Article

Online Media, Civic Engagement, and the Prevention of Religious Radicalism: Together for an Inclusive Future (A View of Empirical Evidence)

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Abstract: The current increase in religiously motivated radicalism is a serious social problem in various countries. Through our qualitative research, which was based on the knowledge and experience of experts recorded during the focus group interview, it was possible to identify the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today. The Slovak Republic, a small post-communist country in the region of Eastern Europe, served as an empirical example for research purposes. Following the research findings, a second research objective was set, namely to present the possibilities and contribution of citizen journalism that can play a key role in tracking, documenting and sharing cases of religious radicalism. The research presents the causes of religious radicalism and the optimal possibilities of citizen journalism, which would adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism with the use of online media. The activities of "people's journalists" appear not only as a trigger for public debate that takes place on social media, blogs, and independent journalistic platforms but also as a necessary voice calling for accountability and transparency of solutions concerning religious radicalism, which is inherently complex and a multifactorial process, often leading to extremism. This study attempts to answer the question of why civic engagement using online media is important in this issue.

Keywords: religion; religious radicalism; civic engagement; citizen journalism; online media; media culture; focus group method; inclusive society

1. Introduction

Academic models of radicalization such as the "Staircase of Terrorism" proposed by Fathali M. Moghaddam (2005), the "Pyramid of Radicalization" developed by John Horgan and Max Taylor (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008), or the "conveyor belt" metaphor proposed by Although Zeyno Baran (2005) differ in the description and assessment of the factors that lead to radicalization, and they agree in understanding radicalization as a process leading to extremism (Moghaddam 2005; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Baran 2005; Custodial Institutions Agency: Ministry of Justice and Security 2018; European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation 2008; European Commission n.d.), i.e., to an anti-systemic and anti-democratic ideological orientation that does not oppose the use of physical violence directed at certain groups of the population (Globsec 2019). However, C. Mudde (2000), A. Sotlar (2004), A. Kaya (2019), and D. R. Mandel (2009), among others, draw attention to a certain difference between the two terms. While extremism is hostile to the system and uses violence in its attitudes, radicalism stands against the system and strives for (from its point of view) positive changes. The aforementioned experts agree that the common denominator of both phenomena is the principled attitudinal departure from the status quo, which determines the character of society and its culture.

This discrepancy, if religious motives are also present, also results in the application of religious radicalism and religious extremism. Although in both cases we talk about the "lack of consensus regarding their definition" (Neumann 2013), we can speak with much more certainty about their often cruel consequences. In connection with the consequences of manifestations of religious extremism, we, therefore, speak of "repression", while, in connection with religious radicalism, we also speak of the need for "prevention".

Interestingly, although radicalization is on the rise in many countries, according to experts, how it manifests itself changes to a large extent over time (Muxel 2020; Borum 2011; Flemish Peace Institute n.d.; Stulberg 2022; and so on). An empirical example of this observation is also the Slovak Republic, which is a former post-communist country with 5.4 million inhabitants and is today classified in the region of Eastern Europe.

Despite the current religious freedom and the declared tolerance and non-discrimination, we must remember that forty years of communism in Slovakia was not the only thing that managed to contribute to the rise of radicalism and shake the basic elements and attributes of the democratic rule of law at the time. Finally, the earlier historical experience of Slovakia (and not only Slovakia) with the Nazi totalitarian regime proves that "the enemies of democracy were able to use democracy and the tools it offers them (freedom of expression, assembly, and association rights) to gain power through a formally legal way" to introduce measures that brought about the removal of the foundations of democracy itself (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic n.d.b, p. 4). This, among many other areas, naturally, had an impact on the level of radicalism towards religious minorities and also on the understanding and respect of the rights of believers.

We see how radicalization manifests itself over time not only in the past but also in the modern history of Slovakia. Back in the 1990s, radicalism and specifically religiously motivated radicalism in Slovakia were mainly represented by skinhead movements, whose ideology spread within communities; they were no strangers to physical violence and admiration for Nazism and Nazi symbolism, and in addition—as the main anti-systemic force—played significant role in the formation of the extreme right. According to the Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research, we are currently seeing more radicalization, which is manifested online and characterized by people's departure from democratic values (Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research 2022). According to other experts, in recent years, there has been an "alarming increase in radicalization" in Slovakia, which is not always linked to religious or political ideology (Press Agency SITA 2020; Kadlečíková 2022; Struhár et al. 2023) but has completely new forms and manifestations. An expert on contemporary extremism and radicalism in the conditions of Central and Eastern Europe, J. Charvát, connects the radicalization present in society in recent years with verbal distancing from racism and anti-Semitism, with the assertion of conservative, social, and nationalist ideas, and with society's inclination towards populism (Charvát 2023); according to other experts, populist Islamophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric is dominant today in Slovakia (Deset 2019). In addition, Charvát also draws attention to the "apparent retreat of radicalism" in society. According to him, the retreat of radicalism is only an illusion, because radicalism remains inherently present in society in its many altered manifestations (Charvát 2023); let us remind that the studies of those manifestations and processes are further developed, for example, in social movement theory (Gunning 2009; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008), conversion theory (Bainbridge 1992; Paloutzian et al. 1999; Rambo 1993), theories from the field of social psychology; e.g., group-related phenomenon, social reality power of isolated people and groups, etc. (Root 1925; Borum 2011; Kruglanski et al. 2018), and in other theories that have been proposed to explain the underlying cause of radicalization and its changing over time.

Through our qualitative research, which was built on the knowledge and experience of experts recorded during a group interview, this article presents a mutual connection of research with an emphasis on identifying the most frequent manifestations of religious radicalism in contemporary Slovakia and research on the optimal possibilities of citizen journalism, which would adequately respond to religious radicalism today. We present

citizen journalism as a welcome counter-reaction to contemporary religious radicalism and at the same time as an arbiter of many believers and many religious groups in the online space. Although the process of radicalization has come to the attention of researchers around the world since 2001 (Trip et al. 2019), this paper aims to contribute to the scholarly debate on religious radicalism in its current forms and to try to answer the question of why citizen initiatives using online media are important in this issue.

2. Empirical Evidence View—Religious Radicalism in the Slovak Republic

The current nature of radicalism naturally also affects religious minorities, for whom the Constitution of the Slovak Republic guarantees freedom of religion and belief and prohibits discrimination based on religion and belief; the state is not bound to any specific religion. Christianity is considered to be the religion of the majority in Slovakia. Christians in Slovakia practice their faith in everyday life, attend religious services, and engage in Christian activities. In Slovakia, there are kindergartens, primary schools, secondary church schools, and universities. Religion is taught as a compulsory subject in schools (with an alternative subject for non-religious children called ethical education). Christian churches publish their magazines and newspapers, there are church publishing houses in Slovakia, Catholic radio Lumen, and Catholic television Noe. Regular religious programs are broadcast on public television, and two Christian democratic parties are active in politics. At least one Catholic, Evangelical, or Orthodox church is built in every town and village in Slovakia.

The character of religious radicalism in Slovakia is currently determined by at least five trends, which, according to domestic experts, are more long-term:

(1) Slovakia is perceived by its inhabitants not only as a predominantly Christian country but "people tend to preserve this character of the country". This fact is declared by repeated comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research on the attitudes of the majority towards minorities, which was carried out in 2019, 2020, and 2021 by the Slovak Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research (Gallo Kriglerova 2021);

(2) Slovakia is still perceived by its citizens as "the country of the Slovaks". For this reason, many do not feel comfortable with people who are too culturally or religiously different (Gallo Kriglerova et al. 2021). Religious minorities in Slovakia represent significant minority groups. In Slovakia, with a population of 5.4 million, the number of members of the Muslim community is estimated at 6000 people. According to the census, the Jewish community has 2000 members, but the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic estimates the Jewish population at 5000 people (Medzinárodná Správa o Náboženskej Slobode 2022);

(3) Among Slovaks, Christians are "perceived significantly more positively than members of other religions". Almost a third of people would not even allow other religions in Slovakia at all. According to research, the reason for these attitudes is Slovaks' fear of radicalization and the change of established (i.e., Christian) rules and the imposition of new rules that come with other religions (Gallo Kriglerova 2021; Institute of Sociology SAV 2020).

