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Violent extremism: personality characteristics and susceptibility to radical ideology among young people

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Abstract

Introduction. The relevance of this study is related to the growing psychological vulnerability of young people in conditions of information overload, which increases their susceptibility to destructive influences, especially from extremist and terrorist organizations. At the same time, individual characteristics play an important role in involvement in illegal activities. The aim of the study was to investigate the propensity for violent extremism and analyze the personality characteristics of young people that determine their susceptibility to extremist ideology. **Methods.** The study involved 274 cadets aged 17 to 29 (average age 20.12). A set of psychodiagnostic techniques was used: "Methodology for Diagnosing Violent Extremist Dispositions," "Aggression Test," "Ways of Responding in Dangerous Situations" questionnaire, "Screening Method for Diagnosing the Propensity for Extremism among Students," and the "Cultural-Value Differential" test. Data were processed using descriptive statistics, as well as correlation (Spearman's coefficient) and comparative analysis (Mann-Whitney U test). **Results.** Young people with signs of social and psychological maladjustment are characterized by social pessimism, destructiveness, and cynicism. Comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences: cadets preparing for a career in law enforcement demonstrate higher levels of mysticism, cynicism, normative nihilism, and physical aggression, which acts as an adaptive mechanism for their future profession, but at the same time increases their vulnerability to extremist ideologies. Reserve cadets demonstrate high levels of subject aggression and collectivist orientation ("towards each other"), which can be interpreted

as a psychological defense mechanism through identification with a reference group, or as a channel for involvement through a similar mechanism of solidarity. **Discussion.** The identified symptom complex (mysticism, cynicism, nihilism) in future military specialists performs a compensatory function but creates cognitive vulnerability to simplified ideological schemes. The data obtained emphasize the need for a differentiated approach in preventive work, taking into account not only obvious markers of distress, but also latent adaptation mechanisms.

Keywords

extremist dispositions, psychological susceptibility, vulnerability, aggressiveness, extremist ideology, social orientations, conflict behavior, response patterns, young people, cadets

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Introduction

The modern world is characterized by psychological transitivity. The rapid development of various aspects of human life places a number of social demands on young people who are in the process of personal and professional self-determination and development. In many ways, this process is determined by the information field in which each person is included. The subjective perception of information and attitude towards it is formed individually and affects the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of personality development. Young people who find themselves in a situation of choice may be subject to destructive informational and psychological influences. At the same time, certain personality traits and subjectivity of perception mediate the polarity of such influence. In some cases, proactive and cognitive defenses of the personality allow

the use of a kind of "information filter," while in others, on the contrary, they serve as a predictor that increases the cognitive and emotional susceptibility of young people. Meanwhile, the threat of cognitive warfare is growing. This is largely facilitated by the broad information field through which both reliable information and false meanings of destructive ideology are disseminated.

This study aims to examine certain psychological characteristics of young people, namely cadets at military training centers, which will help to understand the level of susceptibility to extremist ideology with the aim of improving existing preventive measures. Despite the successes achieved by modern scientists in this field (Orlov, 2024), ensuring the psychological security of the population is not possible without a scientific understanding of the psychological aspects of young people's susceptibility to destructive extremist ideology. A scientific explanation of the mechanisms of informational and psychological influence, taking into account the personal and behavioral characteristics of cadets at military training centers, will make it possible to develop measures to prevent the emergence of radicalization risks and to develop a comprehensive system of prevention and, in the future, counteraction based on modern socio-psychological technologies. In addition, studying the psychological susceptibility of cadets contributes to the harmonious development of young people during their training at military training centers affiliated with universities.

