



Resolution 1344 (2003)¹

Threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly remains concerned at the resurgence of extremist movements and parties in Europe, and considers that no member state is immune to the intrinsic threats that extremism poses to democracy.
2. The tendency today is for extremism to spread across the European continent. In western Europe extremist parties and movements have achieved significant electoral scores. In other member states of the Council of Europe, political extremism has also developed to a noticeable extent. This current trend should encourage the Council of Europe member states to be more vigilant than ever, and to assess the threats posed by extremism to the fundamental values that the Council of Europe aims to uphold.
3. Extremism, whatever its nature, is a form of political activity that overtly or covertly rejects the principles of parliamentary democracy, and very often bases its ideology and its political practices and conduct on intolerance, exclusion, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and ultra-nationalism.
4. The Assembly notes that some extremist movements seek justification for their actions in religion. The danger of this current trend is twofold: on the one hand it fosters intolerance, religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, and on the other it leads to the isolation of entire religious communities for the sake of individuals who abuse the universal values of religion.
5. Extremism relies on social discontent to propose simplistic and stereotyped solutions in response to the anxieties and uncertainties felt by certain social groups in the face of the changes affecting our societies. It shifts responsibility for these difficulties to the inability of representative democracy to meet the challenges of today's world, and the incapacity of elected representatives and institutions to address citizens' expectations, or it designates a particular section of the population as responsible or as a potential threat.
6. Extremist parties and movements are often oligarchies with a strong hierarchical structure, which do not apply democratic principles internally. The unity of the group is reinforced by its exclusive ideology, its populist and simplistic discourse and the predominance of its leader.
7. Extremism is a danger for all democratic states because the fanaticism it involves can serve as a pretext for the use and justification of violence. Even if it does not directly advocate violence, it generates a climate conducive to the escalation of violence. It is both a direct threat because it jeopardises the democratic constitutional order and freedoms, and an indirect threat because it can distort political life. Traditional political parties may be tempted to adopt the stance and the demagogic discourse specific to extremist parties in order to counter their increasing electoral popularity.
8. The Assembly is aware that the struggle against extremism presents democracies with a dilemma because they must on the one hand guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association, allowing all political groups to exist and be politically represented, and on the other hand must defend themselves, and introduce safeguards against the activity of some extremist groups which flout democratic principles and human rights.

1. Assembly debate on 29 September 2003 (26th Sitting) (see [Doc. 9890](#), report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Ms Feric-Vac). Text adopted by the Assembly on 29 September 2003 (26th Sitting).



9. Referring to [Recommendation 1438 \(2000\)](#) on the threat posed to democracy by extremist parties and movements in Europe and [Resolution 1308 \(2002\)](#) on restrictions on political parties in Council of Europe member states, the Assembly remains convinced that states must avoid allowing extremism to be perceived as normal and must counteract its effects by applying – or adopting if they do not exist – appropriate political and administrative measures in order to preserve the rule of law based on respect for democratic principles and human rights. In this connection the Assembly notes that the historical development of the various countries and their differing criteria for tolerance result in different countries adopting different penalties for similar acts.

10. However, the Assembly considers that these restrictive measures can only be used to tackle the roots of extremism if they are supported by public opinion and are accompanied by additional measures, notably regarding political ethics or in the fields of education or information.

11. The Assembly notes that civil society constitutes an essential link between society and government: it is often a key political ally in promoting human rights and democracy. States must therefore consider the organisations of civil society as partners and help them to become established by supporting their activities.

12. The Assembly considers that the rules and principles set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the general policy recommendations of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), particularly [Recommendation No. 7](#) on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination adopted in December 2002, are basic texts which should guide the member states in their strategy for fighting extremism.

13. The Assembly therefore invites the governments of the Council of Europe member states:

13.1. to provide in their legislation that the exercise of freedom of expression, assembly and association can be limited for the purpose of fighting extremism. However, any such measures must comply with the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights;

13.2. to apply or introduce if they do not exist:

- a. effective penalties where cases of proven damage caused by an extremist political party or one of its members are established;
- b. proportionate and dissuasive penalties against public incitement to violence, racial discrimination and intolerance;
- c. the suspension or withdrawal of public funding for organisations promoting extremism;
- d. the dissolution of extremist parties and movements, which should always be regarded as an exceptional measure. It is justified in the case of a threat to a country's constitutional order, and should always be in conformity with the country's constitutional and legislative provisions;

13.3. to monitor, and if necessary to prevent, the reconstitution of dissolved parties or movements under another form or name;

13.4. to encourage political parties to devise a new code of ethics, basing their programmes and activities on respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, excluding political alliances with extremist parties, reinforcing the rules on the transparency of political party finances if necessary, and proposing plausible solutions to the social and economic problems which cause public concern;

13.5. to develop school curricula for education for democratic citizenship based on citizens' rights and duties, social tolerance and respect for difference. Education and training are the most fundamental and lasting methods of guarding against the discriminatory ideology of extremism;

13.6. to encourage awareness-raising campaigns to make citizens aware of the harmful effects of political extremism on democracy;

13.7. to establish at the same time national legislative and administrative measures and closer international co-operation in order to discourage any propagation of extremist ideologies, notably through new information technologies;

13.8. to support the work of ECRI, whose task is to combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance throughout greater Europe, and to ensure that the member states take practical action on its recommendations.