media Culture

Political Psychology and Polarisation: A Conceptual Approach

Abstract

Ekmel GEÇER*

This study, mostly in a theoretical way and through a descriptive textual analysis, aims to give insights into the digital divide within the context of political and media psychology. The article creates new concepts and theories, and relates them to the conflicts on online platforms and tries to present the socio-cultural background that reinforces online polarisation based on new media and communication theories. The article discusses cultural psychology as the main motive for digital polarisation and touches upon online behaviour patterns that are considered as the driving force of rigid politicisation. Starting from this point of view, this conceptual study attempts to answer how the digital divide plays a role as a root cause or intervening factor in conflict and resolution issues and state-society relations. This work then aims to shed valuable light on the dynamics of peace and political psychology in reducing digital polarization and how terms related to socio-cultural psychology like contact theory may increase intimacy and reduce prejudices towards the other which are most likely caused by the echo chambers created on the online platforms. Therefore, this theoretical research, uncovering the potential of peace psychology and drawing upon the relevant existing literature, has important implications for reducing political polarization, the digital divide in other words, on online media platforms which will also help overcome conflicts and discriminations in daily political lives.

*Assoc. Prof. Dr.,
Marmara University,
Psychology Department
E-mail:ekmel.gecer@marmara.edu.tr,
ORCID: 0000-0003-3367-2236

Introduction

In today's right-leaning world, populist polarisation caused by various factors seems to be a reality for many countries including western ones. Although at some levels, polarization is a social change that can be tackled, it does have the influence to harm social harmony, justice and rule of law when it is especially deeply rooted at political levels. Religious, cultural, ethnic, and ideological divisions can polarise people, which at some levels may go further and demonize or terrorize *others* (Kriesi & Hutter, 2019). The traditional factors that deepen the polarisation in society such as political debates nowadays get the support of digital media courses. People form online communities with those who have like-minded ideologies and they intentionally receive information only from these groups *(selective exposure theory)* which in the long rung make them blind to other approaches. In these online groups *(echo chambers)*, through their supporters, they empower their approaches which in the next phase make them think that they are the *absolute right* (Özen et al., 2022).

Yet this *homophily* is also rooted in socio-cultural and political lives. In democratically underdeveloped countries the social divide gets deeper because of harsh politicization (Korkut & Ziya, 2017). Politicians in these societies overtly favour their supporters and discriminate against others, which finds its best explanation in favouring *loyalty over competency* and/or *nepotism* (Jung & Piccoli, 2001, p. 84). Although both approaches at some levels are about corruption and misconduct and they coin the application in which the officials at high positions unfairly promote their followers, the latter one explains this in a family relationship. These practices are said to be problems of democracies as the democratic system does not stop politicians from privileging their admirers or relatives. Although *meritocracy* (a political system in which people are given positions based on their talents, skills, and effort rather than their associations) is presented as a way out, it does not find enough reflection in state-systems studies (McNamee & Miller, Jr., 2014).

Caderisation could be the process of appointing a group of people into political party stuff or giving them unequal positions in an organization or community. *Nepotism* on the other hand in dictionary form is described as "the act of using your power or influence to get good jobs or unfair advantages for members of your own family" (Cambridge, 2019). However, in some sources it is widened to include the *caderisation* which suggests their usage in exchange: "favouritism showed to relatives, to people of the same ethnic orientation, and people of the same sex, gender, belief, political party and associations" (Malan & Smit, 2001, p. 17). As these two terms indicate, when political polarisation increases in a society, it will cause injustice and unequal approaches which then may become widespread.

Therefore, the issues regarding polarisation which are to be handled within this article will also be related to conflict and peace debates along with the religious tensions as an instrument of the divide among the peoples. Because polarisation either on online platforms or in reality, soon finds reflection in daily life and causes people to suffer observable discrimination and engage in conflict with others, it is necessary to study polarisation within the context of political psychology that will further relate it to nationalism, religion, culture and ethnicity (Waldman & Caliskan, 2017).