According to experts, the increase in religiously motivated radicalization in Slovakia is further compounded by the marginal public understanding of inter-religious dialogue, public debate strongly fueled by various conspiracy theories, poor knowledge of history by young people, social insecurity and frustration of the population, negative statements by politicians, or hostile attitudes of people concerning members of other religions (Slovak National Center for Human Rights 2018; Piliarová and Lovašová 2018; Pétiová 2020; Šprocha et al. 2017; Šišková 1998; Tóthová and Šlosár 2018). The Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research also reminds us of the problems in Slovakia related to the ambiguous approach to the prevention of radicalization, the underestimation of the consequences of radicalization, the trivialization of prevention, and the lack of a long-term strategy focused on solutions (Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research 2022). These are factors that seem to have contributed to radicalism becoming part of the mainstream; let us add that it is

mainly about the radicalization of the middle current of society, which is dominant in Slovakia (Aktuality.sk 2010).

Considering what has just been mentioned, it is in a certain sense positive that the fourth long-term trend is:

(4) State-declared lower level of threat to members of religious groups compared to other countries (Slovak Government Office 2021; Gallo Kriglerova et al. 2017; and others). The Slovak Ministry of the Interior even confirms that it does not register "any explicitly extremist group that would threaten the health and lives of residents" in Slovakia (Press Agency SITA 2020). J. Charvát is more cautious in similar statements and reminds that extremism, for example, in the form of Nazi and fascist ideology or anti-Semitism, is visibly less present in the current public environment because it is replaced by more a more aggressive approach in the form of nationalism, anti-communism, anti-Zionism, and other "collectively held ideas, beliefs and attitudes" against ethnic or religious minorities or against immigrants (Charvát 2007).

We are convinced that the lower level of threat to members of religious groups in Slovakia calls for a deeper analysis of long-term confirmed religious radicalism. Above all, we realize that radicalism is a phenomenon that is becoming more and more established not only in society but also in the online space.

The online space is related to the fifth trend. J. Charvát draws attention to it. According to Charvát, in Slovakia and the neighboring Czech Republic, we can see the gradual demise of radical political parties, and yet the persistence of their ideologies on the Internet with the help of still-active Internet stands and websites (Charvát 2023). To state it briefly, the fifth attribute, which appears to be a long-term trend in Slovakia, is:

(5) Transfer and persistence of radical ideologies on the Internet. Radical attitudes and expressions do not disappear along with their political groupings and their representatives but transform their original ideology and references into new forms. Today, they are characterized not only by disinformation narratives but also by "absolute distrust of established political parties, aversion to the European Union and growing hatred of Western European liberalism and liberal democracy" (Charvát 2023). In connection with the transfer and persistence of radical ideologies on the Internet, in August 2022, the Slovak independent government regulator for the field of media— 'Rada pre mediálne služby' (Eng. the Council for Media Services)—acquired new functions related to the resolution of illegal and harmful content on social networks, including content defined by law as "extremist" (e.g., Holocaust denial and incitement to national, racial, religious, ethnic hatred, etc.) (Medzinárodná Správa o Náboženskej Slobode 2022). Already, in December 2022, 'the Council for Media Services' started administrative proceedings against the owner of the most popular Slovak disinformation portal 'Hlavné spravy' (Eng. Main News). The reason for this was the blog post "Jewish woman from Tel Aviv exposes the falsification of the Holocaust story", which stated that the Holocaust was a hoax and manipulation. The case has not yet been decided, but following an investigation by the council, the website operator has taken down the post in question from his blog; the original source, from which the Slovak disinformation portal also drew, is still accessible on the Internet today (Jonas 2022).

2.1. Radicalization Using Online Media—Reactions and Counter-Reactions

According to experts from various scientific fields and from various countries, including Slovakia, today, it is possible to speak of a general inclination of people towards more radical attitudes and actions (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018), which, according to research, is related, inter alia, for example, with changes in society. These are changes co-determining information technology and social networks (U.S. Department of Justice 2022; Akram and Nasar 2023; Zeiger and Gyte 2020), disinformation (Davies 2021) and conspiracy theories (Levinsson et al. 2021), the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Ackerman and Peterson 2020), anti-pandemic measures (Pfundmair and Mahr 2022), and other crisis events (e.g., the Great

Economic Crisis in 2008, the Greek crisis in 2009, the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the migration crisis in Europe since 2015, the Yellow Vests movement in France in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, etc.) (Učeň 2023; Dedryver and Knai 2021; Charvát 2023; and others). All the crises and other related events, including the growth of the disinformation scene, contributed to the erosion of pro-democratic attitudes. The global increase in radicalism was also a reaction to the events presented above (Charvát 2023; Braddock 2022; Martins 2023).

The Internet certainly contributed to the overall increase in radicalism in recent years, which, according to one of the leading representatives of the so-called philosophy of information, Luciano Floridi, has become a common denominator for environmental, anthropological, social, and interpretive forces that expand the possibilities of how we see and interpret the world. It was Floridi (2019) who was convinced that the Internet had triggered a "deep cultural revolution" (p. 7), which we can currently see, unfortunately, also in the use of the Internet for purposes supporting various forms of radicalization (Hamid and Ariza 2022; Zeiger and Gyte 2020; Ware 2023; Stroud et al. 2020; Whittaker 2022; Herath and Whittaker 2021; Reeve 2019; Baldauf et al. 2019; and so on).

We currently associate the online "revolution" (in its positive as well as negative connotations) and above all its main representative, which is "augmented reality" (Jurgenson 2012), with the unlimited participation of the audience in social events. Audience participation also includes opportunities for audience feedback on surrounding events, while it is true that the feedback of Internet users also becomes a "message" in the online space. Concerning radicalization using online media, on the one hand, we see the messages of modern "lone actors", who are representatives of today's "mass radicalization" (Morris 2022), and "are frequently their propaganda arm, sharing manifestos and live streams that further feed the ideology" (Ware 2023). Their posts are part of a fast-moving discussion, not intended to be liked or commented on but intended merely to further or intensify an ongoing conversation, and, among other things, they also contribute to the radicalization of the Internet space (Thorleifsson and Düker 2021). In the context of radicalization using online media, on the other hand, we also see messages that create positive initiatives in the online space. In our opinion, specific types of journalistic information based on investigative reporting, which are referred to as "citizen journalism", can also be included in the group of creators of messages that are also a counter-reaction to contemporary radicalism. Our goal is to present citizen journalism as one of the preventive tools that can effectively contribute to the protection of society from growing (including religious) radicalism and extremism.

2.2. Citizen Journalism as a Counter-Reaction to Religious Radicalism

The origin of the term "citizen journalism" remains uncertain. However, it did not exist before the invention of the Internet (Noor 2017). According to Gillmor (2006), one of the first investigators could have been American pamphleteers who sought social discussion even before the freedom of the press was enshrined in the American Constitution or, for example, the so-called "muckrakers" because at the end of the 19th century, they contributed to problematic revelations in society (they pointed out, for example, harsh working conditions), thereby helping to establish the standards and principles of investigative journalism (Gillmor 2006). Theorists generally agree that citizen journalism began to be discussed in connection with crises, natural disasters, and disasters with material damage and loss of life. It was the direct participants and witnesses—a kind of accidental citizen "journalists"—who documented the course and consequences of the events, thus being able to provide material that was currently beyond the reach of publishers and journalists (Noor 2017).

