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From Margins to Extremes: Economic Factors, Social Integration and the Radicalisation of European Youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between economic variables, social integration and susceptibility to extremism in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. By analysing 415 interviews conducted with young people, activists and practitioners between 2021 and 2023, we have discerned patterns in the influence of economic conditions on radicalisation. We found that nationalist ideologies are associated with economic concerns, particularly those related to globalisation and migration, and that perceived relative deprivation, rather than absolute conditions, mediate the influence of these factors. Comparable economic grievances foster conditions for both right-wing and Islamist radicalisation, indicating shared mechanisms. Nevertheless, national contexts – including welfare models and integration policies – affect the manifestations of these economic factors in actual radicalisation processes. This study elucidates the intricate relationship between economic conditions and extremist ideologies among European youth.

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Introduction

Recently, Europe has witnessed growing concern over a rise in support for both right-wing extremist movements and engagement with Islamist radical groups among young adults, a phenomenon drawing increasing attention from researchers, policymakers and the public alike (Kundnani 2012, Neumann 2015, Koehler 2016, Malet and Hayes 2020). While a multitude of social, political and psychological elements contribute to these trends, the influence of economic factors requires more profound investigation. Scholars increasingly recognise that processes leading towards extremism are multidimensional, involving individual, social and structural factors (Hafez and Mullins 2015). Within this context, economic circumstances – including unemployment, poverty, inequality and perceived economic injustice – have emerged as potentially significant contributors. For clarity, this paper distinguishes between radicalisation and extremism. Following scholars like Kaya (2021), we approach *radicalisation* primarily

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as a process, often defensive or reactionary, driven by experiences of exclusion, marginalisation, or perceived injustice, which may or may not lead to violence. *Extremism*, in contrast, refers more specifically to ideologies and movements (such as far-right nationalism or militant Islamism) that oppose core democratic values, often advocate for fundamental societal change through hostile means and may endorse or employ violence to achieve their aims. This study focuses on factors contributing to *vulnerability*, or the likelihood of adopting such extremist ideologies, exploring the socio-economic conditions that might make these ideologies appealing.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do economic factors, particularly perceived relative deprivation and experiences of social exclusion, relate to vulnerability to extremist ideologies among young adults, and how is this relationship shaped by national contexts in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK? This question reflects the need for a developed understanding of how economic circumstances intersect with social integration and subjective perceptions to shape pathways potentially leading towards extremism. Here, social integration is understood not just as participation in dominant societal structures but also includes feelings of belonging, acceptance and equal opportunity, while vulnerability to extremist ideologies refers to an increased susceptibility or openness to narratives and worldviews offered by extremist groups, often stemming from unmet needs, grievances, or a search for identity and purpose. To address this overarching question, we focus on two key objectives. First, we examine the links between socioeconomic marginalisation (both objective and subjectively perceived) and vulnerability to extremism among diverse groups of young adults. This objective builds on research suggesting that experiences of economic exclusion and deprivation may increase susceptibility to extremist narratives (Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015; Rottweiler and Gill 2022). Second, we analyse the relationship between economic anxieties and support for nationalist ideologies, particularly among ethnic majority youth. This objective responds to growing evidence connecting economic insecurity and support for far-right political movements in Europe (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2019).

A distinctive feature of this research is its comparative approach, examining *both* young people identifying with Muslim backgrounds and those identifying as part of the ethnic majority ('native') population across four distinct European countries. This methodology is deliberately chosen to move beyond simplistic 'civilisational' narratives that often treat these groups as inherently separate. Our underlying assumption is that shared experiences of socio-economic pressure, marginalisation, or relative deprivation might foster vulnerability to different forms of extremist ideologies through comparable mechanisms, even if the specific ideological content differs. Studying these groups in parallel allows us to explore these potential commonalities and divergences, contributing to an emerging strand of research that adopts comparative perspectives on radicalisation (e.g. Kaya 2021). This cross-national approach further allows us to explore how different socio-economic and political contexts (welfare states, integration policies) mediate the relationship between economic factors and vulnerability to extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, Adam-Troian et al. 2021).

This research contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced understanding of the economic dimensions shaping vulnerability to extremism. By comparing across countries and across different potential pathways (right-wing and Islamist), we identify

both shared trends and context-specific dynamics. This comparative analysis responds to calls for more integrated approaches to studying radicalisation that identify common mechanisms across ideological spectrums (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). The results have important implications for theory, particularly regarding the interplay of structural factors (economic conditions, policies) and individual perceptions (relative deprivation, identity), and how these levels interact (Vergani 2018). Practically, by highlighting common trends and context-specific factors, we provide a basis for developing more adaptable, evidence-based approaches to preventing and countering extremism that are sensitive to local contexts while addressing shared underlying socio-economic factors (Lindekilde 2012, Mythen and Baillergeau 2021).