While talking about polarization, particularly, as part of the digital divide, it is better to mention the *communication theories* in relation to psychology. These theories will well explain the approach of an individual when s/he comes across a piece of news information and observe political implementations and approaches. The *spiral of silence*, for instance, explains the passivity of the people in the minority when they are afraid of expressing their views due to likely pressures (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). *Perception management* theory stresses when powers try to make their lies sound as truth through other means such as media and propaganda (Simons & Jones, 2011). *Post-truth* indicates when people start to believe in their emotions and beliefs rather than the facts (Farkas & Schou, 2019) as Malcom also similarly explains (Malcolm, 2021):

> In popular usage, post-truth encapsulates five interconnected ideas. Primarily definitions of post-truth argue that emotion has become more significant than objective fact in shaping personal beliefs and public debates. Second, post-truth includes the relativisation of truth; the idea that political statements, and even empirically grounded scientific positions, are subject to the manipulation of knowledge producers. Correlatively, politicians can apparently contradict their prior assertions without incurring reputational damage and, hence, a third characteristic of post-truth is the decline of shame when one is exposed for being factually wrong or suspected of deception. Fourth, this phenomenon has seemingly been accompanied by a tendency to polarise views. Finally, the manipulation of knowledge and the polarisation of views tends to fuel 'conspiracy' theories.

Just like post-truth, here it is necessary to highlight that these theories cannot be well-assessed without relating them with the *new media* literature where social networking habits are mostly mentioned as fuelling the polarization around the social media terms such as *trolling* or *confirmation bias* in ideational terms (Rogers, 2010, p. 286). In this regard, this study aims to theoretically talk about polarization on digital platforms and then extend it to the daily debates where it affects peace and conflict issues. While doing this, taking them into a wider socio-psychological background with communication theories, the article will correspondingly touch on the main factors of the digital divide such as religion, politics and ethnic tensions. Setting the theoretical frame on these themes, the study will try to answer what role the digital divide plays as a more profound motive or dominant dynamic in conflict and development matters as well as in state-society or person-community relations.

1- Polarisation, Religion and Politics

Before delving deeply into the relationship between religion and politics in regard to polarization, the definition of polarization should be given from the start to ease an understanding of the debate. Polarization in its simplest definition is the political distance splitting those who support different political groups, parties, and ideologies (Franz, 2012). Certainly, the division between political ideologies or parties is something to be expected. Yet political polarisation does not only tell us about the distance between followers of specific ideologies. On the contrary, it refers to how this differentiation prevents people from getting together and talking. That is, it concerns

how the polarised groups humiliate, demonize, and discriminate against each other, how each group claim to have absolute right and lastly how they may sometimes apply psychological and/or physical violence (Sentürk, 2016, p. 108).

Therefore, explaining *political polarisation* requires a wide range of approaches that benefit from political science, psychology, social psychology, and sociology. The literature in this regard suggests that *polarisation* is not only about the political or social distance between different groups. It is also about competing parties and groups, the comparison between them, the ideological homogeneity which in the course of time causes the political divide and the inability to build bridges between religious, cultural, or ethnic groups which at the end of the day also points to the necessity of polarisation to some extent. Political polarization in this context is the divergence of political sentiments away from the middle and towards ideological extremes which if not well managed may end up with political violence. Therefore the majority of political science debates on polarization take political parties and democratic forms of government into account (Gallina, 2008).

There are two types of polarization in political science: elite polarization and mass polarization. Elite polarization refers to the polarization of formal political actors or the institutions populated by those actors. Mass polarization, on the other hand, is the polarization of the entire society. Let's start by recognizing that not all forms of polarization are bad for democratic processes. In fact, some forms of polarization are good for democratic processes. For example, a level of political polarization in a democracy is not only acceptable, but necessary because it provides voters with a strong programmatic alternative, which makes them more interested in politics and stabilizes the system (Milačić, 2022).

Lipset sees political differences as "the lifeblood" of democratic politics (1959). Political dialogues with clear alternatives are more honest when there is healthy polarization. It promotes engagement in politics. It serves as a soother for political cynicism. Another way to say it is: "Democracy needs conflict, but not too much conflict." (Eraydın & Frey, 2018). The danger to democracy comes from a political dynamic in which healthy polarization transforms into toxic polarization. As Lipset again defines it, "political polarization" is a process in which the normal plurality of differences in society converges on a single dimension; cross-cutting distinctions become indistinguishable from one another; and people increasingly see and experience politics and society as 'us vs. them' (1959). Polarization erodes respect for democratic standards; corrodes fundamental legislative processes; undermines the impartiality of the judiciary; fuels public discontent with political parties; increases prejudice and discernment; weakens social trust; and increases violence across the society.