Contemporary citizen journalism essentially integrates the journalistic practices of traditional journalism (i.e., print, radio, television) but also implies certain quantitative and qualitative changes. According to sociologist Vojtěch Bednář, these fundamental changes are that citizen journalism takes place in real time (i.e., with minimal technological delay),

is interactive (counts on the interaction of other users), implies an immediate comparison with the competition (users can watch more media at the same time), and is hypertext or information is linked and available in one place. In our opinion, Bednář captured the essence of citizen journalism, because he underlined the fact that today's citizen journalism makes full use of the Internet, which already includes communication between recipients in its technological construction; the same applies to the web setting of all online media (Bednář 2011).

In recent years, we could see the use and involvement of citizen journalism via the Internet as a counter-reaction to radicalism and extremism. Among many examples, we will mention the participation of citizens in informing about the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. It was citizens "who had something to say and show" (Gillmor 2006, p. 10) who contributed to the information offered about the fall of the Twin Towers. Moreover, with the use of the Internet and new communication tools, co-authorship was made possible for citizens not only at the moment of the disaster but also much later. The contribution of lay journalists was also highly appreciated in crises, such as the explosion in the London subway in 2005 or the emergency landing of a plane on the Hudson River.

The concept of citizen journalism resonated in the Slovak environment in connection with the events that were directly related to the cold-blooded murder of the young investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018. Civic activism in the investigation into the murder of the journalist and his fiancée represented a significant element in social and political development. The murder sparked widespread public uproar and anger across the country, with civic activists driving the response to the tragic incident. The civil movement culminated in massive public protests held in various locations across the country. Participants in these protests emphasized the importance of a fair investigation into the murder and transparency in the political and media environment. The movement "For a decent Slovakia" (Press Agency SITA 2018) became a symbol of civic activism and united people who opposed corruption and clientelism in politics and the media. It is civil activists who have become important partners for journalists and investigative media in uncovering corruption and political scandals.

Citizen journalism can be described as an initiative, symbolizing both the public interest and the interest of the media. There is a fairly broad group of those who can be classified under the term "citizen journalism". Citizen journalists can be (1) "random passersby"—witnesses to an event—with elements of religious radicalism. On the other hand, it can also be (2) people from the ranks of teachers, school psychologists, special counsellors, and others who stand on the "front line" when working with young people and see the pitfalls and initial manifestations of religious radicalism in their work every day. This group can talk about their observations further (for example, using online media), which can be a welcome solution to the "lack of materials, methodologies, or programs from which others could draw" (Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research 2022, p. 19). Space for citizen journalists to publish their stories and positions is also provided by (3) independent organizations as well as (4) independent media and online platforms. In addition, (5) global organizations (e.g., Global Voices or the Radicalization Awareness Network) support citizen journalists and facilitate the sharing of their stories and reports internationally. Let us add that in all the cases mentioned above, these are people who react to the issue of religious radicalism proactively, not reactively.

3. Methodology

In the context of the conviction about the importance and need of citizen journalism and in connection with the events that asked about the causes of religious radicalism, this study presents its own research, which focuses on (a) the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today and represents (b) optimal possibilities for civic initiatives using online media that can adequately respond to radicalism, as a "complex and multifactorial process, often leading to extremism" (Cox et al. 2021, p. 35).

3.1. Theoretical Basis of Research

The practical part of the study, i.e., own research, is based on the available literature and the wealth of historical and contemporary studies of this issue as well as on the own study of the topic and personal interest in it, which lasts several years.

Own research was preceded by the so-called heuristic phase, which consists of gathering and studying the literature and the subsequent analysis and criticism of existing theories. The study of religious radicalism in the context of our country and Eastern European culture meant the study of Slovakia as a representative of the Eastern European post-communist country, which experienced "the removal of religiosity from the life of the population by force". This happened, according to sociologist and expert on the national identity of Slovaks, J. Bunčák, with the use of religious radicalism, which ensured (a) total exclusion of the church from public life, (b) restriction of teaching religion in schools, (c) disruption of the organizational structure of the church, (d) introduction of repressive measures aimed at eliminating the influence of the church, and (e) exclusion of the church from the mindset of individuals through ideology (Bunčák 2001). According to M. Tižik, a sociologist and expert on manifestations of radicalism in society, a radical step was also the enshrining of the ideology of Marxism in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic in 1960 (Tížik 2011), which lasted in Slovakia until the fall of communist totality in 1989 when there was first freedom of religion and religious speeches.

In grasping the origins of the issue of religious radicalism in the context of Slovakia, several comprehensive studies by Slovak and Czech experts on this issue were of great help to us, namely L. Grešková, J. Lenč, G. Pirický, A. Minarovič, M. Tonková, K. Hradská, Y. A. Jelínek, P. Mešťan, R. Vago, and others. Equally significant were several reports by foreign journalists and analyses by foreign theoreticians and experts, focusing on manifestations of religious violence in the world; we will mention S. Trifkovič, an American analyst and expert on Islam; moreover, R. Chazan, who is a professor and winner of the National Jewish Book Award for American Jewish History, or Z. Karabell, analyst of social trends and Harvard professor of history and history of the Middle East and others.

An important piece of the theoretical part and the subsequent research was also the knowledge of the specific activities of individual organizations and institutions that are dedicated to preventive measures on the issue of religious radicalism in Slovakia and the world. For example, the work "Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives" by S. Allan and E. Thorsen, as well as several research works by J. Ware, was useful in grasping the starting points of the issue of optimal civic solutions that would adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism with the use of online media, in addition to C. Thorleifsson, J. Düker, D. Gillmor, D. R. Noor, and others.

Thanks to the experts presented above, it was possible to define the significant features of contemporary religious radicalism, as we can see in a small country in the middle of Europe, i.e., Slovakia. Religious radicalism here is characterized by disrespect or denial of the rights of others and the potential to commit hate crimes. The basic manifestations of religious radicalism in Slovakia include:

(1) presentation of prejudices;
(2) publicly presented intolerant attitudes;
(3) verbal (insulting, intolerant, hateful) attacks (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic n.d.a).

We can see that these are primarily manifestations that are characterized by a lower degree of hateful motivation, a lower intensity of violence and hatred, or a lower security risk, as can be seen in the manifestations of so-called religious extremism, which, according to experts, is already characterized by "illegal or socially dangerous actions, destruction and manifestations that can be defined as a social threat" (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic n.d.a, p. 49).

Although the nature and manifestations of religious extremism remain beyond our research interest, we consider it important to recall their consequences. In other words, while we talk about the need for prevention in the case of manifestations of religious

radicalism, we are already talking about repression in the case of manifestations of religious extremism. Preventive mechanisms in the context of religious radicalism are therefore important to protect society from extremism and violence linked to religious belief. They include, for example, (a) education and awareness programs, (b) social integration and programs focusing on the involvement of religious minorities in important social and religious activities, (c) monitoring online content that incites religious radicalism, (d) monitoring and surveillance of individuals with radical tendencies, (e) targeted cooperation of state-registered religions with minority religious communities, (f) support of youth programs and initiatives aimed at developing the skills and interests of the youth to weaken potential radicalization tendencies, etc. We intend to present the character and possibilities of citizen journalism as another, in our opinion, still underappreciated possibility of fighting against contemporary religious radicalism. We are convinced that the activity of "people's journalists" can be a catalyst for public debate that takes place on social media, blogs, and independent journalistic platforms but also a necessary voice calling for accountability and transparency of solutions concerning religious radicalism today.

3.2. Motivation of Research

According to several Slovak experts, Slovakia has long been characterized by a lower level of threat to members of religious groups (Slovak Government Office 2021; Gallo Kriglerova et al. 2017; and others). The concept of the fight against radicalization and extremism until 2024, which is "the basic document defining the priorities of the Slovak Republic in the area of prevention and fight against radicalization, extremism and the associated anti-social activities that threaten the foundations of the democratic legal state" (Slovak Government Office 2021, p. 3) but recalls "an alarming increase in radicalization, regardless of the religious or political ideology behind it", both on a Slovak and pan-European scale (Press Agency SITA 2020). The motivation for our research was a more narrowly focused and deeper understanding of the specific causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today. Parallel to the research findings, we will try to present the possibilities and potentially positive reactions of citizen journalism to religious radicalism.