Today's society is characterized by the active development of digital resources and social networks. Young people make up the majority of their audience, which makes various Internet platforms an excellent channel for promoting and spreading extremist ideology among a huge number of young people who are vulnerable to the influence of radical beliefs. Recently, the internet has been actively used to spread ideas, demonstrate violence, and intimidate society. Social networks are used to create new heroes and symbols capable of attracting the attention of young people who are actively searching for their path in life and their place in society (Melnikova, 2018). Fake photos, posts with false information, and invalid statistics can all be used by extremists for manipulation and further recruitment. In this case, young people become ideal victims, and those who spread extremist ideology are seen as conscious manipulators who use all means to carry out their radical plans (Meshchaninov, 2016). According to research by B. B. Bidova (2014), an ideology can be called extremist if it meets the following criteria:

- 1) the exclusive truth of this particular ideology, creating a "complex of absolute truth" — the impossibility of refuting the basic postulates of the ideology;
- 2) aggressive intolerance towards all ideological competitors or competing, alternative ideologies;
- 3) a fundamental division of society into two large groups: friends and enemies;
- 4) a focus on immediate practical action to correct the world and people — a program of urgent transformation of the existing social reality;
- 5) the predominance of destructive tasks aimed at destroying the false hostile world

over constructive tasks in the program of transformative actions;

6) a practically unachievable, overly harsh and perverted code of personal conduct that requires extraordinary, extreme actions, sacrifices and fanaticism from a person (Bidova, 2014).

The reasons why young people fall under the influence of extremist ideology are diverse: social conditions, economic difficulties, cultural differences, and political conflicts. According to a number of scholars, young people who are in the "risk zone" usually do not achieve the level of socialization and adaptation in society that they expect. They lack clear life goals, values, and objectives; sometimes they feel isolated from their community, and they find it difficult to realize their personal ambitions and desires. Young people who find themselves in such circumstances look for ways out of their situations, and radical groups offer ready-made solutions, promising support, protection, and the opportunity for self-expression (Artishchev, Artishcheva, 2015).

The process of recruiting young people involves a step-by-step introduction to extremist ideology: first, contact is established and a relationship of trust is formed, then trial tasks are carried out to test loyalty, and subsequently, the stage of active participation in the activities of the extremist group begins. In order to attract young people, financial assistance, appeals to a sense of duty, pride, or spiritual unity are often used to create a strong bond with the group. It is important to note that young people are the age group most vulnerable to manipulation by those who spread extremist ideologies. It is well known that this age period is associated with emotional instability and a tendency to take risks. New experiences and thrills, as well as a sense of their own uniqueness, are often important to young people. Among the personality traits of young people who are most susceptible to destructive influences, the most common are self-doubt, a sense of social injustice, and dissatisfaction with life (Kondratiev, 2015). People who promote extremist ideology often exploit the weaknesses of young people – their need to feel important, involved, financially secure, and part of an ideology that truly values them – and appeal to them. Thus, young people become attractive targets for leaders of extremist movements and ideologies.

In the early 2000s, the field of socio-psychological analysis of extremist ideologies underwent significant development. One of the first in this field was D.V. Olshansky, who studied the textual materials of radical groups – leaflets, manifestos, and Internet resources. Using content and discourse analysis methods, he showed that radical ideologies perform a number of key functions for individuals and groups, as well as a compensatory function, transforming feelings of helplessness and social irrelevance into feelings of strength and significance. Thus, extremist ideology is not so much a system of beliefs as a psychological mechanism for relieving internal tension and finding a place in society (Olshansky, 2002).

Later, in the 2010s, the focus shifted to digital technologies and social networks, which were assigned a key role as an information channel for the dissemination of radical ideas.

Research by K.D. Khlomov and A.A. Bocharov (2018) showed that the internet creates a unique environment in terms of group dynamics and the gradual radicalization of young people. One of the key mechanisms of this process was "echo chambers": social media algorithms create an information bubble for users, where people only see messages that confirm their views. Ideological attitudes are spread not through complex manifestos, but through simple images, short videos, and music, which are quickly and easily absorbed and evoke a strong emotional response. The phenomenon of gradual radicalization is of particular interest: a young person may start out with harmless hobbies, such as historical reenactment or musical subcultures, but gradually find themselves involved in more closed and aggressive communities. In many ways, such involvement is due to the subjective perception of information and a number of personality traits of young people.