Polarised populism on the other hand forces its own people to structure their existence on polarization. Because it is also related to *psychological anxiety*, highly polarised people cannot easily get rid of it. *Collective traumas,* and sometimes cascading ones, make them think they will disappear if they lose the reasons to polarize. Thus, polarisation is not only the separation between different ideological or political groups. It is also the lack and/or weakness of opinion exchange between groups. This is the most dangerous part of socio-political polarisation: ignoring the other option such as tolerance and misapprehension (Anderson & Hoff, 2001).

Medya ve Kültür Dergisi

In conservative countries (e.g., Turkey, Russia, Hungary) along with ideological, economic, and historical references, polarisation also is rooted in religious discourse and attitudes. Religion is mostly at the very centre of social and political issues and (mis)used as a way of political image-making. However, during the political arguments in which religion is a wall to lean on, yet religion itself is at stake.

First and foremost, it is important to understand that religion and populism are part of a larger and more nuanced relationship that is moulded by the opposing forces of secularization and religious revival in contemporary societies. Although not the focus of this paper, these dynamics can be broadly categorized as either the politicization of politics by politicians for political or tactical reasons, or the politicization of religion by religious movements or authorities that join the political sphere. With regard to the particular connection between populism and religion, the politicization of politics "prefers religious uprisings taking on a more populist character when they engage in protest and resistance to secular elites outside of their purely religious motivations." In order to promote a moralistic and monotheistic perspective of politics, the politicization of politics leverages religion (Yabanci & Taleski, 2018).

However, discussing the relationship between politics and religion and talking about religiosity in a political framework depends on where and in which context they are used. In an Islamic-Sufi context which is mostly mentioned by Rumi[1] and Yunus Emre[2] in Turkish studies, Islam, whose members are very careful with their relationships with others, is a religion of love and peace. In Rumi's words, Islam sees "The heart is the true Kaaba[3], the other is just a stone" and breaking a heart is worse than destroying the Kaaba: "If your feet circumambulate the Kaaba a thousand times, and yet you injure a heart, do you still expect to be accepted?" (Rumi, 1973, p. 304). Yunus, similarly, defining the heart as *God's home*, states that no prays will be accepted if you hurt someone just once and that "All of the world's seventy-two nations, cannot wash the dirt off your hands and face" (Emre, 1992).

The cultural codes also seem to influence the understanding and explanation of the religious approaches. Some people assume that Islam is a discriminative religion and even a set of doctrines that allow its members to use violence when needed (Nyangweso, 2014, p. 114). The cultures, therefore, have the power to change religious values, interpretations and behaviours through their local patterns and dynamics. Without doubt, these approaches either positive or negative might be the results of *media representation* but also the behaviours of those who are attached to any particular religion (Geybels et al., 2009).

In this regard, while Islam is a humanistic religion in Sufi followers'[4] poems; it seems to be less compromising in some Muslim scholars' writings such as Mawdudi[5]

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[1] Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, (1207-1273) also known as Mawlana, and popularly as Rumi, was a 13th-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic from Greater Khorasan who lived in Turkey Konya district.

[2] A Turkish poet and Sufi mystic who greatly influenced Anatolian/Turkish culture. Despite his famous poetry, not much information found about his life in the literature but said to be born in 1238.

[3] A square building covered in a silk and cotton veil. Located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia is the holiest shrine in Islam.

[4] A person who closely follows Islamic rituals by living a simple life and by praying and meditating but also sees enlightenment in helping others and being merciful.

[5] Indo-Pakistani Muslim scholar (1903-1979), politician, and founder of Jamaat-i Islami as a movement advocated an Islamic anti-imperialist platform. He believed that the salvation of Muslim culture lay in the restitution and purification of Islamic institutions and practices.

or Ibn Taymiyyah[6] (Merioboute, 2013, p. 132). Although this could be read as a reductive interpretation, Muslims for instance in European cities seem to have more modern lives than those who are practising it in middle eastern countries. Yet this too could be related to cultural diversity where Muslims interact with others. The religious understanding and style that is experienced in a multicultural society gets more broadminded in the long run. But religious people in more closed communities who are not religiously or ethnically diverse seem to be less open-minded, which also demonstrates the effect of cultural codes on religious attitudes (Coleman & White, 2011).