The paper proceeds as follows: First, we provide a thorough theoretical framework synthesising essential concepts and recent scholarly contributions relevant to economic factors, deprivation and radicalisation. Second, we detail our qualitative methodology, based on 415 in-depth interviews across four countries. Third, we present the core findings, organised around key themes emerging from the data. Fourth, we discuss the implications of these findings in relation to existing theories and debates. Finally, we conclude by summarising the key contributions and suggesting avenues for future research and policy development.

Theoretical Development

Understanding the relations between economic factors, social integration and vulnerability to extremist ideologies among European youth necessitates a multifaceted theoretical framework. This section outlines key theories that illuminate how objective economic conditions, subjective perceptions of disadvantage, psychological responses and broader social contexts contribute to radicalisation processes. Research increasingly demonstrates that rising inequality can exacerbate social tensions, foster political extremism and reinforce community boundaries and breakdowns (Engler and Weisstanner 2020). Scholars connect radicalisation potential to those often termed the 'left behind', individuals struggling with post-industrial decline, the precariousness of the 'gig economy', declining labour protections and stagnant relative wages (Standing 2011, Speed and Mannion 2017). These conditions can fuel widespread polarisation, enabling radicalisation and degrading community resilience (Bouchara 2021, McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). However, simplistic links between absolute deprivation and radicalisation are problematic, as many facing hardship do not turn to extremism. Instead, factors like the *fear* of declining social mobility, even among the relatively secure, can foster receptivity to extremist narratives that exploit resonant frames of deprivation (Rydgren and Ruth 2013, Wodak 2021). This points towards the crucial role of subjective perceptions, particularly relative deprivation, in shaping vulnerability.

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), originating with Runciman (1966), provides a cornerstone for our analysis. RDT posits that discontent and grievance stem not necessarily from absolute hardship but from individuals' or groups' *perception* that they are unfairly disadvantaged compared to a relevant reference group, their own past conditions, or their future expectations (Gurr 2015). In the context of radicalisation, RDT suggests that feeling unjustly deprived, economically, socially, or politically, can be a powerful motivator for seeking redress through alternative, sometimes extremist, channels

(King and Taylor 2011). This framework moves beyond objective poverty metrics to capture the crucial role of social comparison and perceived injustice. Recent work extends RDT to emphasise *collective* or group-level relative deprivation as a potent predictor of intergroup hostility and support for radical political action, aligning with our study's focus on both Muslim-identifying and native-majority youth groups who may perceive their respective communities as facing unfair disadvantages (Smith et al. 2022). Furthermore, related concepts like 'nostalgic deprivation', a sense of loss regarding a perceived better past threatened by social change, can also fuel resentment and receptivity to nationalist or traditionalist extremist ideologies (Gest et al. 2018, Bos 2020).

Building on RDT, we incorporate theories addressing economic anxiety, frustration and broader social dimensions of deprivation. Research highlights how economic anxieties, distinct from objective hardship, shape political attitudes, particularly regarding globalisation, migration and support for nationalist or populist movements (Mughan et al. 2003, Inglehart and Norris 2016). These anxieties can create fertile ground for extremist narratives that scapegoat minorities or 'elites' for economic problems. The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis (Berkowitz 1989) offers a psychological lens, suggesting that frustration arising from blocked goals, such as economic aspirations thwarted by perceived discrimination or systemic injustice, can lead to aggression directed towards perceived sources of that frustration, potentially increasing susceptibility to extremist ideologies that offer clear targets and justifications for hostility (Moghaddam 2005). Complementing this, Social Deprivation Theory (SDT) emphasises that deprivation is multidimensional, encompassing not only economic exclusion but also limited access to social opportunities, cultural recognition and political voice (Bhaskar 2022). Young people experiencing intersecting forms of deprivation, economic, social and political, may feel particularly alienated and thus more vulnerable to extremist groups offering alternative forms of belonging, status and empowerment.

The integration of these perspectives, Relative Deprivation Theory, economic anxiety frameworks, the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis and Social Deprivation Theory, provides a robust analytical toolkit. It allows us to examine the relationship between objective economic conditions, individuals' subjective interpretations and comparisons, emotional responses like frustration and anxiety, group-level dynamics and the broader context of social and political exclusion. This integrated framework directly informs our analysis of the interview data, enabling a nuanced exploration of how economic factors, mediated by perceptions and context, relate to vulnerability to extremism across diverse youth groups and national settings. It underpins our two primary hypotheses, guiding our investigation into the mechanisms linking economic life and radicalisation potential:

H_1: Perceived relative economic deprivation, rather than absolute economic circumstances, is positively associated with increased vulnerability to extremist ideologies among young adults in the studied countries. (Draws primarily from RDT).

