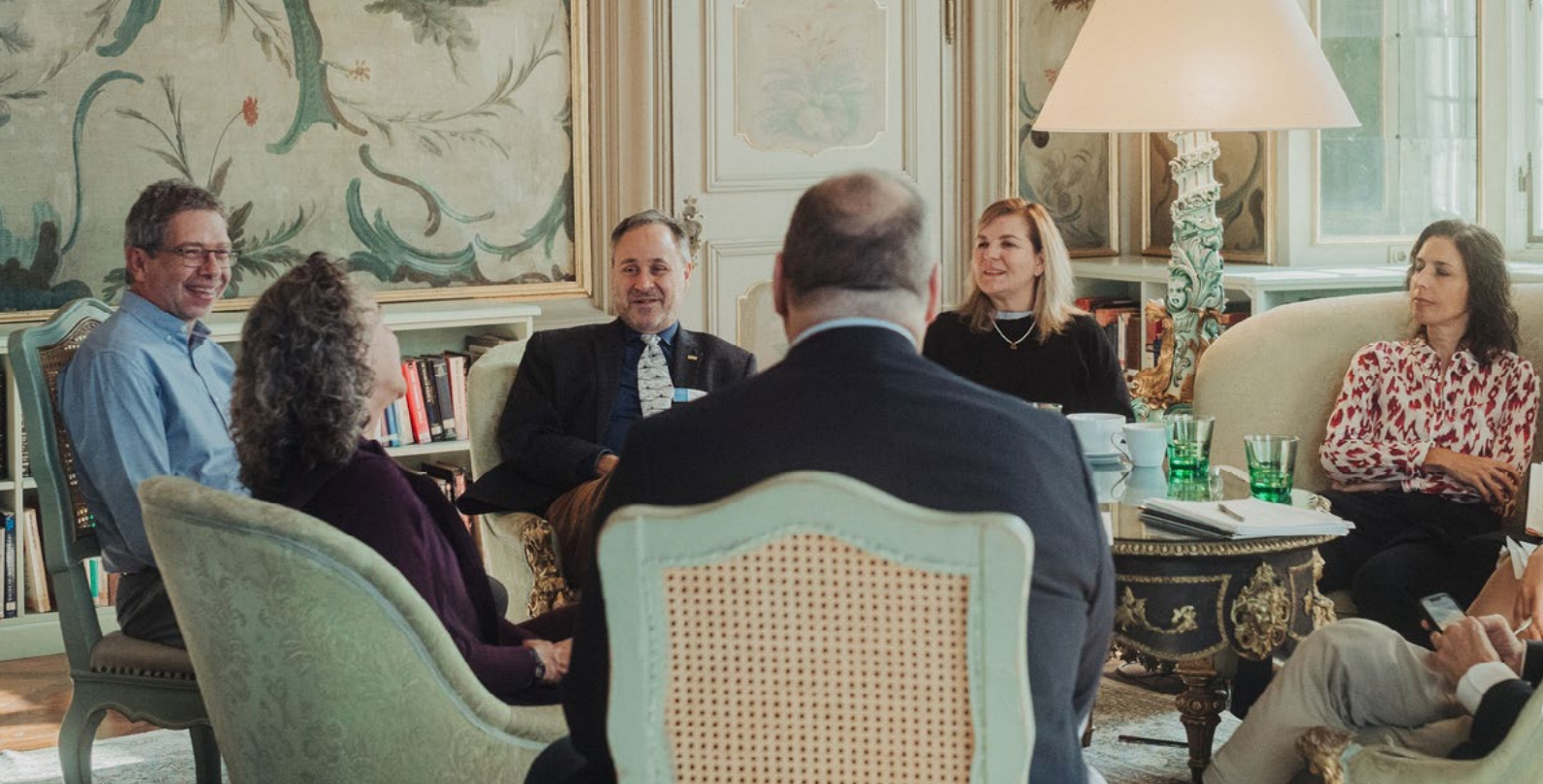


Polarization and Violent Threats to Democratic Systems: *Assessing the Risks and What Can Be Done About Them*





The Polarization and Violent Threats to Democratic Systems project is developing an international, interdisciplinary network of researchers and stakeholders working on understanding and addressing rising polarization and political violence in a range of mature democratic systems. In addition, the project is defining a set of critical questions and objectives to inform and shape a new research agenda on the rise of polarization and political violence across selected countries.

Overview

In 2024, more democratic societies around the world voted than ever before. The erosion of trust in information and institutions and the rise of extremist ideologies pose a serious threat to the stability of democratic societies around the world now and in the immediate future.

The first convening of this three-year project was held in Salzburg, Austria from September 16 to 18, 2024. This session investigated the intersection of political polarization and the escalation of political violence within select mature democratic systems in this context. Participants sought to understand these issues from a cross-national perspective, focusing on a range of recent examples from the USA, Europe, Brazil, India, and Australia, among others.

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Foreword

As is the case with almost any report, events often move so quickly that the context and content of the report itself is outdated upon publication. In some ways, this report is no exception.