3.3. Research Design

In our study, the qualitative sociological method of a focus group proved to be a suitable research method for presenting the nature and causes of religious radicalism. The partner of the focus group research method was the sociocultural approach, as it perceives religion as a part of human society and includes both the dominant culture, as well as religious subcultures (Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others) and countercultures (radicals, extremists), while not forgetting artistic, folk, or mass culture (Komorovský 1997; Paden 2002). The socio-cultural approach, which understands religion as a "universal socio-cultural phenomenon" (Kardis 2013, p. 9), allowed us to supplement the context of the investigated events.

3.4. Research Objectives

In compiling the research design, we took into account several important questions that were directly related to the studied literature, corresponded to our interest in the issue, and resulted from experience during past pedagogical and media practice. Research objectives are characterized by an attempt to answer several adequate questions. These were determined in three relational levels:

(1) Public attitudes toward religious minorities and prejudices
    - Can the attitude towards one's religion be related to the attitude towards believers of other religions?
    - How can the character of a "healthy society" be defined in the context of religious radicalism?
    - What are the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today?

(2) Public attitudes towards religious minorities and media

- What attitudes towards religious minorities do we see in media coverage in Slovakia today?
- What reactions to radicalism directed at religious minorities do we see in the current media in Slovakia?
- What aspects should the media focus on when discussing radicalism related to religious minorities?

(3) Public attitudes towards religious minorities and citizen journalism
- What is the role of citizen journalism in the fight against religious radicalism?
- What are the risks of applying citizen journalism in contexts of religious radicalism?
- What are the optimal options for citizen journalism that would adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism using online media?

A series of questions present in the focus group (n = 7) should lead us to achieve the first and second research objectives. The first was determined as follows:

C1. *Identification of the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today.*

The second research objective was set as follows:

C2. *Presentation of the optimal possibilities of citizen journalism, which would adequately respond to religious radicalism today with the use of online media.*

Based on two main objectives, two research questions were identified:

(Q1). *What are the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today?*

(Q2). *What are the optimal options for citizen journalism that would adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism using online media?*

3.5. Research Method

The focus group sociological research method is considered a method with the potential to effectively contribute to the search for solutions to complex problems. Its goal is to generate ideas that the group members consider the most suitable for solving the given problem. The added value of the method is not only obtaining an idea but also one's interpretation from the point of view of the respondents (Sorice 2007, p. 122). Individual ideas and interpretations are collected and subsequently become new stimuli for discussion until the research participants agree, i.e., respondents reach shared or unified positions. A real advantage of group research is that the researcher can collect data through the mutual interaction of the participants (Burton and Jirák 2008; Piest 2009). With the use of in-depth collective interviews, there is a connection of research questions, i.e., a connection of variables, which are subsequently brought into relation in the group, while new categories of information are created (i.e., the principle of deduction). However, during the implementation, it is necessary to take care to avoid the assertion of strong personalities with persuasive abilities and tendencies.

Group interviews with experts were designed to fulfil the first research objective and answer the first research question. The partial questions of the group interview, as we describe them above in the text, led the respondents to identify the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today (C1). The second part of qualitative research using the focus group aimed to identify the possibilities of citizen journalism as an effective tool to support the fight against religious radicalism (C2). The partial questions of the group interview, as we describe them above in the text, were set in such a way as to guide the researcher and the group of experts to answer the second research question. The findings in the group were subsequently supplemented with their knowledge, acquired during the heuristic phase that preceded the research.

3.6. Research Progress

The research had three research phases:

Phase 1: Setting the research methodology.

Phase 2: The first (test) research was intended to fine-tune the logistical details of the research, introduce the research procedure and research principles, etc. The respondents were familiar with the definition of religious radicalism, with examples of domestic and foreign religious radicalism, as well as with related available documents on the topic of intolerance and discrimination against religious minorities in Europe. Respondents were also presented with a set of research questions on which they could comment. The implementation of the focus group method took place in a trial form in May 2023, and the time limit for it was 1 h and 30 min. The group included 7 people. Table 1 shows the multi-criteria selection of group members.

Table 1. Characteristics of focus group members.

Number of Respondents: 7		
Gender:	**4 Men**	**3 Women**
Field of work	Sociology, non-governmental sector, media, police	Sociology, psychology, education
Religious point of view:	2 believers, 2 non-believers	1 believer, 2 non-believers

(Source: own processing).

Phase 3: The main part of the research represented the implementation of the focus group method. Its implementation took place in October 2023, and the time limit for it was 1 h and 30 min. An audio recording was made of the meeting, which was subsequently transcribed into a recording sheet. The individual transcripts then served as a basis for further analysis. As part of the analysis, all interviews were anonymized, so in the text we only refer to the respondents' field of activity. The research group included the same seven people as in the test research, i.e., in the research took part the same seven experts previously instructed and thoroughly familiar with the issue; see Table 1.

4. Results

The qualitative sociological method of the focus group has proven itself in the research part. With its use, we managed to answer all sub-questions in the specified time and thus answer the first and second research questions. The fact that the focus group helped to anchor the research findings in a wider context also proved to be an advantage of the chosen method, i.e., in the group, it was possible to propose specific solutions in the context of Slovakia as well as in a wider context. Likewise, for this reason, the research method used led to the opening of new research horizons and the raising of new questions with the potential for follow-up research.

4.1. The Most Frequent Causes of Religious Radicalism in Slovakia Today (O1)

The research group identified (i.e., described and analyzed) the variables that express the most common causes of religious radicalism today. For a better understanding of the identified variables, seven experts proceeded to express them in two meaningful contrasts.

- Values of democracy—-Deviation from the values of democracy and leaning towards extremism: The difference between the application of the values of democracy and their deviation lies in the approach to democratic principles and institutions. In the case of the application of democracy, the values of freedom, equality, and the rights of citizens are respected, with an emphasis on the principles of free elections and public debate. On the contrary, the deviation from these values means the restriction of freedom of expression, the concentration of power, and the violation of human rights, which can lead to the growth of radicalism in society. "When it comes to the application of religious values, it includes respect for religious freedom, tolerance and coexistence of different faiths, as in democratic societies, such as Slovakia, freedom of religion and expression of faith is ensured for all citizens" (non-governmental sector). On the contrary, the deviation from democratic values can be the cause of the emergence and

growth of religious radicalism. "We currently see how religious radicalism deviates from democratic values, for example, in the form of discriminatory expressions, but also in the form of verbal violence against those who profess a different faith, such as the faith of Christians" (sociology). According to experts, these manifestations border on religious extremism, which is no stranger to, for example, Nazi ideology or open anti-Semitism.

Verbally expressed radicalism toward religious minorities causes conflicts "even in the case of such small groups as Muslims or Jews in Slovakia" (psychology). Respondents agree that "not much is said about these conflicts and the media is only marginally interested". It is therefore important, even with the use of the media, to always condemn aggressive verbal attacks and, on the contrary, to support religious tolerance and freedom of religion within the framework of democratic values. "This is the way to prevent not only radicalism but also violent conflicts, although they may seem unlikely" (media). Deviation from the values of democracy and leaning towards extremes concerning democracy—if little is said about it in society—is because it is also a significant cause of religious radicalization (all respondents).

- Healthy radicalization as a part of youth growth—-unhealthy radicalization: Healthy radicalization is a process where young people devote their energy and enthusiasm to the transformation of society to achieve positive changes (greater tolerance in schools, participation in social projects, respect for others, etc.). "This includes active civic interest and civic involvement, but also acknowledging the rights of others or demanding change in favour of minorities or otherwise disadvantaged groups" (psychology). According to the respondents, "it is therefore important to support processes that allow young people to express their opinions and at the same time teach them the values of tolerance and respect for others" (all respondents).