H_2: The relationship between economic factors and vulnerability to extremist ideologies is mediated by experiences of multidimensional deprivation (economic, social and political) and moderated by country-specific contexts (such as welfare state models and integration policies). (Integrates SDT and contextual factors).

These hypotheses allow for a comprehensive examination of both individual-level perceptions and broader structural influences, aiming for the analytical symbiosis of theory and empirical evidence sought in this study.

Methods

This study is based on a comprehensive analysis of 415 semi-structured interviews conducted among young people, practitioners and activists in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom during the period 2021–2023. The interviews were designed to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions and attitudes related to economic factors, social integration (including feelings of belonging and exclusion) and vulnerability to extremist ideologies, as defined in our introduction. Fieldwork was conducted across various urban and regional settings within the four countries, with particular focus on Oslo and Kristiansand in Norway, Copenhagen and Aarhus in Denmark, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague in the Netherlands, and London, Manchester, and Birmingham in the UK to capture diverse local contexts.

We recruited participants using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure a diverse range of perspectives relevant to the research questions. The sample included young adults (defined primarily as 18–25 years old) from various socioeconomic backgrounds, encompassing both individuals identifying with the ethnic majority ('native') and those identifying with immigrant or minority backgrounds (specifically focusing on those identifying as Muslim for comparative purposes); practitioners working in fields related to youth work, social services, education, and counter-extremism; and activists involved in community organisations and social movements addressing issues of integration, discrimination, or political mobilisation.

A key methodological choice was to interview both native-majority and Muslim-identifying youth using a comparable set of guiding questions within the same national contexts. This comparative approach was deliberately adopted, as outlined in the introduction, to move beyond essentialising narratives and explore potential commonalities in how socio-economic factors, such as marginalisation or relative deprivation, might influence vulnerability to *different* forms of extremist ideology (e.g. right-wing or Islamist). Our underlying assumption was that shared pressures and grievances might operate through similar psychological and social mechanisms, even if leading towards distinct ideological pathways. This allows for a more integrated analysis of radicalisation processes across the ideological spectrum.

We transcribed the interviews verbatim and applied a rigorous thematic analysis approach, guided by our theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke 2006). To enhance the reliability of our findings, two researchers independently conducted initial coding on a subset of transcripts, discussing discrepancies to refine the coding frame. The iterative nature of this process allowed themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data while remaining informed by our theoretical concepts (such as RDT, economic anxiety, and multidimensional deprivation). This dual approach ensured that our analysis was both empirically grounded and theoretically informed. As we progressed through the analysis, several key themes emerged as particularly salient: experiences and perceptions of economic marginalisation; attitudes towards globalisation and immigration; perceptions of relative deprivation and injustice; expressions of nationalist or group-specific sentiments; and factors perceived to increase susceptibility to extremist ideologies.

Beyond identifying these overarching themes, we conducted a comparative analysis across the four countries and between the different participant groups. This cross-national and cross-group comparison allowed us to distinguish between potentially

universal trends (e.g. the role of relative deprivation) and context-specific factors (e.g. the influence of national integration policies or local economic conditions), providing a detailed understanding of how economic factors interact with local socio-political contexts to influence vulnerability to extremism. To reflect the importance of local context, quotations presented in the Findings section are attributed with relevant geographical information.

Finally, the relevant institutional ethics committees at the participating institutions approved the study protocol. We obtained informed consent from all participants prior to the interviews, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect participant anonymity. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, we took particular care during interviews to ensure participants' wellbeing and provided information on support resources where appropriate or requested.

Findings

This section presents the key themes emerging from the analysis of 415 interviews regarding the relationship between economic factors, social integration, and vulnerability to extremist ideologies. Each theme is illustrated with participant testimonies, analysed through the lens of our theoretical framework, incorporating Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), economic anxiety, the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, and Social Deprivation Theory (SDT).