In 2015, M.Y. Kondratyev proposed a model for working with "at-risk groups," including adolescents and young people with uncertain social status, migrants, and those from disadvantaged families, with the aim of preventing young people from becoming involved in extremist ideologies. A key direction in this model is the creation of alternative communities of acceptance—sports clubs, creative studios, volunteer movements—where young people can fulfill their basic needs for belonging, respect, and identity in socially acceptable ways (Kondratiev, 2015). Therefore, an important task is to develop critical thinking and media literacy, which helps young people recognize the manipulative techniques and information distortions characteristic of extremist communities.

Foreign studies show similar results and emphasize the complex nature of psychological and socio-environmental factors that contribute to the vulnerability of young people to extremist ideology. In particular, a study was conducted in 2023 (Haghish et al., 2023) among a large sample of Norwegian adolescents (N=11,397), using machine learning methods, which identified 550 significant psychosocial and contextual variables. The key predictors of extremist attitudes were behavioral problems, level of social well-being, family environment security, and quality of relationships with parents and peers. One of the most significant predictors was age—increased vulnerability is observed in early adolescence. The sensitivity of young people as an important predictor of loyalty to extremist ideology is confirmed by other studies. For example, a 2022 study (González et al., 2022) analyzed the psychological manipulation techniques used to radicalize young people. Among other things, the emotional sensitivity of young men and women, belief in the legitimacy of violence, and manipulation of empathy and identity aimed at achieving psychological submission play an important role. Similar results are seen in other studies (Wallner, 2023), which indicate that prevention programs are based on specific factors of youth vulnerability, including impulsivity, identity search, high susceptibility to peer influence, and an existential need for significance.

In the context of our empirical study, which was conducted on cadets at a military training center, the data obtained in Serbia in 2021 (Vukčević et al., 2021) are interesting. The researchers focused on contextual and psychological predictors of militaristic extremism. The following factors contributing to excessive susceptibility were identified:

family dysfunction, a harsh school environment, feelings of loneliness, authoritarianism, and a focus on social dominance. Together, these variables explained a significant portion of the variance in the components of extremist thinking—belief in the justification of violence and trust in divine power as the ultimate arbiter. Finally, similar to domestic studies on this issue, the 2022 report "How and Why Minors and Youth are Attracted by Extremist Ideologies?" highlights a new dimension of this problem in the digital age: accelerated radicalization is carried out through echo chambers (the exploitation of the same radical ideas) on social networks and the consumption of fragmented ideologies that synthesize conspiracy theories and extremist narratives, which significantly complicates both the diagnosis of vulnerability and the development of preventive measures.

Thus, susceptibility (vulnerability) to extremism is formed at the intersection of individual psychological traits (emotional vulnerability, behavioral problems, search for identity), developmental factors, the quality of the social environment (family, peers, school) and an increasingly aggressive digital context, which is actively exploited by recruiters to manipulate these aspects of personal susceptibility. Thus, analysis of various approaches shows that young people, due to their age characteristics, socio-economic conditions, and psychological vulnerability, are the most susceptible group to extremist influence in the digital space. The internet and social networks are becoming not only a channel of communication, but also a tool for targeted manipulation, where the tenets of radical ideologies are presented in an attractive and accessible form. In these conditions, it becomes particularly important to identify predictors that increase or, conversely, decrease the susceptibility of young people to such influence.

The lack of a clear empirical link between specific personality characteristics, apart from the obvious ones such as aggressiveness or conflictiveness and a tendency towards violent extremism, makes it difficult to develop and implement special preventive programs in working with young people, and the measures taken quickly become vague, preventing the early detection of risks of individuals becoming involved in illegal activities.

The above allows us to specify the research task: it is important to understand which personality traits, psychological states, and behavioral patterns can contribute to the involvement of young people in destructive ideologies, and which, on the contrary, prevent this. This determined the formulation of the research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1.