In the context of further reflections on healthy radicalization, another respondent states: "At the same time, it is necessary to realize that a certain form of radicalization is also related to the development period. Above all, today's youth is the bearer of manifestations of the search for oneself and the formation of one's identity (young people are looking for their place in society, they are looking for social groups in which their need for acceptance and recognition would be fulfilled, etc.). So, it is a relatively normal manifestation of adolescence" (education). As can be seen, healthy radicalization in a certain sense belongs to the development of the individual and, according to the respondents, is a process that stimulates constructive steps. On the contrary, unhealthy radicalization poses a threat to social peace and stability because it carries elements of violation of basic democratic values and rights. "Unhealthy radicalization refers to ideologically motivated change that is selfish and unrelated to the development of the individual. It is characterized by its disregard for the rights and freedoms of other individuals or groups" (police). This kind of radicalization can lead to extreme views, violence, discrimination, xenophobia, and radicalism; the latter more than once grows into extremism.

- Social participation—-social exclusion: Social participation is a key prerequisite for an active and engaged life in society. In the social context, it is related to social life but also to the individual's interest in society, the development of one's own culture, the direction of the religious community, etc. In the framework of religiously motivated radicalism, "social participation is a constructive way of expressing one's religious affiliation and belief and, in a certain sense, also engaging in public discussions and activities related to one's religious affiliation and belief" (sociology). If there is a positive perception of a religious minority by the majority of the population, it might lead the members of this minority to participate in peaceful demonstrations, political movements, or charitable organizations, which co-determine the character of the entire society. Conversely, "social exclusion in the context of religiously motivated radicalism means that individuals or groups become isolated from society, feel overlooked and discriminated against, leading to an increase in discontent" (all respondents).

The discussion in the focus group moves on with the opinion that "a parallel phenomenon of social isolation can be the effort to "belong somewhere" and therefore be willing to belong to more radical groups that profess more extreme and ideologically coloured groups" (police). In addition, since "socially excluded individuals lose the motivation to engage in dialogue with the rejecting majority or resolve conflicts within a democratic framework, an environment is created that agrees with radicalization and violence" (police, sociology). This is also why "supporting an inclusive social environment where individuals can freely express themselves and engage is the primary key to preventing religiously motivated radicalization" (all respondents).

- Success and quality of life—-lack of opportunity, economic deprivation: The distinction between success versus lack of opportunity is extremely important concerning religiously motivated radicalism. Success includes aspects such as economic stability, decent employment, appreciation, general social well-being, etc. These factors have a direct impact on individual satisfaction. On the contrary, the lack of opportunities is often associated with poverty, unemployment, limited access to education and health care, etc. These factors can lead to the search for alternative ways to achieve a better life.

Experts from the focus group also see a similar contrast between the quality of life and economic deprivation, which represent seemingly interconnected yet content-different aspects that affect the overall life of individuals and society. Quality of life includes various factors that affect the well-being of individuals, including physical and mental health, access to health care, education, cultural opportunities, etc. Economic scarcity, on the other hand, represents limitations to these possibilities and resources and is also manifested at the border, i.e., as the inability to meet basic needs such as food or housing. "Although economic deprivation does not always mean a low quality of life, it usually plays a significant role in determining the availability of basic needs and opportunities that ultimately affect the quality of life of individuals and communities" (sociology). In addition, although the overall quality of life increases in the long term, when comparing oneself with others (for example, through social networks), we may see our own life as low quality, which can again contribute to an increase in internal dissatisfaction and a potential inclination to radical solutions (police).

Radical groups can take advantage of the situation and reach out to vulnerable individuals, promising them change and personal meaning or improvement in their situation. "Above all, economic shortages can very quickly connect radical groups with economically strong groups of Jews; in Slovakia, the verbal attacks of radicals also contain stereotypical expressions from the past, which resemble the image of greedy Jews who get rich at the expense of Slovaks" (sociology, psychology, media). However, religiously motivated radicalism is also heard in connection with Muslims, who are representatives of the upper social class in Slovakia. "Most Muslims live in the biggest cities in Slovakia. They are doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs, and, of course, students. There are also numerous families of cooks and waiters in Arab kebab shops and pastry shops, which are also owned by Muslims" (sociology). Let us add that in the context of the quality of life of Muslims, there are also "derogatory statements in connection with the practice of faith or the teaching of the Koran".

- Offline existence and spending of free time—-online existence and spending of free time: Spending free time offline and online teaches us to interact with our surroundings differently. In the offline world, people tend to communicate face-to-face with family and friends. These are interactions that also bring constructive discussions and learning. However, in the context of religiously motivated radicalism, these discussions "at the same time led to the 'inheritance' of stereotypes and prejudices, which contributes to xenophobia" (sociology). Offline debates "in the same room" can therefore also be limited to pre-existing ideological bubbles created by the same people, i.e., family members or friends. Finally, the "traditional ways of obtaining

information in these close groups" are also limiting, which can also contribute to closedness to the diversity of opinions and, secondarily, to religious radicalization (non-governmental sector).

Online existence and activities in social networks provide individuals with access to a wide range of information and therefore diverse opinions. Therefore, raising awareness and knowledge thanks to the Internet is evaluated positively. On the other hand, this can also open the door to religiously motivated radicalism. Focus group members consider the following factors to be significant, which contribute to the radicalization of an individual in the online space: (a) the online space enables a quick path to radical content; (b) due to the amount of information and audience overload, we can talk about user disorientation (sociologist); (c) users tend to search for information that confirms what they already think, and thus 'information bubbles' arise; (d) users' own opinions are also supported by algorithms, etc. (all respondents). Focus group respondents therefore agree that the impact of radicalism on an individual in the online space is "an important phenomenon that is poorly documented, and yet key in the fight against religiously motivated radicalism" (all respondents).

- Media literacy and critical thinking—-lack of media literacy and critical thinking, misinformation: Media literacy refers to the ability to recognize, analyze, and interpret information from the media, including distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources. Critical thinking involves the ability to examine information with an emphasis on its plausibility, consistency, and context. In both cases, we can talk about key aspects necessary for proper and effective navigation in the information environment.

In the case of religiously motivated radicalism, media literacy and critical thinking are key to recognizing potentially radical views and misinformation that may be disseminated to contribute to radicalism. People with a lack of media literacy and critical thinking are more prone to accept opinions without critical evaluation, making them vulnerable to religiously motivated radicalism. "The reverse is also true, media literacy and critical thinking can help individuals recognize manipulative tactics and distinguish between real facts and lies, thereby better defending themselves against both radicalism and disinformation that supports this radicalism" (non-governmental sector, media).

The respondents agree that the lack of media literacy and critical thinking in Slovakia also contribute to the "insufficient determination of schools in the issue of preventive activities" (non-governmental sector). A certain Slovakian specificity is the fact that even if schools want to focus on the topic of radicalization prevention, they do not have the professional and personnel capacities to do so; the competent (teachers, professional employees, and others) often do not know how to grasp the topic and how to include the issue of radicalization and extremism in education" (education). Respondents agree that this is a challenge that the state must listen to. "The state needs to make a clear commitment to this topic, define goals, provide methodical guidance and financial support for schools and individuals who will devote themselves to the teaching of media literacy and critical thinking in the long term" (all respondents).

- Healthy society—-polarization of society, loss of authority, erosion of rules: Respondents tried to define the term "healthy society" in the context of religious radicalism. They defined this term as a society that "maintains a balance between religious freedom and collective security and prosperity, proclaims and maintains respect and tolerance for different religious groups and their beliefs, and sees these views as part of public debate without violence and discrimination" (all respondents). In addition, there is also the opinion that society should always approach its ideal. Such an idea of a healthy society has "well-functioning institutions that monitor and respond to cases of radicalization, actively work to prevent religious radicalism and build an inclusive environment that rejects radicalism and violence in all its forms" (police). A healthy society therefore "not only protects citizens from religious radicalism but also

actively supports preventive measures and freedom of religion and opinion, which it understands as part of the individual rights of citizens" (sociology).