In 2024, Salzburg Global and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation set out to assess the threats of polarization and political violence within democratic systems and to better understand what can be done about them. Our aim, given the rapidly increasing levels of political polarization and political violence across a range of democracies, is to make a meaningful contribution to this understanding and to help identify ways not only to reduce the threat of political violence, but to address the dangers that polarization and political violence present to democratic systems themselves.

During the course of this project, we have identified three typologies of political violence, which are described in detail below. These typologies include: 1) State-Sponsored or Mediated Violence, which is characterized by the direct or indirect involvement of the state in orchestrating violence or the threat of violence; 2) State vs. Outside Groups, which is characterized by the state confronting non-state (or state adjacent) groups; and 3) Decentralized Social Violence, which is characterized by violence arising from decentralized or socially diffuse sources across societies.

The events of 2025 have so far indicated two things. First, that the importance of this project – and the work of those involved in it – has not diminished in any way. Second, that in

some democratic societies, the threat of state sponsored intimidation, recrimination, and violence to achieve political aims is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of the democratic landscape.

In other ways, and in view of the events of 2025, this report is timely and prescient. This report suggests that the greatest dangers to democratic systems emerge when full democracies shift toward “hybrid democracies,” i.e. systems with democratic structures but marked by dysfunction, identity struggles, and intense forms of political competition that undermine democratic processes. In this sense, “hybrid democracies” are particularly susceptible to political violence because hybrid democratic systems often exhibit violence – or the threat of retribution, recrimination, and violence – as a tool to manage deep-rooted conflicts over identity and governance and to dismantle the accountability mechanisms associated with thriving democratic societies.

How these threats will evolve, and what the repercussions for democracy may be, is not yet clear. What remains clear, however, is that understanding these threats, and knowing what to do about them, is among the most important questions facing the future of democratic societies today.



1 Background

In 2024, Salzburg Global and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation initiated a multi-year project to address the critical and complex issue of assessing the threats of polarization and political violence within democratic systems, and what can be done about them. The project, over three years, seeks to address the following key issues:

1 Defining Political Violence

What constitutes political violence in contemporary democratic societies? Are there accepted and agreed definitions of what constitutes political violence?

2 Assessment of Threats

How and when do hate speech and polarization serve as precursors to violence in different democratic contexts? How do we understand the threshold for when incitement leads to violence, and what insights do we currently have regarding the transition from hate speech to physical or political violence?

3 Understanding the Nexus Between Political Violence and Information Technology:

How do we evaluate and comprehend the relationship between polarization and political violence, especially amidst the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) and its potential amplification of polarizing political narratives? How can we accurately assess both existing and emerging threats of political violence in an era of rapidly advancing information technologies? What new measures and “guardrails” are different democratic societies employing and what additional mechanisms do democratic societies need in order to mitigate threats in this emerging context?

4 Comparative Analysis

Where are there similarities and differences in understanding and assessing the threats of polarization and the potential rise of political violence? To what extent are conditions conducive to political violence more severe in present-day democratic societies compared to other historical periods? Do we need to redefine and reevaluate the nature of incitement and political violence in the age of digital media and AI?

Over the period 2024-2026, the project will convene an international, interdisciplinary network of researchers and stakeholders working to understand and address rising polarization and political violence in a range of democratic systems; define a set of critical questions and objectives to inform and shape a new research agenda on the rise of polarization and political violence across the selected countries; contribute to better understanding of how to assess escalating threats; and, posit policy and practice recommendations for how to begin to more effectively address them.

In September 2024, Salzburg Global and the Harry Frank Guggenheim convened the first high-level program of 25 researchers, journalists, technologists, philanthropists, and other stakeholders to address these issues and begin the process of making recommendations for how to assess and deal with the rising threat of political violence in democratic societies.

Below is an initial overview of the findings of the project, as well some key takeaways and recommendations from the first phase of this multi-year initiative.



2 Framing the Risk of Political Violence

The intersection of democracy and political violence is an increasingly worrying trend, specifically in the context of violent threats within democratic systems, many of which are emerging as real and complex threats to the health and stability of democratic societies. However, the complexities of democratic systems, and the patterns, trends, and potential underlying causes of political violence are still not well understood. As part of this project's initial findings, a corollary question has emerged which bears further investigation and research. When does political violence not only become a threat within democratic societies, but to the structures and processes of democracy itself?

2.1 Definition of Political Violence

For the purposes of this project, political violence can be defined as the use of physical force, coercion, or intimidation to achieve political

goals. This project focuses specifically on the threat of political violence in democratic systems, and in particular on advanced industrialized democratic systems.

From a broader perspective, political violence can encompass a wide range of actions, including violent acts against individuals or groups, state-sponsored repression, and physical violence and intimidation used by both state and non-state actors. In democratic societies, political violence often targets marginalized communities and seeks to undermine democratic participation, destabilize governance, or maintain power.