It is assumed that there is a significant correlation between certain personality characteristics (mysticism and cynicism) and high levels of aggression among respondents, which increases the risk of involvement in destructive ideologies.

Hypothesis 2.

It is expected that cadets studying reserve and personnel specialties will differ in terms of the level of psychological susceptibility to extremist ideologies and the degree of their exposure to destructive attitudes and ideas.

Methods

Methods

The key tool was the "Methodology for Diagnosing Dispositions to Violent Extremism" (Davydov, Khlomov, 2017), which allows identifying stable predispositions to justify violence, conflictual perception of social reality, and negative attitudes toward society, which are the basis for involvement in destructive practices.

The characteristics of the affective sphere were determined using the Aggression Test (L. G. Pochebut), which demonstrates the differentiation between various forms of aggression and hostility. High scores on the relevant scales are interpreted as indicators of the search for destructive ways of emotional release and potential recourse to extremist ideas, which increases susceptibility to destructive informational and psychological influence.

The behavioral component was analyzed using the questionnaire "Ways of Responding in Dangerous Situations" (V. G. Maralov, 2012), which identifies dominant coping strategies. In this case, a tendency toward aggressive and confrontational reactions in threatening situations is considered a risk factor for extremist involvement.

A screening method for diagnosing a tendency toward extremism among students (Kapustina et al., 2022) was included for rapid integrated assessment.

The "Cultural-Value Differential" test (G. U. Soldatova, 1998) is aimed at identifying axiological attitudes—ethnocentrism, xenophobia, rejection of cultural diversity—which form the value basis for the assimilation of radical ideas and the cultivation of hatred towards various population groups based on a number of factors.

Sample

Young people aged 17 to 29 ($M=20.12$ years) participated in the study. Among them were 258 men and 16 women. All respondents are enrolled in military training centers at civilian universities: 123 people are enrolled in civilian training programs, after which they will be enlisted in the reserves; 151 people are enrolled in programs that will lead to subsequent appointments to positions in military organizations.

Statistical processing

Statistical research methods were selected in accordance with the nature of the data obtained. At the first stage, a descriptive analysis was carried out, which made it possible to describe the sample and check the normality of the data distribution (Table 1). The results of the analysis showed that the distribution of data was different from normal, and therefore non-parametric statistical methods were used in the study. In the second stage,

correlation analysis was used to determine the relationships between the phenomena under study, using Spearman's criterion. In the third stage, a comparative analysis of two independent groups was carried out, selected in accordance with the criterion of the educational program studied by the respondents. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to identify differences.

Table 1

Descriptive analysis of the variables studied among young people—cadets at military training centers

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Age	17	29	20	19.9695	0.2399
Methodology for diagnosing violent extremist dispositions					
Intolerance	9	30	17	16.9008	1.7333
Conventional coercion	8	30	19.0	18.3321	4.5359
Social pessimism	6	30	12	12.9084	3.9720
Mysticism	6	30	14	13.6221	4.5230
Destructiveness and cynicism	8	30	15.5	15.6107	3.8865
Protest activity	6	30	17	16.5153	3.8959
Normative nihilism	8	30	16	16.0153	2.7695
Anti-intrapeption	9	29	19.0	18.2748	3.2295

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Aggression test					
Conformity	6	30	15	15.1794	3.9307
Verbal aggression	0	7	2	2.3969	1.5594
Physical aggression	0	7	2	2.4389	1.7491
Object aggression	0	7	1	1.7901	1.3123
Emotional aggression	0	7	1	1.4695	1.2553
Self-aggression	0	8	2	2.0611	1.7693
Questionnaire "Ways of responding in dangerous situations"					
Adequate type	0	16	3.0	3.0878	1.9367
Anxious type	0	16	8.0	7.3321	2.7348
Ignoring type	0	10	4.0	4.1832	2.0049
Undefined type	0	0	0	0.0000	0
"Screening method for diagnosing extremist tendencies among students"					
Propensity for extremism	0	22	6	6.4809	4.0878
Cultural-Value Differential Test					
Group orientation	3	12	7	6.9962	1.6597
Orientation toward power	3	12	7	7.0573	1.8217
Orientation towards each other	3	12	6.0	6.7595	2.2809
Focus on change	3	12	7	7.2748	1.8427