According to experts, three factors can weaken a healthy society and increase its vulnerability to religiously motivated radicalism: polarization of society, loss of authority, and erosion of rules. The polarization of society means the division of society into conflicting groups with increasingly extreme views, which also creates the ground for radicalism directed against religious groups. Loss of authority leads to society's inability to effectively resolve conflicts and focus on building healthy values and opinions. Erosion of rules, as the third important factor that increases the vulnerability of society to radicalism, represents a gradual but certain reduction of respect for the legal and ethical norms that until then applied in society and determined its character. Respondents agreed that in the context of religiously motivated radicalism, "the three factors mentioned above are dangerous because they can weaken the mechanisms that would otherwise prevent the growth of this form of radicalism" (all respondents).

- Correct information about crises related to religions—-incorrect information: Focus group members agree that "correct information about crises related to religions and/or believers is important for maintaining the stability of society and also contributes to the mitigation of religiously motivated radicalism. "This is information that should primarily be true and based on objective and accurate data about believers, religious practices and other cultural aspects that are relevant to a given religion or situation" (media). At the same time, correct information should not only be impartial but also based on reliable sources "to avoid increasing tension or creating false ideas about believers or their beliefs, motives, etc". (police).

On the contrary, incorrect information about crises related to religions can significantly contribute to religiously motivated radicalism, as the publication of unverified or biased information can cause fear, hatred, and other misunderstandings between different religious groups. "Such information can increase the risk that individuals or groups become more susceptible to radicalization in a religious context, as they may feel that their religion is being denigrated or even threatened" (all respondents).

4.2. Optimal Options for Citizen Journalism, Which Would Adequately Respond to Contemporary Religious Radicalism Using Online Media (O2)

In the next part, we will talk about the possibilities of citizen journalism as a tool for the prevention of religious radicalism. In other words, we are looking for an answer to the question of why active individuals who use online media are important in the prevention of religious radicalism. In the following section, we present the common opinions of experts (n = 7) in our research sample, i.e., the opinions of all respondents.

Speaking about the prevention of religious radicalism, the surveyed experts see the following possibilities of citizen journalism as important:

(a) Citizen journalists carry out rapid recording and documentation of cases of religious intolerance, which can contribute to rapid public discussion and the detection of cases with the character of religious radicalism.

(b) Citizen journalists have better access to local topics, including a perspective that can be closer to the real experiences of believers in a specific place. Thus, they can contribute more deeply to the understanding of the local problems of believers.

(c) Citizen journalists can create authentic and at the same time correct information not only about actual events but also about potential pitfalls faced by believers because of their religious affiliation.

(d) The activity of citizen journalists through online media can contribute to raising awareness of religious radicalism and religious intolerance, and thus citizen journalism also contributes to public participation in other civic initiatives aimed at preventing and combatting religious radicalism.

(e)   Citizen journalism, as an additional or even parallel source of information, complements traditional media, thereby contributing not only to the overall understanding of the differences between religions but also to solving the problem of religious radicalism in society. In the case of specific cases of religious radicalism, the contributions of "random passersby" are exclusive material, as serious media do not manage to be personally present at the scene of the event at the given moment or manage to do so only a little later.

(f)   Citizen journalism is a certain representative of civic solutions and as such cannot only present facts based on personal experiences and own observations or even the opinions of the citizen—the author of a journalistic contribution, but also bring into the media world the pure, unfiltered subjectivity of citizens, which contrasts with the desired objectivity and the impartiality required of professional reporters.

(g)   Citizen journalists can also use online media to spread positive news about various religious groups, including spreading information about their cooperation, organizing social activities, information about campaigns aimed at understanding and mutual respect, etc. Similarly, citizen journalism can be a defender of religious groups in the online space, responding to various forms of verbal hatred.

According to the respondents, citizen journalism is one of the good options to "react to the current media stereotyping", which can be seen concerning Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Slovak media. According to respondents, an example of media stereotyping of Jews is the targeted narrowing of Slovak–Jewish relations to the war years 1938–1944 instead of presenting events in their long-term historical context, when relations between Slovaks and Jews were fine. There are also frequent media images of tombstones, desecrated swastikas, or images of dilapidated and abandoned synagogues, all of which give the impression that no one cares about these places anymore and they are doomed. According to the respondents, we see radicalism in the attitude towards Jews, especially in the area of online media. Discussions on social media are full of 'anti-Semitism', which denies the equal dignity of all races and peoples, but equally unacceptable is 'anti-Judaism', which manifests as distrust and hostility towards the Jewish people. Thirdly, online speeches in Slovak internet discussions are also accompanied by 'anti-Zionism', i.e., a mixture of statements that represent a crude and often violent expression of a systematic hostile attitude towards Israel.

Concerning the Christian Church, we occasionally see a sharp and even satirical tone in the media in Slovakia, which has a strong emotional color. Caricature depictions of church representatives or mockery of publicly known believers are no exception; an example is the public mockery and insults of Sima Martausová, who became the target of attack and ridicule by opinion-forming media journalists because of her Christian faith; journalists published a "slander on Sima Martausová" on their Twitter profile and identified Christianity as the reason why the singer's work is uncreative, slobbery, and kitsch (Magušin 2021).

Relating to Muslims, it is possible to see, for example, a frequent and often unnecessary escalation of negative emotions in the media space in Slovakia. According to the respondents, this happens primarily because it demonstrably increases the readership of the media, i.e., profit from sales. According to focus group respondents, the cultural background or religious tradition of believers in Islam is not often mentioned. On the contrary, believers are most often presented as foreigners, especially in online discussions; moreover, the accentuated difference presents them both covertly and openly as a potential threat.

5. Discussion

The actual research was conducted using the qualitative focus group method, which can also be characterized as a group interview. The goal of this method was to obtain the opinions and attitudes of the group members on the investigated issue. The focus group represented a qualitative method based on in-depth collective interviews conducted by a person well versed in the given issue. In compiling the research design, the authors of

the research took into account several important questions that were directly related to the studied literature, corresponded to their long-term interest in the issue, and resulted from experience during pedagogical and media practice.

The first research part aimed to identify the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today (O1). For a better understanding of the identified variables, the respondents proceeded to express the variables in two opposites of meaning. According to experts, the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia at present are manifested as a result of the following phenomena (8): (a) deviation from the values of democracy and leaning towards extremes in relation to democracy (instead of applying and respecting the values of democracy); (b) unhealthy radicalization (instead of healthy radicalization, which is considered part of healthy youth development); (c) social exclusion (instead of social participation); (d) lack of opportunities and economic deprivation (instead of success and quality of life); (e) online existence and spending time on social networks (instead of offline leisure); (f) lack of media literacy and critical thinking, presence of misinformation (instead of media literacy and critical thinking); (g) polarization of society, loss of authority, and erosion of rules (instead of a healthy society without these phenomena); (h) incorrect information (instead of correct information about crisis situations related to religions).

Through the focus group, the common opinion of experts on solving the problem of radicalization in the context of the contradictions outlined above is heard. According to the respondents, it "consists of strengthening economic stability, supporting education, and creating opportunities for a better life". According to the respondents, an ideal is the effort to solve economic and social inequalities among citizens, "because poverty and poor living standards are evil masters". According to the respondents, mitigating these aspects in society can contribute to the prevention of radical attitudes, including religiously motivated radicalism. "Of course, it is an ideal that will probably never be fully fulfilled, but that must not prevent us from striving for it and at least getting closer to it. It certainly contributes to long-term sustainable peace and stability in society", respondents added.