Although *cultural codes* are that influential in religious (mis)understanding, it is possible to state that, particularly in more polarised countries, politics has almost the same level of impact on religious approaches. When we look at the propaganda techniques the politicians use to convince the audience, it will be easier to understand why and how religion is used to divide the society and so to keep the power. *Transferring* as one of the ways of propaganda suggests that those who have power in hand and who want people to believe in their ideologies, use secrecy and religion when necessary. In this technique, the leader is mostly is likened to a heroic person who has some mystic-super powers (Marlin, 2003, p. 103). On the other side, the rival is again through religious jargon demonized and likened to corrupt historical personalities like dictators and torturers. This, as the opposite form of *transferring,* is called *name-calling,* through which other political parties and their supporters are discredited and slandered. In *name-calling,* "Rather than making a legitimate argument, the propagandist attacks the opposition on a personal level, often appealing to the audience's preconceptions and prejudices" (Shabo, 2008, p. 47)

In these propaganda techniques, religion helps the propagandists at a great level. Because they know how people can be persuaded through religion and that once the rival is religiously condemned s/he will not easily clear her/his image. They apply religious discourse by dividing the society into two: we and them, patriots and terrorists, believers and blasphemer, heavenly and infernal. On the other hand, those who take advantage of religion to create polarisation pretend to be very religious. They go to mosques, read Koran (Islam's holy book) on live broadcasting and share photos from their religious practices on social media accounts. In a Christian setting, they read the bible, go to church and recite verses in political gatherings which could also be assessed within the context of social identity theory.

Social Identity theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner in the field of social psychology in 1979, describes how groups come together for a similar cause and unite around problems. Various fields have used the theory to investigate group identities. SIT can also be used to investigate how evangelical Christians behave politically and decide which political movements or candidates to back. SIT investigates people as members of groups who are influenced and controlled by the behaviour, views, and ideology of the groups themselves, as opposed to presuming that organizations are simply made up of individuals who choose to connect with one another. In-groups are distinguished from out-groups by the development of a shared set of values for the group (such as backing a political candidate or cause) (Burke, 2006).

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[6] A controversial medieval Sunni Muslim theologian (1263-1328), author and political figure whose doctrine was the supremacy and authoritativeness of the Quran and Sunnah of Muhammad and the early Muslim community.

Medya ve Kültür Dergisi

Given that there are various subgroups of evangelical Christianity that have similar political objectives, this idea is particularly significant. The requirement for group members to feel a sense of "identification" or belonging to their ingroup affects how they interact with other groups. The group offers structure and emotional support, but it also goes beyond that. The social group literally describes an individual's source of identity, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), which is significant because it could aid researchers in understanding why evangelical Christians are under pressure to support particular political candidates or issues. (Comer & Jacobi, 2021).

I call these kinds of behaviours *prime-time religiosity*. Also, coined *selfie-religiosity* to describe people who on Instagram or through any other social media course post photos from mosques and rituals to influence the way people think about them. They particularly take the political arena as devoted religious people during the times of elections just as the *prime time[7] programs* on television. The most important times are when the elections are so close. So, *religious messages* should be delivered at these *prime times* since people are more focused on rhetoric. The messages must be delivered through a religious discourse to be more trustable. Along with selfies of such people that display them practising religion (Islam in the Turkish case or Judaism in an Israeli context), the speech in a spiritual way will convince the supporters, with the rivals being discriminated against through a religious basis. Thus, the polarisation will keep working in favour of the political communication strategies that were planned and applied in a religious set-up no matter whether they are online or off.

2- Psychology of Information in Polarized Times

We are passing through an incomplete revolutionary age with a profusion of means of communication. Digital technologies and information flow, although sometimes slow, are somehow shaping practically every institution and service we have. Yet these new media devices, and profoundly smartphones, are capable of influencing our way of understanding the world we live in. Today, one of the main debates regarding knowledge is if we feel better after we had digital technologies which enabled us to access information in a very quick and easy way.