The Surge of Political Violence in Democratic Societies

Across numerous societies, the “tragic coexistence” of democracy and violence has shaped their histories, political cultures, and defined the role of the state as both a protector against violence and as perpetrator of violence. However, over the last 10 years, there has been a substantial increase in political violence in several advanced democratic contexts, raising questions about what is driving this increase and how we should evaluate the long-term threats and dangers associated with it.

A review of select indicators over the last 10 years include:

- In the United States, there has been a sharp rise in political violence, with a tenfold increase in threats against members of Congress since 2015.
- The U.S. experienced unprecedented levels of aggression toward election workers in recent election cycles, especially during the 2020 and 2022 elections.
- In 2023, hate crimes were at their highest point in the U.S. in the 21st century.
- A disturbing generational trend is starting to emerge: While political violence is generally carried out by older and middle-aged men, among Generation Z (12-27 years old currently), there has been a considerable increase in the percentage of people that appear tolerant of violence as a means to achieve political ends.
- In Germany, 10,000 attacks on local politicians have been reported over the past five years.
- In the U.K., violence and rioting erupted across the country in 2024, following a high-profile attack on children and fast-spreading misinformation on social media, highlighting the potential for societal tensions to rapidly escalate into violence.

2.2 Typologies of Political Violence

The project identified three main types of political violence:

- 1 **State-Sponsored or Mediated Violence:** The direct or indirect involvement of the state in orchestrating violence, often through non-state actors or militias.
- 2 **State vs. Outside Groups:** Where the state directly engages with non-state (or state adjacent) groups, leading to confrontation and violence. This is particularly acute in conflicts where governments suppress uprisings or insurgencies.
- 3 **Decentralized Social Violence:** Violence arising from decentralized or socially diffuse sources, often with an ambiguous involvement of the state, and where local actors, including political parties or non-state actors, perpetuate violence across societies.

While a great deal of research exists on the first two of these typologies, there is a lack of research and understanding about decentralized social violence, including how to assess the threat of decentralized violence, what the causal factors are that lead to widespread political violence, and how to minimize or counter this form of political violence in democratic systems.

3 Key Findings

3.1 Political Competition, Not Polarization, as a Key Driver

Political polarization is often cited as a key determining driver of political violence. Indeed, understanding how and whether political polarization leads to political violence was a key question driving this project. However, the initial findings of this project have provided a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between political competition and violence. This perspective challenges the prevailing assumption that political polarization is the primary cause of unrest in democratic societies, and instead suggests that political competition, particularly in middle- to high-income democracies where the stakes for political power are higher, is a better indicator of the threat of political violence in democratic systems.

Several key findings from the research presented as part of this project are worth noting:

- Despite a sharp rise in political violence across many democracies, political violence does not always correlate directly with political polarization, a commonly assumed driver of unrest.
- Several countries, including Spain, Chile, and Poland, exhibit high levels of political polarization without significant political violence. This discrepancy suggests that while polarization can intensify political divides, it is not the sole cause of violence.

- Hybrid democracies are systems with democratic structures but marked by dysfunction, identity struggles, and intense forms of political competition that undermine democratic processes. This can include competitive elections on an unlevel playing field, restrictions on civil and political freedoms, unequal access to justice, or the destruction of accountability mechanisms and checks and balances. Hybrid democracies are proving particularly vulnerable to political violence, and these “hybrid democratic systems” often exhibit violence – or the threat of violence and retribution – as a tool for managing deep-rooted conflicts over identity and governance.

Despite widespread perceptions, the greatest incidences of political violence occur in societies with high degrees of both political competition and polarization, and not in societies with high political polarization and low political competition. The competition for political dominance in highly competitive systems, such as two-party or “winner-take-all” systems, often results in violence – or the threat of violence – being used as a strategic political tool. In this context, political violence is not necessarily an anomaly, but rather a feature of democracy—one that serves to shape outcomes in highly contested political environments.

This suggests conventional views that political polarization alone drives political violence need to be reconsidered. Instead, the structure of political systems, particularly those with “hybrid democratic characteristics” that foster intense competition and have “winner-take-all” political systems, may play a more critical role.

One hypothesis put forward as part of this project is that the combination of political polarization as mutually antagonistic political camps with mutual accusations of the other as an existential threat to the nation or to democracy itself, combined with high stakes political competition, raises the risk of political violence.

This hypothesis underscores the need for more research and a deeper understanding of how political competition and political violence manifest in different stages of democratic development and different democratic systems.

This perspective challenges the prevailing assumption that political polarization is the primary cause of unrest in democratic societies, and instead suggests that political competition, particularly in middle- to high-income democracies where the stakes for political power are higher, is a better indicator of the threat of political violence in democratic systems.

3.2 Political Violence Against Marginalized Groups Is Often a Key Marker for Expanding Threats Within Democratic Systems

Decentralized and socially diffuse political violence – a significant concern of this project – often manifests first at the peripheries of democratic societies and is directed at marginalized and minority groups. This form of violence, which is often found at the edges of political systems, has broader societal implications. It not only disrupts democratic participation but also erodes civic engagement, particularly among vulnerable populations, potentially restricting participation in political processes and often leading to long-term political instability.