In the context of research findings, we recall the observation of J. Charvát, who already fifteen years ago in his monograph states that extremism in the form of Nazi and fascist ideology or anti-Semitism seems to disappear from the public environment but is replaced by a more aggressive form of nationalism, anti-communism, anti-Zionism, and by other "collectively maintained ideas, beliefs and attitudes" against an ethnic or religious minority or immigrants (Charvát 2007, p. 15). This is what the experts surveyed by us state today. The research group agrees that it is precisely religious radicalism that deviates from democratic values and presents ideas of Nazi ideology or open anti-Semitism in the form of discriminatory expressions and verbal violence. Although the state declares "a lower level of extremism (including religious extremism), and the resulting violence against persons of other faiths" (Slovak Government Office 2021) and the ministry in another report talks about "the absence of an extremist group that would threaten the health and lives of the inhabitants" (Press Agency SITA 2020), it seems that these are not phenomena that would reduce contemporary radicalism. In short, based on our research, it appears that the low presence of extremism declared by the state is accompanied by a growing tendency of radical manifestations, which nowadays often mask the original extremist views. In addition, it can be stated that extremism in Slovakia manifests itself in the process of verbal radicalization (possibly also in the radicalization of attitudes) more than in concrete extremist acts. The research findings call for the activation of public interest, including greater media interest.

In this context, it is imperative to emphasize that the research findings within O1 extend beyond the confines of Slovakia and bear relevance to various European countries. The confirmation of our findings in several European countries substantiates their applicability on a broader scale. The deliberate comparative analysis with regions or countries contending with analogous challenges of religious radicalization serves the purpose of expanding the research's overarching scope.

When discussing (a) deviation from democratic values, we emphasized the significance of upholding democratic principles such as freedom and equality. We cautioned against deviation leading to restrictions on freedom, concentration of power, and violations of human rights. The research findings address the correlation between deviation from democratic values and the proliferation of religious radicalism. Similar concerns are highlighted by Pickel and Pickel (2023), who discuss Eastern European countries. They note a considerable openness towards alternative anti-democratic systems in these countries, leading to an increase in prejudices. According to their observations, socially engaged believers tend to support democracy, while fundamentalists selectively align themselves with anti-democratic beliefs (p. 157). This selective affinity for anti-democratic beliefs is identified as one of the prerequisites for the rise of radicalism.

The research findings further validate the inverse relationship between (b) healthy and unhealthy radicalization. Healthy radicalization is characterized as positive engagement in societal transformation, while unhealthy radicalization is defined as selfish, ideologically motivated change that poses threats to democratic values. Preventing extremist radicalization aligns with key priorities in EU security policy, as articulated in the recent 'Analysis and trends in the development of radicalization and extremism in the Slovak Republic and the European Union' (Department of the Office of the Minister of Interior of the Slovak Republic 2020). Similarly, the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy outlines five common priorities for a safer, and we can say healthier, Europe. Among these priorities is a commitment to addressing violent forms of radicalism and extremism within society (Council of the European Union 2016).

The prevailing causes of religious radicalism in present-day Slovakia underscore the distinction between (c) social participation and exclusion. Focus group members highlight the constructive role of social participation in expressing religious affiliation and caution that social exclusion can result in feelings of isolation and discontent, fostering religious radicalization. This observation aligns with B. Sparke's analysis, where the author examines religious and social motivators, concluding that while religion can contribute to radicalization, the primary source lies in belonging to specific social groups and the psychological influences within these groups (Sparke 2019). The critical importance of intra- and intergroup processes is further discussed in M. Verkuyten (2018)'s study. Conversely, the benefits of social cohesion, considered a pivotal element of a comprehensive counter-radicalism policy, are described by scholars such as Grossman and Tahiri (2015), S. Fataliyeva (2016), and S. W. Hayes (2017) as part of "soft" solutions.

According to experts in the focus group, contemporary causes of religious radicalism also stem from (d) lack of opportunity and economic deprivation. We draw a connection between success, economic stability, and well-being, positing that these factors lower susceptibility to radicalization. Moreover, we underscore the impact of economic deprivation and social comparisons on vulnerability to radical solutions. Noteworthy insights in this context are provided by B.-V. Ikejiaku, who explores the relationship between poverty, conflict, and development (Ikejiaku 2009). Additionally, S. Ozer and P. Bertelsen draw attention to the development of various life skills, including economic skills, as a means of preventing and countering radicalization (Ozer and Bertelsen 2019).

Moreover, (e) offline and online existence constitutes another research finding that highlights the constraints of offline discussions in reinforcing existing prejudices. Simultaneously, it recognizes the potential for online spaces to disseminate radical content and contribute to user disorientation. These findings align with the consensus among many experts over an extended period (Malina 2009; Hinton 2000; Hahn and Mannová 2007; and so on).

Regarding the increasing scientific evidence on relevant aspects for radicalization or deradicalization processes, such as cognitive rigidity and conspiracy beliefs, experts within our research emphasize the significance of (f) media literacy and critical thinking in the context of religiously motivated radicalism. Both are regarded as crucial for recognizing potentially radical views and countering misinformation that may contribute to radicalism.

Therefore, we not only highlight the importance of media literacy and critical thinking in identifying and addressing radical views but also underscore that the absence of these skills can be considered a factor contributing to vulnerability and the acceptance of radical opinions. These research findings align with the views of Grizzle and Tornero (2016) or I. Jugl (2022).

Focus group members acknowledge the inherent difficulty in identifying individuals susceptible to radicalization and subsequent attraction to extremist behavior. Conversely, experts discern broader societal phenomena, such as (g) the polarization of society, loss of authority, and erosion of rules, as being incompatible with the principles of a tolerant society. These phenomena run counter to values such as religious freedom, security, respect, and tolerance. Empirical research underscores that these identified factors not only weaken the fabric of a society but also heighten its susceptibility to radicalism. This scholarly perspective resonates with the findings of Bjornsgaard and Dukić (2023), who not only corroborate the significance of these societal factors but also pinpoint the media, particularly alternative media, as a contemporary catalyst that reinforces polarization, especially "among those already polarized" (p. 6). The observed media influence is posited to play a consequential role in the furtherance of radicalization towards extremism.

The final relationship within the most frequent causes of religious radicalism in Slovakia today concerns the link between (h) correct information about crises related to religions and incorrect information. Research findings underscore the importance of accurate and objective information for maintaining societal stability. Conversely, they caution against the negative impact of incorrect information, which can contribute to fear, hatred, and misunderstandings, thereby fostering religious radicalism. Similar conclusions can be found in several other research studies (Demant and De Graaf 2010; Smith et al. 2018; and so on).

Our research findings manifest a discernible alignment with comparable outcomes observed in various European countries. The deliberate comparative analysis, extended beyond regional confines, sought to augment the research's comprehensive scope. By juxtaposing results with analogous studies conducted in diverse regions contending with analogous challenges of religious radicalization, our intention was to enrich the study with a more nuanced understanding. This methodological approach further facilitated the integration of profound cultural considerations, affording a heightened insight into specific attitudes towards religious minorities".

The context of the second research part determined the presentation of the Internet and online media as key tools for the activities of citizen journalists. Research findings underscore the importance of online media. Among other things, for example, thanks to the dissemination of information about religions, which, in society, helps shape the public view of different religious groups and also their beliefs (i.e., doctrines) and practices (i.e., religious practice). They are online media that provide platforms for "people's journalists" to learn about important religious events, talk about issues with a moral dimension, or lead discussions that influence societal decisions in the context of religions. At the same time, online platforms provide a space in which it is possible to react to topics related to religions or even create them. As such, not only traditional media but also their virtual counterparts can be co-creators of the idea of freedom of religious belief without manifestations of religiously motivated radicalism.