1. Socioeconomic Marginalisation and Vulnerability to Extremism

Consistent with theories emphasising structural factors and multidimensional deprivation (SDT), our findings across all four countries indicate a link between experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation and increased vulnerability, or openness, to extremist ideologies. Participants often described how objective conditions like poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity in specific locales, particularly areas affected by post-industrial decline, created fertile ground for resentment and alternative affiliations. One interviewee linked these structural issues directly to shifts in political attitudes and ideology:

> … particularly in the UK something like post-industrial areas is a bit of a thing in relation to the right, perhaps particularly that some company has sort of run a small town, some huge factory has sort of been the place where most people have been employed and then it's either been closed down and there's been extreme poverty, which always does something to political attitudes, or Eastern European labour has come in and stolen all this from the parents of someone, and that's something that does a lot to ideology (Denmark, Muslim, male, Copenhagen)

The impact of wider economic trends, austerity politics, and diminished social safety nets was frequently cited as contributing to conditions where radicalisation processes might take hold. This reflects concerns about the erosion of social support systems potentially increasing frustration and alienation:

> I think we're in an economic crisis. We're in recession. I think the government need to recognise the links between poverty and radicalisation and do something to ensure that young

> people are supported even through really severe economic times … Our services are cut to the bone. Young people, services, are cut to the bone. (UK, nationalist, female, Liverpool)

Participants experiencing economic disadvantage or blocked social mobility often articulated how such circumstances could make radical ideas seem more appealing, illustrating a potential pathway from marginalisation to ideological vulnerability:

> People who are significantly marginalised, who have fewer opportunities to lead a good life through other fields, um, radical ideas become more attractive to, to those people. I think there's, there's different types of exclusion, of course. So some of that exclusion might be things like obviously like socio socioeconomic exclusion, you know, ethnic, religious exclusion. (UK, nationalist, male, London)

This connection between vulnerable areas, lower socioeconomic status, and potential militancy was echoed across different national contexts:

> If we are talking about young people, which I think you have more focus on in this project, then it is typically in the vulnerable areas, where there is a lower socio-economic status, lower level of education, lower income, higher concentration of people with the same background as yourself, if you think of such a minority in relation to militancy. (Denmark, nationalist, female, Copenhagen)

The findings underscore the importance of intersectionality, where economic disadvantage combines with ethnic, religious, or class-based exclusion, potentially amplifying feelings of marginalisation and, consequently, vulnerability, aligning with SDT's emphasis on multidimensional deprivation:

> Being from different kinds of class background, being from different kinds of heritage where you're structurally, structurally disadvantaged and excluded, I think heightens vulnerability. (UK, nationalist, male, London)

However, interviewees consistently cautioned against deterministic interpretations. Many stressed that poverty or marginalisation alone does not inevitably lead to extremism, highlighting the role of individual agency and other mediating factors. This nuance is crucial, suggesting economic factors act as a 'hook' or contributing element within a more complex process:

> Most people who suffer deprivation and, you know, low academic achievement and that sort of thing don't go on to do anything. They go on to find a job and live happy lives. But it's certainly a hook. (UK, practitioner, male, Birmingham)

This intersection of deprivation with other, potentially mediating factors, was echoed across countries and different urban spaces:

> Socio economic deprivation and people are not able to engage in activities and they're not given opportunities. Because they're from racialised working class communities they start resorting to alternative means of expressing themselves right and I'm not saying that just because you're poor you're going to become a terrorist that's not to imply that - not at all. (UK, Muslim, male, Manchester)

2. Economic Anxieties and Support for Nationalist Ideologies

Aligning with theories linking economic insecurity to support for nationalist or populist movements (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2019), our

findings show a strong association between economic anxieties, particularly concerning globalisation, immigration, and perceived cultural change, and support for nationalist ideologies, especially among ethnic majority youth. These anxieties often manifested as criticisms of what was referred to as 'globalism' and immigration policies, framed through an economic lens where outsiders are perceived as threats to national resources or economic stability:

> The globalist will most likely be an enemy. The globalists will be accused for that the economic situation is like it is that there's no national control over their energy resources and that it has been an irresponsible immigration policy in terms of the economic cost of immigration. (Norway, nationalist, male, Oslo)

In several contexts, anti-immigration sentiments were explicitly tied to economic burdens, illustrating how economic anxieties can be channelled into scapegoating narratives, potentially fuelled by frustration (as per the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis):

> I think if cross-channel migration, if someone if some effective sort of activists can really hammer home to people, some idea of, you know, the reason that your energy bills are so high is because we are spending so much on hotels or something? You know, I think it would be. That's much more likely. I think any non-economic issue is going to struggle to capture people's imagination in quite the same way, although I don't really know. (UK, nationalist, male, London)

These economic anxieties were frequently intertwined with broader perceptions of cultural threat and societal change, suggesting a link between economic insecurity and what some theorists term 'nostalgic deprivation' (Gest et al. 2018) – a longing for a perceived lost past exploited by nationalist political actors:

> So, there's also an impact of socioeconomic dynamics that affect people's perceptions of what Britishness and Englishness is, which is why politicians always play on national nationalism, 'cause they need some votes, right? Especially in those areas that are very poor, sort of the white trash places, that nationalism kind of comes into play very well, and they often are able to secure votes and able to sweep votes. (UK, Muslim, male, London)