In highly polarized and contested democratic systems, this form of decentralized violence is often targeted specifically at migrant populations. Migrant populations often become scapegoats for broader societal frustrations, with violence against them tied to structural – and sometimes even state-tolerated – violence. This type of violence, inherently political in nature, reflects a deep-seated anxiety around issues of identity and belonging within nations facing demographic and social changes, particularly where those changes shift the balance of political competition. Perpetrators of political violence against these populations frequently view themselves as victims of

the system or specific groups, which further perpetuates cycles of violence. This pattern of perceived victimhood and “justified” or even “righteous” violence make resolution more difficult, as the lines between victim and aggressor blur, and societal divisions deepen. This form of “righteous political violence” and what drives it is discussed further below.

3.3 How and When Does Polarization “Activate” Political Violence?

If high levels of political polarization and political competition increase the threat of political violence in democratic systems, what factors contribute to the “activation” of violence in political contexts? Is there an identifiable combination of polarization, competition, elite rhetoric, and identity politics, that tips the scales toward political violence? Under what conditions is political violence most likely to emerge? The following initial findings from this project suggest ways of assessing when marginalization, dangerous speech, and threat construction by political elites can light the fuse of violence in democratic societies.

3.4 When Polarization Leads to Violence: “Affective Polarization,” “Pernicious Polarization,” and “Toxic Polarization”

It is clear that political elites play a central role in shaping narratives that fuel political violence. By exploiting societal divisions and stoking fears about external threats, political elites can activate violence through their rhetoric, often using fears about immigration and minorities to galvanize their political supporters and energize their bases through scapegoating, identifying specific groups as “enemies”, and using dehumanizing language to undermine the legitimacy of minority groups as part of the democratic fabric of society. But when does polarization become dangerous, and what markers of characteristics of polarization might be identified that enable us to understand when polarization leads to violence?

An important finding of this project has been to consider when polarization is not only a form of non-violent political conflict, but when it becomes dangerous. Several ways of thinking about this question have been identified during this project. First, a key factor in the shift from polarization to violence can be seen through the lens of “affective polarization”—a form of polarization driven by an emotional hatred and contempt for political opponents. This form



of polarization deepens the stakes of political competition, widens societal divisions, and can begin to normalize violence as an option in political conflict, creating an environment where violence can flourish. While “affective polarization” itself does not appear to trigger violence, it creates the conditions for its emergence.

Second, the concepts of “pernicious polarization” or “toxic polarization” were put forward as ways to understand when polarization begins to “tip” specifically toward violence. Pernicious polarization is a condition in which political leaders and elites utilize the conditions of affective polarization to incite violence by portraying certain groups as existential threats to society.

Similarly, “toxic polarization” is a highly dangerous form of polarization when political opponents are dehumanized and when individuals view their political opponents as illegitimate participants in the political process and as existential threats to be marginalized or eliminated. The implementation of these forms

of “pernicious” and “toxic” polarization can encourage violence and undermine democratic principles. Once pernicious or toxic polarization have taken root, de-escalation becomes increasingly difficult.

These forms of polarization can have particularly harmful consequences for democracy, as “pernicious” or “toxic” polarizing strategies identify opponents as “disloyal enemies” to the nation and use dehumanizing and demonizing language to weaken democratic commitments and frame opponents as existential threats. These kinds of political rhetoric frame violence as a necessary form of self-defense against perceived dangers, and provide not only a permission structure for violence, but frame political violence as a righteous and moral act.

A key question for the future of this project will be to explore whether there is a sequential and evolutionary relationship between affective polarization and pernicious or toxic polarization, and how this relates to the question of assessing when political violence becomes a threat to democratic systems.

The U.S. As a Unique Case of Polarization and Violence

A significant concern of this project is the unique status of the United States and the increasing incidents and threats of violence reshaping American society. In this context, the U.S. is an outlier, where high degrees of “winner take all” political competition and deep political polarization – combined with an extremely high per capita number of firearms and military-grade weapons in the hands of citizens – have led to increases in violence and are challenging conventional democratic norms. While surveys suggest a link between political competition, polarization, and violence, experimental data presented as a part of this project suggests that in the U.S., competition and polarization alone do not directly lead to violence, but that political leaders play a significant role in “activating” violent behavior through the use of “elite political cues” and “dangerous speech.”

In the U.S., such elite political cues, such as the use of conspiracy theories and inflammatory rhetoric for political purposes, have increasingly bonded politicians to certain segments of society, often encouraging violent actions. These cues often dehumanize political opponents and frame “out-groups” as existential threats. This pattern of violence has been evident in recent years, especially during the 2020 and 2022 elections, and in incidents such as the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol. In these examples, the combination of affective polarization, pernicious polarization, and dangerous speech created a charged atmosphere where violence was seen as a legitimate response to perceived threats. The issue of what constitutes dangerous speech, and how it relates to triggering political violence, is described below.