Results

Based on the results of descriptive analysis, the following dispositions of violent extremism were identified as predominant in the sample. In particular, the following manifestations were identified:

1. conventional coercion, characterized by the priority of restoring justice over other humanistic values, which is achieved through stricter demands on oneself and others, as well as the introduction of censorship ($M=19$);
2. anti-introspection, expressed in the rejection of subjective manifestations of introspection, fantasy, and sensual experiences; emphasis is placed on physical reality, orientation toward simple ideas, and immediate actions ($M=19$);
3. intolerance, reflecting a desire for unambiguous perception of the world, rejection of other people's differences, denial of the possibility of dissent, and a desire to impose one's views on others by any means necessary ($M=17$).
4. Protest activity, in other words, maladaptive activity characterized by a desire for heroic deeds, the unknown, adventure, and transformation, a willingness to take risks and sacrifice oneself for an idea ($M=17$).

At the same time, the overall level of aggression was low. In dangerous situations, the most pronounced type of response was anxious, characterized by a tendency to exaggerate the threat ($M=8$).

The psychoterrorism indicator is at an average level ($M=-5$), which indicates the absence of a pronounced desire to deliberately destabilize the interlocutor. However, a tendency toward emotional manipulation may be observed, but within limited limits.

The screening diagnostic data also did not reveal a tendency toward maladaptive behavior ($M=6$). In addition, a hierarchy of respondents' orientations was established. The orientation towards change () is more pronounced ($m(\text{avg})=7.2$; $M=7$), followed by the orientation towards power ($m(\text{avg})=7$; $M=7$), towards the group ($m(\text{avg})=6.9$; $M=7$), and towards each other ($m(\text{avg})=6.7$; $M=6$).

To continue investigating the relationship between personality characteristics and attitudes that increase the risk of involvement in destructive ideologies, as well as to test the hypothesis of the existence of relationships between these indicators, a correlation analysis was performed using Spearman's criterion. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

Correlation analysis showed that the tendency toward extremism, understood as a manifestation of socio-psychological maladjustment, is closely related to a number of personality dispositions. The tendency toward extremism (maladaptive state) is positively associated with such dispositions as social pessimism ($r = 0.3$) and destructiveness and cynicism ($r = 0.4$).

Table 2

Correlation analysis of violent extremist dispositions and personality characteristics explaining the susceptibility of young people to extremist ideology

	IN	CP	SP	DC	PA	ODD	SA
SE	0.20	0.17	0.32	0.40	0.15	0.36	0.40
BA	0.42	0.22	0.11	0.19	0.22	0.10	-
FA	0.24	0.33	0.08	0.17	0.30	-0.06	-

Note: 1. SE — tendency toward extremism; VA — verbal aggression; PA — physical aggression; IN — intolerance; CP — conventional coercion; SP — social pessimism; DC — destructiveness and cynicism; PA — protest activity; ODD — orientation toward each other; SA — self-aggression. 2. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. ** 3. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

It is noteworthy that the tendency toward extremism is related to orientation toward others ($r = 0.3$), which is explained by the desire of young people to find a support group, a community that shares their views and justifies radical actions. At the same time, it is important for individuals to "stand out" and show results that are different from others, which is easier to achieve through radical measures and illegal actions than through painstaking work on oneself. At the same time, the coldness and emotional alienation that accompany such an orientation devalue human relationships, turning social interaction into a kind of "competition." Another interesting connection was found between a tendency toward extremism and self-aggression ($r = 0.4$).

It is equally telling that intolerance correlates positively with verbal aggression ($r = 0.4$). The desire for a simplified and rigid worldview is often accompanied by aggressive defense of one's own beliefs. Young people who are intolerant of other opinions are more likely to resort to verbal abuse and confrontation. In turn, constant exposure to conflict narrows perception and further reinforces the limitations of one's worldview. Physical aggression is significantly associated with such dispositions of violent extremism as conventional coercion ($r = 0.3$) and protest activity ($r = 0.3$).