Indeed, we are careful with our expectations these days. We realize that we have passed the early period of cyberculture assessment when the potential of new media was discussed in a rather utopian form. Among many, for example, the philosopher Pierre Lévy associated cyberspace with the benefits of the interconnectedness of virtual communities and emphasized the attributes of virtual collective intelligence as a spiritual perspective. Lévy described the World Wide Web as an information river that brings a "flood of open knowledge" that is not structurally, temporally, or semantically closed (Lévy 2000, pp. 142–45). Other proponents of the online public sphere, for example, emphasized informational abundance and absolute freedom of users, enhanced by civic participation

and efforts to promote democracy (McQuail 2016). In other words, even today we recognize the online space as having many of the above-mentioned positive qualities, but we also reflect on the pitfalls and dangers associated with the Internet and online media; let us mention, for example, the latest research, focused on the perception of safety on the Internet among residents of 16 countries, which confirms that in 2023, up to 69% of respondents encountered some kind of risk on the Internet, while the most frequent experience they had was with misinformation and personal threats, including cyberbullying, hate speech, and threats of violence (Microsoft 2023). In this context, we can again recall the words of Floridi, who was convinced that the Internet has triggered a "deep cultural revolution" (Floridi 2019, p. 7), which we currently see, unfortunately, also in the use of the Internet for purposes that support various forms of radicalization (Hamid and Ariza 2022; Ware 2023; Stroud et al. 2020; Whittaker 2022; Herath and Whittaker 2021; Reeve 2019; Baldauf et al. 2019; and so on), contributing to the overall radicalization of society (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018; Charvát 2023; Braddock 2022; Akram and Nasar 2023; Zeiger and Gyte 2020; U.S. Department of Justice 2022).

We identify with the opinion of focus group respondents that, despite the negatives, the Internet also "fulfils the democratic potential of the public sphere, which also gains its voice thanks to citizen journalism, as a kind of media alternative, in which engaged citizens also contribute to the discourse of mainstream journalism, using certain practices of professional journalists". Although we could argue that in a certain form, citizen media initiatives existed even before the Internet, their full self-realization was made possible only by the conditions of the online space; earlier in the research paper, we talked about low costs and interactivity, but user independence, potentially wide reach, etc. can also be added. We currently consider the use of the possibilities of citizen journalism to be important, including in the fight against religious radicalism.

In the second part of the research, based on the focus group research method, a total of eight optimal options for citizen journalism were determined, which would adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism (O2) using online media. Based on the research findings, we can conclude that the respondents, experts in our research sample, advise on the basic possibilities of citizen journalism as journalism that develops on the Internet and with the use of online media, setting the agenda of new topics, bringing quick records of events and the associated quick activation of public discussions, and influencing public discourse through deeper insights into the local problems of believers. The activities of citizen journalists and bloggers bring information even when traditional media or official institutions fail. In addition, they help professional journalists to reflect on social problems. Among the advantages of citizen journalism is not only the possibility to obtain information in a "raw" form but also to freely react or express one's opinion. Citizen journalists can further create authentic and at the same time correct information about the events that took place as well as inform about the potential pitfalls that believers face because of their religious affiliation; all this brings user participation and democratic intervention in the monopoly of media conglomerates.

According to the experts in our research sample, the fact that citizen journalists contribute to raising awareness of religious radicalism or to public participation in other civic initiatives aimed at preventing and fighting religious radicalism can also be positively evaluated. In addition, the contributions of participants in various events, i.e., their audio recordings, video recordings, or photographs taken by hand-held cameramen or mobile phones, are often valued for their authenticity. Sharing these materials enriches media content with "first-hand" information, as random citizen "journalists" point to what they see, hear, and experience at a given moment in a given place. Citizen journalism often becomes not only a parallel source of information, as we talk about above, but also enriches the presentation of the event with exclusive information or footage. Presentation of events and facts, based on personal experiences and own observations, brings the sometimes-necessary subjectivity into the media world, which turns into a "loud trumpet" calling for correction and without elements of mandatory media objectivity or political correctness.

In this context, citizen journalism can be positioned, among other things, as a defender of religious groups in the online space. As the last possibility of citizen journalism, which could adequately respond to contemporary religious radicalism using online media, the respondents mentioned the activities of teachers, school psychologists, special advisors, and others who, in their work, also encounter manifestations of religious radicalization and who, using online media, can be a welcome a solution to the "lack of materials, methodologies, or programs in schools and educational institutions from which others could draw" (Centre for Ethnicity and Culture Research 2022, p. 19).

Our objective is to underscore the broader impact and relevance of our research across diverse sectors. By addressing a wide array of stakeholders, we aim to facilitate meaningful engagement and application of our findings in ways that extend beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

To expand our research framework beyond the confines of sociology, we emphasize the significant contributions of our research findings to various stakeholders. These include academia, media employers, supervisors, municipalities, policymakers, governments, and the general public.

The presentation of research findings would be incomplete without pointing out the limitations of the research. The goal, or the ideal, of the research part was to present as accurately as possible the current reality of religious radicalism in Slovakia from the point of view of seven selected experts from the focus group. For us, the opinions of the group are not and must not be automatically opinion forming, which is why the text of the thesis was corrected and supplemented with opinions from the professional literature. Similarly, the present study faces several other inherent limitations. Sampling size could be considered a negative part of the study because the sample does not accurately represent the broader population. Additionally, reliance on respondents' self-reported data within the focus group method introduces the possibility of bias of social reality, impacting the accuracy of information on online media usage and civic engagement. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of online media and civic engagement poses a temporal challenge, potentially rendering the findings outdated.

Thus, we realize that the study's applicability is constrained by the geographical and cultural context, while the dynamic nature of online platforms and potential gaps in empirical evidence may limit the depth of analysis. We acknowledge these limitations, and we try to bring more transparency to the study's results and its qualitative findings.

Despite the limitations of our research just indicated, we believe that the set of research findings in both its parts can be beneficial not only in the context of a positive presentation of the possibilities of citizen journalism in the prevention and fight against religious radicalism but also in informing about questions and problems within the diverse contexts of religious intolerance and present religiously motivated radicalism.

6. Conclusions

The issue of religiously motivated violence is extremely broad. It is related to the acceptance of basic democratic values, such as the equality of people, dignity, and the right to life, health, freedom of religion, and the protection of minority rights. It deals with problems of perception and respect for the rights of other people. Although the origin of these problems, their consequences, and the culminating tensions are often attributed to religions, we must remember that religions are not the initiators of every military conflict, violence, or intolerance. However, the fact is that an impartial investigation of even this moment—actual or potential religious radicalism—can be useful in solving many related problems, some of which were introduced in this article. The need for a solution and the need for prevention against religious radicalism are all the more acute if we realize that the current social and political context in Europe and the world shows a marked increase in religious radicalism in recent years and is a serious problem in various countries.

This study pointed to the interconnection of citizen journalism and research findings on the issue of the most frequent manifestations of religious radicalism. We tried

to contribute to the discussion about religious radicalism and at the same time answer the question of why civic engagement using online media is important in this issue. Research findings confirm that citizen journalism, as a new and dynamic way of managing information, can play an important role in tracking, documenting, and sharing cases of religious radicalism and discrimination. People actively involved in citizen journalism may be the first to capture these incidents and bring them to public attention. At the same time, it is important to remember that citizen journalists often draw attention to events and issues that could be overlooked by traditional media. Their activity on social media, blogs, and independent journalistic platforms can therefore be a welcome addition to the media agenda of traditional media and at the same time an impulse that calls for transparency of information and responsibility in solutions related to religious radicalism.

Empirical research findings call for the need for dialogue on religious radicalism, to raise awareness of its consequences, and to promote the prevention and mitigation of religious-related conflicts. However, their biggest goal is to contribute to the efforts for a more tolerant and inclusive society, because it turns out to be most important to look for new procedural sources of social cohesion that would ensure the mutual coexistence of groups even with conflicting interests. In our opinion, it is necessary to look for ways, mechanisms, and institutions that would provide the cohesion of society. First of all, the rejection of ethnic, cultural, and religious radicalism, which is the beginning of considerations that a certain form of life is considered better, or even the only possible, becomes key in this challenge.

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