The 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania serves as another example of where these forms of polarization – affective, pernicious, and toxic – created the conditions for political violence. This mass shooting was perpetrated by an individual who cited anti-immigrant and antisemitic rhetoric as his motivation, suggesting in his manifesto that Jews were facilitating the entry of illegal migrants into the United States and represented an existential threat to the state. In this case, the combination of each form of polarization, combined with elite-driven threat construction of migrants, seems to have played a role in encouraging and normalizing violence as a necessary means of dealing with a perceived social threat.

4 Political Violence and Digital Threats: The Role of Dangerous Speech and Social Media

In addition to better understanding the context in which polarization leads to political violence, this project is concerned with the relationship between the digital landscape and political violence. A key aspect of the project has therefore been to explore the question of “dangerous speech,” how dangerous speech is constructed, the role of political leadership in fostering dangerous speech, and the influence of social media in amplifying dangerous narratives. What is dangerous speech, how can it be countered, and what is needed both with respect to political leadership and social media regulation to reduce the risk of political violence from dangerous speech?

4.1 Dangerous Speech and Threat Construction

Dangerous speech refers to rhetoric that constructs threats to an “in-group,” justifies actions against perceived threats, and frames violence not only as justified but as virtuous. Such narratives often draw on historical or religious analogies, making violent responses appear righteous or necessary. In this sense, dangerous speech can be seen as the manifestation of pernicious and toxic polarization through the construction of threats that reinforce that polarization. The scale and scope of dangerous speech in democratic societies may therefore be a key indicator for when affective polarization leads to more pernicious and toxic polarization, and how these conditions can be used to incite political violence.

Dangerous speech in this context is also particularly inflammatory in democratic societies, because it seeks not only to reshape democratic processes, but to erode or dismantle social norms. A key suggestion of this project has been that when influential political figures use dangerous speech effectively, they shift the “Overton Window” — the range of acceptable issues within public discourse — making violence seem a legitimate response to perceived political or social threats. As these norms shift, the “moveable middle” of society may come to accept violence as a means to resolve conflicts or defend identity, particularly in democratic societies where political competition is already high, and where the characteristics of “affective”, “pernicious”, or “toxic” polarization are prevalent. How far the Overton Window shifts may also be a key factor in understanding the conditions that make political violence not only a threat within democratic societies, but a threat to democratic processes and structures.

4.2 Countering Dangerous Speech

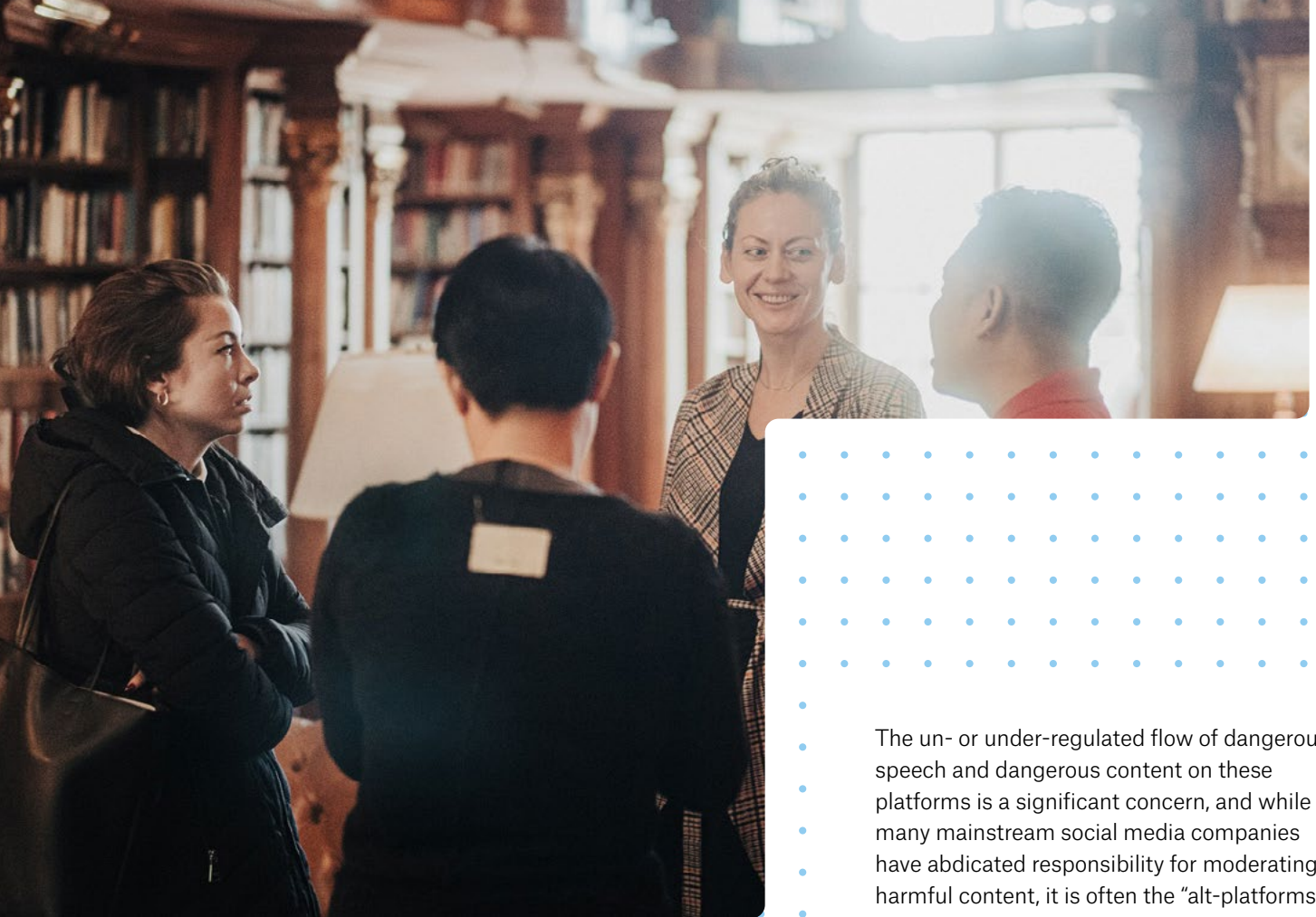
Despite the alarming rise of dangerous speech, there are initiatives designed to counter its effects, both online and offline. One such initiative referenced as part of this project, #IAmHere, operates across 19 countries and empowers individuals to challenge harmful narratives on social media. These decentralized movements play a vital role in promoting social cohesion, democratic engagement, and pluralism, disrupting the dangerous narratives that often precede political violence.