The word or concept *post-truth* gained its reputation when the *oxford dictionary* chose it as the word of the year 2016. Presidential elections in the USA in 2016 (Trump's victory) and BREXIT[8] debates in the UK again in the same year, amplified and helped the word to be more on the public and political agenda (Davis, 2017, p. 5). It then became *the meme word* of our time. The concept proposes that we live in a *political culture* in which we believe in our feeling and beliefs rather than actual facts. In other words, it "relates to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts" (Prado, 2018, p. 6). Because of its close relationship with politics and political propaganda, it is also described as the public burial of objective facts through intense media messages which aim to appeal to emotions and personal beliefs. Therefore, *post-truth* is mostly

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[7] The time at which a radio or television audience is expected to be at its highest level. This time slot is usually acknowledged to be between 8 pm and 11 pm when people get back their home from work and sit to watch television.

[8] Brexit is an abbreviation for "British exit," that denotes the U.K.'s referendum result on 23 June 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU). Leave won by 52% to 48%. The referendum turnout was high at 72%, with more than 30 million people voting - 17.4 million people opting for Brexit.

mentioned along with the argument that politicians and powers are trying to deceive people. It is a mixture of traditional (as explained above within the context of religion) and new ways of propaganda. As a way of communication that may contain old-fashioned lying, where speakers say things about their world in an exaggerated and emotional way that is usually decorated with social and patriotic values such as ethics, justice, and prosperity (Mustapha et al., 2019).

We mostly believe in an ideology not because it is right but because it is what will make us happy and peaceful (motivated reasoning). For instance, all others around us believe that the political government in power is doing well. Why should we oppose it? If we do not believe in that government's success, we may lose our friendships; we may be forced into a social alienation or estrangement. Furthermore, we may not want to get out of our *comfort zone* and face the challenge. *Conformism* as a position matching the situation of post-truth tells us to be a part of the majority and keep our relations. People are prone to be conformists as they do not want to get in any trouble with *mind guards* by seriously questioning the usual practices or standards of a group, society, and political approach which could be related to the symptoms of *groupthink* but specially to *group conformity, the illusion of unanimity* and *the illusion of invulnerability* (Haynes, 2012).

Beyond any doubt, it is not only because of *post-truth times* that we are easily mistaken in finding the truth. Media technologies and user-generated content influence us, our beliefs, the information we receive and so our behaviours and attitudes (Winston, 2000). McLuhan's famous expression "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1963, p. 9) and *technological determinism* (Jordan, 2008) are some other approaches that demonstrate our interaction with digital media and how they influence our points of view. Media outlets within that context first check how we will percept reality and then deliver it to us. Those who are addicted to social media feel under the pressure of posting something online and *doom-scrolling* to find some posts that disgrace what or who they are against. The more they have the reaction, the more they share. Their desire to post online then turns into a *vicious circle* where the users start to hear their own voices which are in new media literacy called *echo chambers*. It is a metaphorical narrative of a position in which beliefs are amplified or strengthened through communication and repetition inside a closed online circle. Thus, account holders' experience on social media is an exercise in the confirmation of their prejudices and manipulated information (Clark & Slyke, 2010).

Commentators and analysts frequently express concern about echo chambers and filter bubbles because they believe these phenomena will exacerbate polarization, reduce mutual understanding, and eventually result in a situation in which people are so polarized that they have no common ground and are, in effect, inhabiting different realities. Polarization can appear in many different ways. For the purposes of this review, the following forms are crucial. First, ideological polarization, which describes the intensity of political disagreement. The second type of polarization is affective, and it deals with how individuals feel about the people who are on the "other side" of an argument. The third factor is news audience polarization, which measures how politically divided or partisan news audiences are on average in a specific nation. (Arguedas, Robertson, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2022).