However, this perspective was not universal. Some participants, even among the nationalist-leaning group, contested the framing of immigration as solely an economic threat, highlighting potential benefits or framing openness in terms of liberal values:

> I personally do think that we should be more open to immigration and um, on that specific topic. So, I think it's become important because the stakes have become very high. And if people are talking about it and if people want to limit immigration, I for me it becomes important to show the benefits of immigration for both economic reasons and also based on this argument of personal liberty as well. (UK, nationalist, male, London)

Nonetheless, the dominant pattern linked economic decline and feelings of being 'left behind' in certain areas to the attractiveness of radical right-wing or nationalist views, suggesting that breakdown of norms and expectations in forgotten spaces creates proximity to radical influences:

> I think there is there is something about spaces that feel like they've been left behind, they've been forgotten. They've been the norms are breaking down, right. The expectations are breaking down. And then you end up with and I can see why that would kind of put

> people into those radical spaces or at least put them in proximity to people who can put them into those radical spaces. (UK, nationalist, male, Glasgow)

3. Relative Deprivation and Perceived Injustice

Central to our findings, and strongly supporting Hypothesis 1 and the tenets of RDT, is the observation that *perceptions* of relative deprivation and injustice often appeared more influential in fostering vulnerability to extremism than absolute economic conditions. Participants who felt unfairly disadvantaged compared to others, whether other groups in society, people in different regions, or based on intergenerational comparisons, expressed greater susceptibility to extremist narratives offering explanations or solutions. This subjective sense of grievance was often paramount:

> If you believe that you are discriminated against, if you believe that you are socially, economically, politically marginal, it doesn't matter whether you're a middle class Egyptian with links to the regime. You know what matters is how you feel. (UK, nationalist, male, Manchester)

Visible economic disparities and spatial segregation often exacerbated these feelings of relative deprivation. Comparisons between disadvantaged areas ('ghettos') and affluent neighbourhoods highlighted perceived systemic unfairness, fuelling resentment and potentially undermining social cohesion:

> They are demolishing the ghetto. But you just create a new ghetto again. You can't divide us. We will be united again … When I drive to Risskov [affluent area in Aarhus]. Isn't it a ghetto? It's also a ghetto. It's only doctors and engineers and fancy houses, lawyers … There's no one in the bottom class (Denmark, Muslim, male, Aarhus)

The concept of group-level relative deprivation (Smith et al. 2022) was particularly salient in discussions about intergenerational mobility and the challenges faced by minority or immigrant-origin communities compared to established populations, fostering a sense of collective disadvantage:

> So when you start from scratch, you can't build it all in one generation unless you, well, someone can, but generally speaking, it's often something that takes generations to create and many of them are insanely rich in Denmark, most of them have inherited this and that, land and I'll come after you. We're starting from scratch. We have nothing here. We literally have nothing. (Denmark, Muslim, male, Copenhagen)

This perceived relative deprivation was often linked to feelings of social exclusion, anxiety and difficulty navigating different social contexts, suggesting how subjective economic comparisons can intersect with social integration challenges:

> They have created a small mini cosmos where they can be safe and not fall through, and due to a lack of skills to switch between social contexts, it has been vulnerable and anxiety provoking to be with other young people from other strata of society. (Denmark, nationalist, male, Copenhagen)

4. Common Economic Grievances in Different Forms of Extremism

Intriguingly, and supporting the rationale for our comparative methodology, the findings suggest that similar underlying economic grievances and perceptions of injustice may contribute to vulnerability towards *both* right-wing extremism and Islamist

radicalisation pathways. While some participants differentiated the role of poverty, noting that some Islamist activists came from educated backgrounds:

> … in Islamic militancy, I never really saw that as a theme. Poverty. In fact, you know, most of the people I came across who were involved in nonviolent activism, they came from very well-educated backgrounds … (UK, Muslim, male, Birmingham)

Others, including practitioners, observed that similar feelings of marginalisation, perceived injustice (even vicarious injustice felt on behalf of one's group), and economic anxieties operated across different ideological spectrums. This suggests that relative deprivation or frustration can manifest in different ideological directions depending on available narratives and identities:

> I think we've seen that with Islamist extremism. I think we've seen people, you know, Muslims in the UK who have been doing pretty well for themselves … pretty economically sorted. But yet they see the plight or perceived plight … there's often a real tragedy somewhere. (UK, practitioner, male, London)

This practitioner's observation highlights how group-level relative deprivation can motivate even economically successful individuals if they perceive their community faces injustice. Another participant explicitly linked internal grievances (like perceived discrimination or Islamophobia) and structural inequalities to vulnerability, acknowledging poverty's complicated, non-deterministic role:

> … internal range of issues that individuals experience in the UK, it could be perception of discrimination or it could be perceptions of Islamophobia … But any kind of grievances that are more internal from here. And of course, you know … whereas poverty, there is a strong argument that is scientifically proven that poverty does not breed terrorism … However, we cannot underestimate also the structural and the socioeconomic inequality and how it … contributes to it in a way. (UK, practitioner, female, London)

The idea that economic grievances serve as a 'hook' for both far-right and Islamist extremism recruitment was explicitly mentioned:

> It's a big grievance. And it definitely is being used as kind of a bit of a hook. But not only with far right. I'm just thinking far right because there's more kind of economical things, but obviously with Islamist extremism. (UK, practitioner, female, Liverpool)

Furthermore, objective poverty in specific, often segregated, neighbourhoods was seen as creating conditions ('othering', resentment, stigmatisation) that could be exploited by *both* far-right narratives (using the area as a negative example) and potentially Islamist recruiters offering alternative solutions or identities:

> Because there's a negative public perception … where Schilderswijk faces huge negative public perceptions … this has contributed to a big stigmatisation … Schilderswijk is used as an example in mainstream media, by politicians, and also by some far-right groups … as being this problem area, this negative example. (Netherlands, Muslim, male, The Hague - Schilderswijk)

5. Country-Specific Variations

Finally, supporting Hypothesis 2 regarding moderation by context, while consistent patterns like the importance of RDT emerged, we also observed significant variations

shaped by country-specific contexts, including welfare state models, integration policies, national discourses, and local histories. In Denmark, for instance, the highly salient national discourse around 'parallel societies' or 'ghettos' heavily framed discussions of integration, marginalisation, and extremism:

> They are demolishing the ghetto. But you just create a new ghetto again. You can't divide us. We will be united again. (Denmark, Muslim, male, Aarhus)

However, the specific nature of economic deprivation differed, with some Danish participants noting the relative absence of large-scale post-industrial decline compared to other countries like the UK:

> … we don't have that in Denmark, we don't have that kind of – maybe a little bit in Randers and Southern Jutland – but we don't have post-industrial cities … (Denmark, Muslim, male, Aarhus)

In the UK, the impact of austerity policies implemented over the previous decade was frequently invoked as a key factor exacerbating deprivation, resentment, and potentially fuelling both racism and right-wing mobilisation:

> From a variety of perspectives from my sort of austerity and economic perspective, they created further deprivation, and this will create lots of kind of resentments and anger … The kind of conditions for marginalisation and alienation can increase their racism … obviously gives some kind of security or a booster to right-wing mobilisations (UK, Muslim, female, London)

The UK context also highlighted diverse forms of deprivation, such as rural isolation or digital poverty, particularly emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> With the kids, because of digital poverty, coronavirus has meant that we haven't been able to teach effectively for a lot of the students (UK, practitioner, female, Liverpool)

Differing welfare models and migration histories also shaped experiences. A UK participant discussed how the economic motivations and expectations of migrants interact with declining wage standards and changing concepts of a 'living wage':

> Many of the people are coming over as immigrants … They're economic migrants … They are looking to build up a nest egg … So they can more easily take a lower wage … So, what you're getting is that the idea of a sort of living wage … Now we're at a point where the living wage is just talked of as being an individual. (UK, nationalist, male, London)

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands and Norway, participants specifically highlighted increasing social stratification and the return of entrenched class divides, sometimes linked to intergenerational poverty and state interventions like child protection services, as factors contributing to alienation and potential radicalisation:

> We have an increased class divide in Norway … The increasingly large group of poor people, long-term poor people … you have people who we know are radicalised, and they have child protection cases on them, and their parents and grandparents have also had child protection cases on them … So I think this thing about being poor for a long time and being put in a box and not being able to get out of that class (Norway, practitioner, female, Oslo)

These country-specific nuances underscore the necessity of analysing radicalisation within specific national and local contexts, recognising that broader economic trends

are filtered through distinct policy environments, social structures and public discourses. As one participant concluded, addressing political violence requires a holistic, society-wide approach attentive to these interconnected structural factors:

> To address the issue of political violence or terrorism … is going to be a whole of society shift you can't just address one aspect of it, because the issue of political violence is inherently connected to a broader set of structural socio economic and political factors. (UK, Muslim, male, Manchester)