This kind of counter-speech can be an effective and essential tool in undermining the narratives that fuel violence. By providing alternative perspectives and challenging dangerous rhetoric, such efforts work to preemptively halt the radicalization process that leads to violence.

4.3 Local Political Leadership

Political leadership also plays a decisive role in either escalating or mitigating political violence. Leaders who engage in vitriolic, divisive rhetoric create environments ripe for violence. This type of leadership fuels societal conflict by exploiting divisions and encouraging radicalization.

However, this project has suggested that while national political leaders play a prominent and powerful role in creating the conditions for political violence, or in denouncing violence within their parties or among their supporters, there is a significant and often under-appreciated role that local political leaders play in countering dangerous speech. Local leaders, who are often closer to their communities and more in tune with local concerns, can more directly address grievances and foster dialogue that diffuses tensions, particularly in cases where national leadership is absent or is fostering dangerous speech and creating conditions for political violence to emerge.



4.4 Digital Platforms and the Role of Social Media in Political Violence

Online platforms play a central role in shaping political discourse by amplifying both constructive and destructive narratives. While these platforms have democratized access to political speech, allowing a broader range of voices to participate in political conversations, they also have democratized misinformation and dangerous rhetoric. This shift has undermined traditional gatekeepers of information, creating a more chaotic and volatile political landscape where expertise is often drowned out by dangerous rhetoric and conspiracy theories.

There is widespread agreement among those participating in this project that social media has become a space where political violence is incubated, amplified, and planned, often in critical ways that are unregulated and under-addressed by major social media platforms.

The un- or under-regulated flow of dangerous speech and dangerous content on these platforms is a significant concern, and while many mainstream social media companies have abdicated responsibility for moderating harmful content, it is often the “alt-platforms” where the most incendiary and dangerous forms of speech are hosted.

This is problematic, because efforts to regulate social media platforms have often focused on large social media companies like Facebook and Twitter, but insufficient attention has been given to “alt-social media platforms” or to developing comprehensive policies for dealing with dangerous speech wherever it is occurring.

This suggests a specific focus of concern for this project, specifically with respect to how social media – and the lack of clear policies and practices to monitor and interrupt dangerous speech – can enable a shift from affective, to pernicious, to toxic polarization online. This project acknowledges that content moderation and regulation are extremely difficult to manage in democratic societies where free speech is and should be protected. Nonetheless, there is an urgent need to consider options for identifying and disrupting the nefarious consequences of dangerous speech, and to more effectively penalize companies and platforms that tolerate or fail to curb dangerous speech when it becomes toxic, including companies that provide hosting services for alt-social media platforms.

5 The Role of State-Sponsored Violence in Democratic Systems

While a significant concern of this project is the danger of decentralized political violence in democratic societies, the project also seeks to explore the effects of state-sponsored political violence, including how governments across different countries manipulate, tolerate, or directly encourage violence – or the threats of violence – to maintain political control and succeed in competitive political environments. Examples from countries including India, Hungary, and Turkey illustrate how political and social fault lines, state complicity, and political manipulation can create and sustain violence in democratic contexts. More importantly, these examples suggest another way of addressing the question of when political violence becomes a threat to democracy itself, i.e., when it is used as a tool of the state to control and enhance the competitiveness of a single political party.

