and a more stable framework for expressing their views and actively participating in the democratic process.

Conclusions

This study highlights the crucial role of public trust in the prevention of radicalization, demonstrating that a strong and transparent relationship between individuals and state institutions can mitigate the factors that contribute to extremist engagement, although it cannot be considered a single and sufficient solution in this complex process. Radicalization frequently occurs in social and political contexts where individuals feel alienated, marginalized or exhibit a high level of mistrust of state institutions. Fair and transparent institutions have the potential to reduce the likelihood that citizens will turn to alternative, often extremist, narratives that challenge the legitimacy of the state. In this sense, public trust contributes to the consolidation of social cohesion, giving individuals a sense of belonging and inclusion, which diminishes the predisposition towards extremist ideologies.

Another fundamental aspect of institutional trust is its ability to encourage cooperation between citizens and authorities. Communities that trust government, law enforcement, and public agencies are more

likely to cooperate with state institutions, report and actively participate in radicalization prevention initiatives. In addition, trust in institutions contributes to increasing the population's receptivity to state-promoted counter-narratives, thereby reducing individuals' susceptibility to misinformation, conspiracy theories or extremist propaganda. Citizens who trust state institutions are therefore more resistant to recruitment attempts by radical groups, who often seek to discredit government institutions by portraying them as oppressive, corrupt or illegitimate.

However, public trust is not something one can impose. Trust must be earned and maintained through transparency, accountability and inclusive governance. In states where trust in institutions is already low due to historical injustices, corruption or structural inequalities, the process of rebuilding it requires time and consistent efforts. This can be achieved through decisional transparency and predictability, as well as pre-established functional control mechanisms.

Radicalization is not only influenced by internal factors, but also by external elements, such as exposure to global extremist movements, online influences or transnational grievances, which can undermine trust in state institutions, even in established democracies. In this context, strengthening institutional trust must be an integral part of strategies to prevent radicalization, complemented by measures aimed to reduce social inequalities, promoting inclusion and improving communication between the state and citizens.

Through the case study of the Danish Model, it becomes obvious that a multi-agency approach—rooted in trust-building mechanisms such as dialogue, social inclusion and community engagement—can serve as an effective strategy for preventing radicalization. The Danish experience underscores the importance of balancing security measures with preventive social policies, ensuring that individuals at risk perceive institutions as legitimate, fair and responsive to their needs.

Although the Danish model cannot be directly transferred to the Romanian context due to differences in the level of public trust and socioeconomic conditions, some of its core principles and strategies remain valuable. Key elements such as early intervention, community engagement, and enhancing inter-agency collaboration can contribute to preventing radicalization in Romania, but only if they are carefully adapted to local realities. For these strategies to be effective, Romanian

authorities must prioritize strengthening their collaboration and mutual trust, fostering a more cohesive and coordinated approach.

Furthermore, in a low-trust society like Romania, adopting targeted strategies to enhance public trust is crucial for the success of radicalization prevention efforts. Strengthening institutional transparency, ensuring fairness in decision-making, and actively addressing corruption perceptions are essential steps in fostering trust between the state and its citizens. Trust-building measures should also include long-term investments in education, civic engagement, and social cohesion programs, which contribute to a more resilient and cooperative society.

In this context, although societal high levels of institutional trust cannot, alone, eradicate radicalization, social polarization and violent extremism, it constitutes itself as an important protective factor against the attraction of extremist ideologies. Effective strategies to prevent radicalization must include measures to strengthen and maintain public trust in government, law enforcement and social institutions. Thus, strengthening public trust not only reduces the vulnerability of individuals to extremist propaganda, but also contributes to the development of a more resilient society, capable of effectively responding to the challenges associated with radicalization and violent extremism.

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