This is also about the *uses and gratification theory* which states that the audience interacts with mass communication tools including digital ones to satisfy their motives such as getting information, entertainment, and education (Katz et al. 1973). Consumers on online platforms create their content and look for supporters to get satisfied. They only follow whom they politically feel close to. This tendency after a short while pushes them to go into echo chambers where they can only meet their like-minded fellows, hear ideas that are close to already existing ones and see visuals which are not against their previous approaches and construction of the world. Furthermore, the confirmation bias and positive test strategy that users are prone to is not only limited to the online platforms but also in the long run make them join the same homogenous groups during their everyday activities. Although it is possible to get out of those dead rooms through some kind of critical thinking and digital/new media literacy information, the fear and anxiety regarding being discriminated against and facing a disturbing reality that may challenge their current ideas and position, they prefer staying in those echo chambers and keeping their comforts not troubled by any divergence (Geschke et al., 2018).

Because the politicians are aware of this internet usage and daily biases, they also have their devotees who create media content to promote their ideology. These political media productions *manufacture audiences' consent*[9] and in the long run, they believe in what they receive from their groups without any objection (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). In the next step, the followers believe that those who do not have opinions as theirs are the "others", and they are only a few. Those who are exposed to falsified news online or offline will not be aware of other approaches and they will soon believe in their righteousness. This point of view will soon make the wrongs stay as the facts and those who have different ideas as undermining group harmony.

3- Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the above debate it is difficult to state that the digital divide or polarization in society is rooted only in daily politics. On the contrary, just like personal traumas societies also may have collective childhood traumas. From media messages to propaganda, from nationalist historical stories to tribal narcissism, from cross-border wars to the refugee crisis, it does have various factors each of which deserves to be studied as a separate title. As mentioned above, regarding the communication theories, the policymakers seemingly know how to manage the perceptions. Since it is also about the financial relationship between media and politics, the politicians can suggest editors what to and how to cover *(framing)* and play the role of gatekeepers (editors) in the newsroom. By creating the media agenda and then the public agenda, they achieve their goal: to keep the support for them by dividing the public and increasing the votes.

The politically driven digital or offline polarisation significantly influences the ethnic tensions and this deep divide influences online content production and management as well. In a colloquial speech, having armies of trolls, the powers either political, economic, or ethnic have the ability to control the flow of information on online platforms. The audience of traditional media is not active and cannot give instant feedback about the media content. However, in digital courses, users can give

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[9] Manufacturing Consent: A theory developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman which states that media organizations create people consents which they once were opposing. Thus, media works as a tool for political propaganda.

direct responses and criticize what they want. Once a powerful politician who benefits from polarization is criticized by any account holder on Twitter or Instagram, his/her followers show up and force the critic back by resorting to *cyberbullying* or defamation. Therefore, social media users give up criticizing politicians as they may have even threats that push them into psychological traumas and increase their anxiety. This renunciation pushes the users to get into a *spiral of silence* where they get desperate for a close change. As a reflection of *post-truth* debates, those who actively troll for specific politicians and ideologies never question their opinions.

Despite the practical (news confirmation accounts and applications) and theoretical efforts (media literacy and news culture) which fight against the dissemination of provocative messages through digital platforms, the nature of "wicked thoughts" and "fake and false news" is claimed to be influential on deepening the conflict. Online networks such as blogs, social media courses, and forums take the interaction between users to another phase. However, this communication, on the other hand, makes the internet users stay in their echo chambers which in the long run gives them the feeling that they are always right. The *filter bubbles* in which the account holders only hear their own voices and meet their supporters have the potential to make them more intolerant. These bigoted users are called "trolls" in social media terminology. They are famous for discriminating and demonizing the others and in the end fuel the polarisation throughout the internet platforms.

Without any doubt, it would be inadequate to state that the polarization in a country case only arises from online or offline belittlement or political discrimination. It might have so many other reasons which could not be handled within the limits of this study. However, it is possible to indicate that the mainstream society members or the powers (political, cultural or economic) who produce polarisation to access their targets such as votes or some other positions, at the end of the day may cause social security problems and conflicts. The observable digital or offline polarisation makes those who generate it (either from mainstream or minority) lean on injustice which in the course of time might cause the social reconciliation to get lost and might push society into chaos. Therefore, the political elites in the first place and then all social groups and individuals should develop a more tolerant culture, emphatic communication, and democratic values through which each culture, religion, ethnicity, and identity can peacefully express themselves.

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