5.1 India: Weaponizing Social Fault Lines & State-Tolerated Violence

India's experience with political violence reveals how social and religious fault lines can be weaponized by the state. Following partition and the mass violence that accompanied it, the Indian state developed – at least in part – as a means to prevent mass violence and to achieve a balance of power between its diverse regions and ethnic and religious groups. However, the Indian state, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has allowed political violence against Muslims to persist and intensify. Under the current government, violence has been ideologically manipulated to marginalize Muslims and entrench a vision of India as a Hindu nation.

While overall political violence has decreased in India, targeted violence against Muslims has risen significantly due largely to Prime Minister Modi's willingness not only to foster and use hateful speech, but to enable the state

to tolerate political violence. This example reinforces the finding of this project that hybrid democracies – those democracies that evolve toward authoritarian leadership – can create a significant danger of rising political violence in ways facilitated by the ruling party's political strategy.

5.2 Hungary: Manufactured Chaos and Violence for Political Stability

Hungary presents a case where political violence has been used strategically to consolidate power. While Hungary is often cited as an example of a country where polarization alone does not lead to political violence, this project has looked more deeply into the way in which Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party first consolidated power. Of particular interest is the way Orbán instrumentalized political violence as a means to break apart accepted political norms during the 2006 Hungarian elections, using right-wing groups to engage in violence against the Roma community. This “manufactured chaos and violence,” which was organized and orchestrated by Fidesz, enabled Orbán to create a political platform of “peace and stability” and present himself as the solution to disorder and chaos, which remains his political message and promise to Hungary today.



These examples underscore a key feature of when and how political violence is used to undermine the structures and processes of democratic societies, and how democratic societies begin to “autocratize” through the use of political violence.

While, on the surface, Hungary appears to be a society with low levels of political violence, this project highlighted a significant concern about a return to state-organized violence and chaos at a future point in time where Fidesz starts to lose political popularity. This pattern of creating instability and then offering security as a political tool has become central to Orbán’s political and governing identity. Orbán may again employ this tool of using toxic polarization and dangerous speech directed at minorities and migrants as a way to mobilize violence and reclaim a political message of peace and stability.

5.3 Turkey: Political Violence Through State Alliances

In Turkey, President Erdoğan’s rise to political power was accompanied by alliances formed with non-state militant groups such as the “Grey Wolves,” known for their involvement in widespread political violence directed at

leftist political movements, and specifically the Kurdish Workers Party, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This violence emerged from a period of high inflation, significant political competition, and state-sponsorship of organized crime and militia groups. It continues to influence Turkish politics and political competition today. Following the coup d’etat attempt in Turkey in 2016, Erdoğan has increasingly leveraged historical grievances and the Kurdish issue to divide secular and Muslim Turks. He has also employed his far-right coalition partner, the MHP (the political wing of the Grey Wolves) to use intimidation and the threat of political violence as a means to strengthen his hold on power.

The strategic use of intimidation and violence in Turkey echoes both the Indian and Hungarian context, where state-endorsed violence targets specific minority groups and uses violence and intimidation to reconsolidate power.

These examples underscore a key feature of when and how political violence is used to undermine the structures and processes of democratic societies, and how democratic societies begin to “autocratize” through the use of political violence. The specific use of political violence to gain or maintain political control, whether through direct sponsorship, toleration, or outsourcing violence to non-state actors, may be a key indicator of when political violence can present a danger to democracy itself. Importantly, for this project, these examples suggest a way of assessing how political violence manifests in hybrid-democratic and “autocratizing” societies.



6 Conclusion

Political violence is a feature of polarization and competition in democratic societies, not an anomaly. But when and how does political violence threaten democracy itself?

Political violence is not an aberration in modern democracies but, in many cases, a feature of them. Highly competitive and polarized political systems, hybrid democracies, and autocratizing states are particularly susceptible to political violence, which often begins on the peripheries of society before expanding into broader societal conflicts through specific forms of affective, pernicious, and toxic polarization and through the “activation” of polarization into violence by dangerous speech. While political competition, polarization, and violence are interrelated, their manifestations depend on the specific political and social contexts of each country.

This project seeks to identify and understand how increasing polarization and political violence is affecting a range of democratic systems; define a set of critical questions and objectives to inform and shape a new research agenda on the rise of polarization and political violence across select democracies; contribute to better understanding of how to assess escalating threats; and posit policy and practice recommendations for how to begin more effectively addressing them.

To date, this project has arrived at the following conclusion and areas for further exploration.