Thus, correlation analysis showed that the tendency toward extremism among young people is formed at the intersection of such indicators as internal vulnerability, frustration, and the desire for social self-identification. Social pessimism, cynicism, aggression, and intolerance not only undermine the harmony of the individual, but also create a basis for justifying radical and destructive practices in the minds of young people.

In order to verify how much the severity of these characteristics varies among representatives of different groups of respondents, we conducted a comparative analysis using the Mann-Whitney U test. The data obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparative analysis of violent extremist dispositions and the severity of personality characteristics among cadets in different training programs (Mann-Whitney U test)

Variables	U	p	Average rank ¹
Mysticism	6879.500	0.013	117.98/141.44
Destructiveness and cynicism	6277.500	0	112.55/145.43
Normative nihilism	5765.00	0	107.94/148.82
Physical aggression	7102.50	0.032	119.99/139.96
Object aggression	6640.500	0.002	147.18/119.98
Orientation toward each other	6451.500	0.001	148.88/118.73

Note: ¹The number before the slash is the average rank of the values of variables for cadets in reserve specialties, and after the slash is for cadets in regular specialties.

Cadets oriented toward professional activity in military structures demonstrated statistically significantly higher scores on dispositions such as mysticism ($z = 6879.5$), destructiveness, cynicism ($z = 6277.5$), and normative nihilism ($z = 5765.0$) compared to cadets enrolled in the reserve program. Future military specialists are characterized by a pronounced tendency toward an external locus of control, which manifests itself in a tendency to shift responsibility to external, uncontrollable forces. This psychological mechanism can be seen as a compensatory strategy for coping with existential anxiety and high levels of uncertainty, which are objectively inherent in the professional activities of specialists in the military sphere. The use of irrational explanatory models (belief in predestination) performs a protective function for the psyche, reducing the emotional tension associated with the awareness of the risks and high responsibility of the future profession. However, this same mechanism creates cognitive vulnerability: simplified and emotionally charged explanatory schemes increase susceptibility to extremist ideologies, which are characterized by a dichotomous view of the world ("us" versus "them") and the absolutization of the image of the enemy.

The increased levels of destructiveness and cynicism among students in the military training program reflect a generalized negative attitude toward people, attributing base motives to their actions, devaluing interpersonal relationships, and diminishing the value of human life. In the context of a military specialty involving the use of violence, such cynicism can serve an adaptive function, reducing emotional stress and moral-psychological/intrapersonal conflicts. In the long term, this contributes to the dehumanization of the enemy, which not only facilitates the performance of combat tasks, but also creates an illusion to justify excessive cruelty and the acceptance of ideologies based on hatred and

exclusivity on one side. Normative nihilism is more common among cadets who plan to continue working in the military. This disposition legitimizes unlawful actions. Moral and legal restrictions begin to be perceived as conditional and applicable only to situations not related to "serving the cause."

The above dispositions constitute a symptom complex that serves as an adaptive mechanism to the high stress and moral dilemmas of the military profession, but, on the other hand, make cadets in professional training vulnerable to extremist ideology. Physical aggression, which is also more common among cadets in military specialties and represents an increased readiness to use physical force, is the behavioral embodiment of the above-mentioned dispositions, completing the picture of potential involvement in violent practices.

Cadets who will form the mobilization reserve upon completion of their training have higher scores in terms of object aggression, a tendency to express negative emotions toward inanimate objects in situations of frustration or psycho-emotional stress, compared to cadets training in personnel specialties. This form of response may indicate restraint from direct aggression against people and is considered less destructive. Cadets deliberately choose more acceptable forms of aggression—this is probably due to their future professional activities, where legitimate physical force will not be used and, accordingly, there will be no need to resort to physical aggression. This cannot be said about cadets in personnel specialties, whose professional activities may be directly related to it.