In summary, the analysis of participant testimonies reveals consistent empirical patterns across the four countries. Experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation, encompassing objective hardship and intersectional disadvantages, were frequently linked to increased vulnerability to extremist ideologies, although this link was consistently described as non-deterministic. Economic anxieties, particularly tied to globalisation and immigration, showed a strong association with support for nationalist sentiments among majority youth. Crucially, the subjective experience of relative deprivation and perceived injustice emerged as a powerful mediating factor, often appearing more salient than absolute economic conditions. Furthermore, the data suggests that similar underlying economic grievances and frustrations can serve as a 'hook' contributing to vulnerability towards both right-wing and Islamist extremism. Finally, while these patterns showed consistency, their specific manifestation and intensity were clearly shaped by distinct national and local contexts, including welfare systems, integration policies, public discourses and specific forms of deprivation prevalent in each setting. These empirical findings provide the foundation for the subsequent discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

Discussion

Our study of the relationship between economic factors, social integration and vulnerability to extremist ideologies among young adults in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom contributes significantly to the growing body of literature on the economic dimensions of radicalisation processes. By analysing rich qualitative data from diverse participants across varied national contexts, the findings provide several key insights that confirm, nuance and extend existing theories, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of the pathways potentially leading towards extremism. The empirical patterns summarised previously highlight the consistent relevance of economic factors, the crucial mediating role of subjective perceptions like relative deprivation, the intersectional nature of disadvantage, the potential for common underlying grievances across different extremist leanings and the significant moderating influence of national and local contexts. This discussion elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of these core findings.

First, our research underscores the role of economic factors. While we found consistent evidence linking experiences of socioeconomic marginalisation and economic anxieties to increased vulnerability to extremist ideologies, our participants repeatedly emphasised that this relationship is far from deterministic. The majority facing economic hardship do not turn to extremism. This aligns with critiques of purely economistic models of radicalisation and supports theories emphasising the role of multiple factors

(Hafez and Mullins 2015). Our findings suggest economic factors often function as a 'hook' (as one practitioner termed it) or contributing vulnerability within a wider web of social, psychological and political influences. Economic marginalisation might foster alienation or frustration, but whether this translates into embracing extremism depends heavily on mediating factors like social networks, available narratives, individual resilience, and, crucially, perceived injustice, aligning with multi-causal frameworks like Vergani et al.'s (2018) push, pull and personal factors model.

Second, and central to our contribution, the study provides strong empirical support for the explanatory power of Relative Deprivation Theory in understanding vulnerability to extremism (Hypothesis 1). Across diverse groups and national contexts, participants' *perceptions* of unfair treatment, disadvantage relative to others, or blocked aspirations appeared more significant than their absolute economic circumstances (Runciman 1966, Gurr 2015). This resonates with Bos's (2020) work on unfairness and radicalisation and meta-analytic reviews confirming RDT's relevance to intergroup hostility (Smith et al. 2022). Our findings highlight the importance of analysing both individual and *group-level* relative deprivation, as even economically stable individuals expressed vulnerability when perceiving their community (ethnic, religious, or national) as unjustly treated or declining. This necessitates moving beyond objective economic indicators in prevention efforts to address subjective feelings of grievance, comparative injustice, and frustrated expectations, which extremist groups are adept at exploiting.

Third, the research highlights the intersectional and multidimensional nature of deprivation contributing to vulnerability (Hypothesis 2). Economic disadvantage rarely operates in isolation; rather, it intersects with ethnicity, religion, class, migration status, and geographic location to create compounded experiences of marginalisation, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989) and echoed in Bhaskar's (2022) Social Deprivation Theory. Participants frequently described how being 'structurally disadvantaged' across multiple dimensions heightened vulnerability. This finding underscores the inadequacy of single-factor explanations and points towards the need for interventions that recognise and address these overlapping forms of exclusion – economic, social, political, and cultural – which together can create profound feelings of alienation and limit access to mainstream opportunities and sources of belonging.

Fourth, one of the most significant findings is the potential for common underlying economic grievances and mechanisms across different forms of extremism (right-wing and Islamist). While the specific ideologies, narratives, and targets differ profoundly, the underlying feelings of economic marginalisation, relative deprivation, perceived injustice against one's group, and frustration with the status quo appeared comparable in some instances, acting as a potential 'hook' in both contexts. This supports calls for more integrated theories of radicalisation that identify common psychological and social mechanisms across the ideological spectrum (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). Practically, it suggests that addressing shared socio-economic root causes, promoting economic opportunity, tackling perceived injustices, fostering inclusive identities, could form part of a universal prevention strategy, while still requiring tailored approaches to counter specific extremist narratives and recruitment tactics.