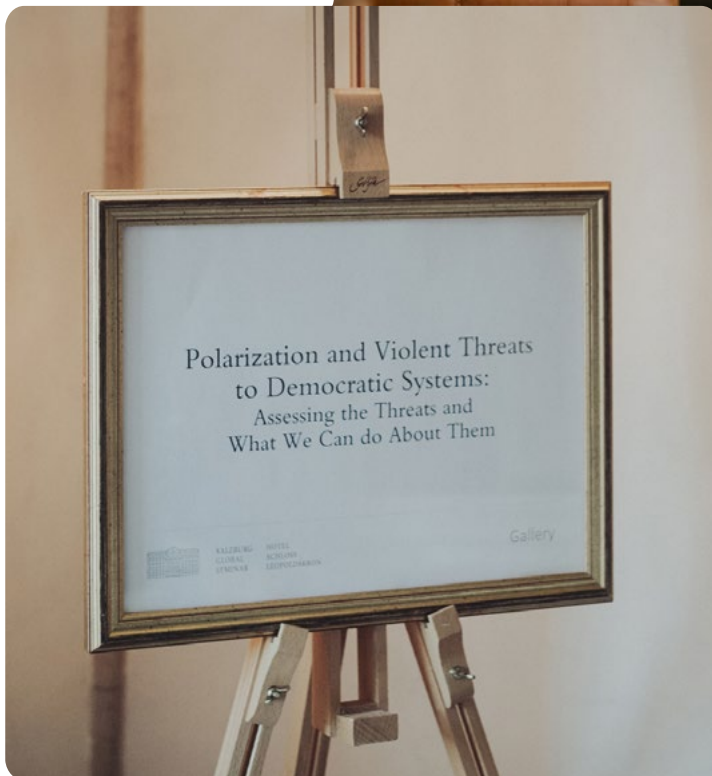
- 1 **Hybrid-Democracies and “Autocratizing” States:** How and when political violence is used, encouraged, or tolerated in societies to achieve single party rule provides important potential indicators of where democratic structures and processes are threatened. The relationship between political competition, polarization, and the “hybridization” of democracy and autocracy is a critical area for further exploration.
- 2 **Decentralized and Diffuse Violence in Democratic Societies:** Decentralized and diffuse political violence in democratic societies is a significant area of focus, as there is comparably less research on the causes and consequence of this form of political violence in democratic societies.
- 3 **The Role of Political Competition in Polarized Societies:** Understanding the role of political competition in highly polarized societies, and when political competition leads to violence, needs to be considered alongside questions of polarization.
- 4 **Typologies of Polarization:** To understand when polarization leads to violence, it is important to understand the evolution and sequence of polarization in society. Using concepts like affective polarization, pernicious polarization, and toxic polarization, and understanding when and how these emerge, is an important way to assess and predict the emergence of violence.

- 5 **Triggers and Activating Violence:** The role of dangerous speech and other means of activating violence in highly polarized and competitive societies is a key indicator for violence. The relationship between the typologies or polarization and the conditions in which dangerous speech might activate widespread violence is a key question for further research.

- 6 **Political Violence in the United States:** Specifically with respect to challenges currently faced by the rise of political polarization and violence in the United States, especially after the re-election of Donald Trump as president, this project will seek to monitor and assess both the risks of decentralized violence as well as the potential for an increased risk of “state-sponsored” and/or “state-adjacent” violence incited through “pernicious” and/ or “toxic” polarization strategies and perpetrated by the state, militia groups, or other organized structures.

Political violence is an inherent feature of democratic systems. However, a clear understanding of when and how political violence emerges in democratic societies, and when it threatens democratic systems themselves, requires the ability to recognize the drivers of violence, how it emerges in specific democratic contexts, and how political violence evolves from isolated incidents into existential threats.

These six conclusions and areas for further exploration from the project suggest a way of thinking about and addressing these questions. When and how political violence threatens democracy itself, and whether there are ways to develop new research and evidence – including frameworks, indicators, case studies, and examples from a range of democratic societies – will be the focus of future phases of this project. This aims to shed light on ways to assess these existential risks to democratic systems, and more importantly, what to do about them.



About Salzburg Global

Salzburg Global is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to convening open-minded leaders to overcome barriers and *open a world of better possibilities*.

Since 1947, we have worked with over 40,000 Fellows from more than 170 countries to address the most pressing issues of our time. Our first session brought together over 100 young Europeans and Americans – including survivors of concentration camps, veterans of resistance movements, prisoners of war, and former enemies. They met at Schloss Leopoldskron, an Austrian palace that had been occupied by the Nazis, in a country that was still under Allied military control. Together, they wrestled with how diverse and fractured groups of people could come together and begin to create the conditions for peace in the aftermath of war.

Today, the challenges may be different, but our mission still carries that same founding spirit: *To overcome barriers and open up a world of better possibilities*.

The Austrian palace
we call home



A Schloss With a Mission

Since 1947, we have made our home at Schloss Leopoldskron, an Austrian palace with a rich and complex history stretching back to the 18th century.

The Schloss has been many things over the years – the summer home of a notorious Prince Archbishop, a cultural hub for Europe's theater scene, the home of famed director and impresario Max Reinhardt, a Nazi administrative headquarters, and a monument to the past.

Today, it is a thriving center for dialogue and debate – a place of refuge and reconciliation where diverse leaders from around the world gather for conversations of consequence. We are committed to reclaiming the past of the Schloss and serving as stewards of its future.

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