The higher indicators of "friend-oriented" behavior among reserve cadets compared to cadets in regular military specialties may reflect significant differences in their value and meaning systems. For example, reserve cadets demonstrate a more pronounced collectivist orientation, which can manifest itself in a desire for mutual assistance, cooperation, and emotional support within the group. Sometimes this is due to their temporary stay in the service environment and the lack of long-term prospects in this area, which increases the importance of horizontal ties and mutual support as a mechanism for adapting to stressful training conditions. Cadets in regular military service specialties are less oriented toward the collective. This is probably due to their desire for individual achievement and further career growth, as well as the fact that they are initially trained for leadership positions. Upon completion of the educational program, they are distributed across different regions of the country, which reduces the importance of interaction within their study group. Individualistic work makes cadets vulnerable to the influence of various ideological concepts, including radical and extremist ones.

Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed a number of significant correlations between the psychological characteristics of young people and their susceptibility to extremist ideology. The tendency toward extremism as a maladaptive state demonstrates significant

links to a complex of specific psychological dispositions, among which the key indicators were: social pessimism, destructiveness and cynicism, orientation toward others in the context of conformity and seeking approval, self-aggression, intolerance, and physical aggression. Foreign researchers come to similar conclusions in their work, emphasizing that recruiters manipulate perception. Negative attitudes towards society are formed on the basis of distrust of another group, which is based on opposition that distinguishes the individual from others (Kruglanski et al., 2014; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017). The results obtained provide a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying radicalization. In particular, social pessimism, expressed in a negative, catastrophic perception of the world and the future, combined with destructiveness and cynicism, forms the cognitive-emotional basis for adopting radical views. Frustration, along with the need for security and justice, generates a demand for simplified answers and a dichotomous perception of reality, which corresponds to the provisions on "strains of terrorism." The severity of social pessimism predisposes people to a negative perception of the world around them, catastrophizing the future and expecting danger, while destructiveness and cynicism are dispositions that manifest themselves in a critical attitude towards others, suspicion, and rejection of human relationships (Davydov, Khlomov, 2017). The interdependence of these dispositions, as well as the tendency toward social and psychological maladjustment, is due to the fact that one of its criteria, identified by Kapustina T.V., is depression, which is characteristic of individuals with pronounced social pessimism and dehumanization of others, which can occur with an increased level of cynicism (Kondratiev, 2015). A frustrated sense of security, negative expectations of the present and future, and intolerance of human manifestations can be markers of the risk of involvement in extremist ideologies, as young people may be inclined to resort to radical methods of changing their environment. ' tendency to view the world through the prism of pessimism can cause feelings of hostility towards them. Intolerance towards others is already an aspect of predisposition to destructive acts against those around them. Thus, in situations of psychological vulnerability, ideas about the legitimacy and legality of using violence and other destructive means to protect oneself and one's interests may arise. An important role in the formation of this predisposition is played by orientation towards others, which manifests itself in conformity and the search for support among like-minded people. This echoes data according to which extremist groups satisfy the basic needs of belonging and recognition for individuals with impaired social connections (Doosje et al., 2016). As L.G. Pochebut notes, a person deprived of inner harmony and psychological defense mechanisms is vulnerable to an aggressive external environment. In situations of psychological vulnerability, young people may experience an acute sense of danger, which leads to a distortion of their values and meaning and contributes to the development of a tendency to make radical and destructive decisions as a mechanism for protecting their psychological integrity.