Fifth, our comparative analysis strongly confirms the moderating role of national context (Hypothesis 2). While RDT principles appeared broadly applicable, the specific *manifestation* of economic factors, the nature of grievances, and the available

extremist narratives were clearly shaped by distinct national welfare models, integration policies, dominant public discourses (e.g. Denmark's 'ghetto' debate), historical legacies, and recent political events (e.g. UK austerity). This aligns with research emphasising context-specificity in radicalisation (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, Lindekilde 2012). It implies that effective counter-extremism strategies cannot be 'one-size-fits-all' but must be deeply attuned to the specific socio-economic realities, political climates, and cultural sensitivities of different countries and local communities within them. Interventions must address not only individual or group grievances but also the structural and discursive contexts that shape them.

Sixth, the strong association observed between economic anxieties (linked to globalisation and migration) and support for nationalist ideologies among majority youth warrants specific attention. This finding resonates with literature on the rise of populism, connecting economic insecurity with cultural backlash and status anxieties (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2019 Gidron and Hall 2020,). It suggests that countering far-right extremism requires not only challenging xenophobic and exclusionary narratives but also addressing the underlying economic fears and insecurities that make such narratives appealing. This points towards policies aimed at mitigating the perceived negative impacts of globalisation, enhancing job security, and promoting inclusive economic narratives that counter scapegoating, while acknowledging and addressing economic concerns.

Finally, while emphasising the importance of economic dimensions, our study simultaneously reveals the limitations of purely economic explanations. The interconnection between economic circumstances with social integration challenges, identity dynamics, psychological factors (like frustration or the search for significance), exposure to ideological narratives, and social network influences reinforces the need for holistic, multicausal approaches to understanding and preventing extremism. Economic interventions are necessary but insufficient on their own. They must be integrated within broader strategies that promote social inclusion, build community resilience, foster critical thinking skills, provide positive alternative pathways for identity and belonging, and address the political and ideological dimensions that shape how economic grievances are interpreted and acted upon.

Conclusions

This study provides valuable insights into the relationships between economic factors, social integration, and vulnerability to extremist ideologies among young adults across Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Through a comprehensive qualitative analysis, we have illuminated key patterns that both confirm and challenge existing understandings of radicalisation processes. Our findings demonstrate that while economic factors like marginalisation and anxiety are relevant contributors to vulnerability, their influence is non-deterministic, and significantly mediated by subjective perceptions, particularly feelings of relative deprivation and injustice. The research strongly supports the applicability of Relative Deprivation Theory, showing that how individuals perceive their economic standing and treatment in comparison to others is often more critical than absolute poverty. Furthermore, the study highlights

the intersectional nature of disadvantage, where economic factors combine with social, political, and cultural exclusion to heighten vulnerability.

A key contribution of this comparative research is the observation that similar underlying economic grievances and frustrations may contribute to vulnerability towards both right-wing and Islamist extremist pathways, suggesting potential commonalities in socio-economic drivers even when ideological outcomes differ. This finding encourages more integrated theoretical approaches and points towards possibilities for universal prevention strategies targeting shared root causes like perceived injustice and lack of opportunity. However, our analysis also powerfully underscores the crucial role of national and local contexts. Welfare state models, integration policies, specific national discourses, and local economic histories significantly shape how broader economic pressures manifest and how grievances are framed, necessitating context-sensitive approaches to counter-extremism that are attuned to these specific realities.

The implications for policy and practice are significant. Prevention strategies should move beyond a narrow focus on absolute poverty to address perceived inequalities, relative deprivation, and feelings of injustice. Efforts to counter extremism, particularly far-right nationalism, must engage with the underlying economic anxieties related to globalisation and immigration, promoting inclusive narratives and policies. Interventions need to be holistic, recognising the multidimensional and intersectional nature of deprivation, and tailored to specific contexts and communities. Building community resilience, fostering social inclusion, and providing positive alternative pathways for belonging and purpose are crucial elements alongside targeted economic support. Ultimately, addressing the economic dimensions of radicalisation requires a 'whole of society' approach, tackling structural inequalities while also engaging with subjective perceptions and ideological narratives.

While this study offers valuable insights, further research is warranted. Longitudinal studies could better elucidate the causal pathways and temporal dynamics linking economic experiences to radicalisation processes over time. Comparative research across a wider range of European and non-European countries could further test the generalisability of these findings and explore the influence of different socio-political systems. Additionally, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of various intervention strategies specifically designed to address the economic dimensions of vulnerability to extremism, informing evidence-based policy-making.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that economic factors are a critical, yet multifaceted, piece of the radicalisation puzzle. Addressing economic marginalisation, anxiety, and particularly perceived relative deprivation is essential, but must be integrated within broader strategies that promote social inclusion, tackle intersecting inequalities, foster resilience, and provide meaningful alternatives to the narratives offered by extremist groups. By understanding and addressing these interconnected economic, social, psychological, and ideological dimensions in a context-sensitive manner, we can work towards building more equitable, cohesive societies better equipped to resist the appeal of extremism.

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