Self-aggression and intolerance emerged as key markers of internal distress closely linked to extremist attitudes. Their connection with verbal and physical aggression

highlights the role of internal conflicts and cognitive rigidity in the radicalization process (Maralov et al., 2012; Melnikova, 2018). The work of E.V. Sokolova and A.A. Grigorieva (2010) revealed important personality differences between young people observed in extremist manifestations and their peers. The study was conducted on a sample of 120 people aged 17–25. The first group of participants consisted of young people registered with law enforcement agencies for extremist actions or statements, while the second group was a control group. The results showed that the radicalized group of young people had a higher level of aggression, both physical and verbal. In addition, they had a negative self-image, expressed in a complex of "wounded pride": low self-esteem, internal conflict, and a tendency to blame themselves. The motives for involvement were predominantly non-ideological. Participants most often spoke of the need to belong (27%), protest against social injustice (23%), and the search for thrills (19%). Ideology was not the root cause, but rather a justification and a tool for unity (Sokolova, Grigorieva, 2010). However, conventional coercion is based on the desire to "restore justice" at any cost, even to the detriment of humanistic values (Davydov & Khlomov, 2017). Usually, this is achieved by imposing strict requirements on oneself and others. This logic is consistent with the well-known "frustration-aggression" model. Protest activity, on the contrary, reflects a need for novelty, a search for thrills and "forbidden experiences." In this case, aggression and violence become a form of exploration, a unique way to test oneself and the surrounding world. This is consistent with longitudinal studies, where aggression and bullying are among the most consistent predictors of antisocial behavior (Vergani et al., 2018; Victoroff, 2005). Moreover, research data show that young people, as the main users of social networks who demonstrate active constructive and destructive forms of information behavior, have significantly higher scores on all indicators of aggression and hostility and demonstrate more pronounced phone dependence (Kolenova et al., 2022). It is important to note that in the study, classic risk factors such as symptoms of depression and anxiety did not show as significant predictive power in relation to extremist attitudes as the complex of identified dispositions (Vergani et al., 2018). Consequently, a more detailed analysis of specific personality traits and cognitive styles of information processing, going beyond general diagnostic categories, is necessary to understand the phenomenon of extremism.

Susceptibility to extremism is the result of a complex interaction of maladaptive personality traits, affective states, and cognitive distortions. This conclusion is supported by foreign studies on the characterological traits of terrorists, since the identified dispositions are a direct reflection of psychological tension, which can find an outlet in radical forms of coping strategies. This confirms that higher education institutions, which bring together young people from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, face a dual effect. On the one hand, this enriches the educational space, but on the other, it creates potential ground for conflict. In this process, building partnerships within the university community is of fundamental importance. It is through such interaction that a mature personality is formed, capable of self-realization and critical understanding of reality, which is the basis for resistance to destructive ideologies (Kagermaova et al., 2021).

The limitation of this study is that the emphasis is on correlations, and causal relationships are assumed exclusively between the variables under consideration. In addition, the results are based on a sample in which men are numerically predominant, which may limit the practical significance of the conclusions for women, who may also obtain military-related degrees at universities.

Prospects for further research primarily include studying the causal relationships between psychological dispositions and the propensity for extremism, which is necessary for a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms of the formation of extremist views and the constant updating of knowledge about them. An equally important area of future research is the analysis of the role of social and cultural factors influencing the radicalization of young people, as these are sometimes understudied catalysts for changes in a person's worldview. In the future, it is planned to compile patterns of personality traits in young people that are most likely to lead to the radicalization of an individual's views, which will enable early diagnosis and timely preventive intervention.

Conclusion

The results of the study demonstrate the complex nature of young people's susceptibility to extremist ideology. Not only aggressive and intolerant attitudes play an important role, but also personality traits such as pessimism, mysticism, and cynicism. Preventive programs should take these psychological characteristics into account and be aimed at developing critical thinking, emotional stability, and tolerance among young people. This will reduce the risks of radicalization and contribute to the formation of a more harmonious society.

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Alexandra Anatolyevna Zherdeva – selection and description of methodological tools, collection of empirical data.

Elena Aleksandrovna Krasnova – theoretical review of Russian literature on the research topic.

Ekaterina Olegovna Kuznetsova – data processing and statistical preparation for analysis and interpretation.

Ekaterina Petrovna Khazina – review of international literature, discussion of results, technical formatting of the text.

Alexandra Aleksandrovna Veligodskaya – graphic design of tables and data interpretation.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.