

REPORT

Polarisation and conflict

A non-violent approach

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Introduction

For some years now, concern has been growing about polarisation in society. In the media and in public debates references to the phenomenon are manifold. However, despite the many references to it, the term is rarely defined. Media analysis indicates that the concept usually appears without an adjective or any kind of further explanation; it seems to function mostly as a catch-all term to designate all kinds of social tension and conflict. Moreover, in the media polarisation is usually framed as a negative phenomenon¹ – there are indeed risks and dangers linked to polarisation. However, our view of the phenomenon risks being blurred when we approach polarisation in a one-sided negative way.

Over the past several years, a host of training courses and workshops have been developed in Flanders for professionals such as teachers, civil servants, youth workers and police officers to enhance their skills in dealing with the dynamics of polarisation they encounter in their professional practice. In Flanders, these training events and workshops are based on relatively nuanced and complex definitions of polarisation. This sharper conceptual focus seems to be the result of a number of questions that have arisen in the past:

- How can practitioners and professionals distinguish between different forms of polarisation?
- When is polarisation problematic and threatening and when is it an integral part of a democratic society – for example, when activists polarise in their quest for social change?
- How do practitioners relate best to the identity and power issues that may lie behind polarisation, contestation and conflict?

These questions have broadened the conceptual horizon of training practices. At the same time, they indicate that continuing reflection on the meaning of polarisation remains useful.

Such continuing reflection on the way we view polarisation and how best to deal with it is indeed important. Statements and interventions concerning polarisation are not

neutral. They have effects. Launching a well-aimed remark such as “You are polarising!”, for example, often results in more polarisation or conflict.² If one thoughtlessly states that polarisation exists between certain groups, one may run the risk of homogenising those groups more than they actually are. In some cases, over-hasty attempts to “depolarise” also risk dismissing certain voices, such as those of activists, as negative, without first having listened carefully.³ In sum, using the term “polarisation” to frame every tension or conflict in society as problematic or negative only risks creating conceptual confusion. We then also fail to recognise that polarisation and conflict can sometimes contribute meaningfully to societal change.

Therefore it is useful to keep reflecting on the meaning of polarisation dynamics and the best ways to deal with them from different perspectives: practice, policy and research. This report wishes to contribute to this reflection. We start by discussing a number of key insights from the literature on polarisation and conflict. Next, we try to think through what these insights mean for practitioners and professionals. Our aim, therefore, is to outline a frame of reference for dealing in peaceful and non-violent ways with polarisation in neighbourhoods, in classrooms and on online platforms. The target audience we have in mind are policymakers at the local and national level, professionals who are active in offering training on polarisation and conflict management, and practitioners such as education professionals and public servants who are looking for practice-oriented and research-based information on polarisation and conflict.

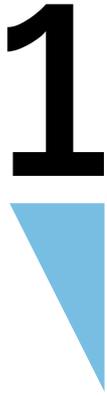
Specifically, the report follows a three-part approach:

- The first step is to understand the various forms that polarisation dynamics can take and to grasp the underlying mechanisms in order to intervene adequately and effectively or to respond to them. Based on the literature, we provide a conceptual framework that distinguishes between different forms of polarisation. We discuss first polarisation in like-minded groups and then thematic, ideological and affective polarisation between groups. We also clarify the difference between polarisation and conflict. In this way, we hope to avoid pitfalls such as conceptualising polarisation too narrowly and cataloguing every tension or contestation under the heading of polarisation. In this first step, we mainly adopt a conceptual approach: we describe the forms that polarisation can take and explain underlying mechanisms.
- Secondly, we consider what polarisation and conflict mean from a normative point of view. When are polarisation and conflict a “normal” part of a pluralistic democratic society and when are they at risk of becoming pernicious or toxic? In this step, we move beyond the descriptive and explore the political and social ambivalence of polarisation and conflict. Critical reflection on this ambivalence is important because, again, in order to respond adequately to a specific situation it is best to take into account the actual form that polarisation and conflict take in these concrete situations.
- Finally, we move from theory to practice. Although the report will not go into great detail on concrete techniques and methods, we intend to provide a number

of points of reference for dealing with polarisation and conflict peacefully and non-violently.

One of the important assumptions of the conceptual framework we elaborate on in this report is that polarisation and conflict are distinct phenomena.⁴ In a nutshell, polarisation is about increasing distance between opinions and groups, whereas conflict is about clash and confrontation. Polarisation and conflict are, however, closely related. Polarisation can lead to conflict, whereas conflict can have the effect of increasing polarisation. The complex interaction between polarisation and conflict is an important reason why the Flemish Peace Institute wishes to engage in the debate on these issues. One of the missions of the institute is to contribute, on the basis of scientific insights, to the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the prevention of violence. It is from this perspective that we focus in this report on polarisation: as a current phenomenon that lies at the root of many tensions and conflicts in our society. The focus, moreover, is mainly on the political and the social. In other words, the report deals with polarisation involving current political themes such as migration and the left-right divide and with antagonisms between political and social groups occurring at the level of society at large, in neighbourhoods and classrooms, and on online platforms. Interpersonal (eg family) and business conflicts are therefore beyond the scope of this report. Finally, conceptual frameworks for dealing with political and social tensions and conflicts peacefully and non-violently require a vision of democracy, conflict and peace. Such a vision will be made explicit in the course of the report.

1



Polarisation as a multifaceted phenomenon

What is polarisation? As we mentioned above, the term is not always elaborately defined, although it is often used in public debates. This entails the risk that all kinds of tension, antagonism and conflict are lumped together under the guise of polarisation. In practice, this often leads professionals and policymakers to rely too heavily on one-sided definitions that do not encompass the many aspects and the complexity of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the literature on the topic offers a host of definitions and conceptual distinctions. It is this definitional and conceptual complexity that we wish to highlight in this section, in order to inform the policy and practice relating to polarisation with the broadest possible view of the phenomenon. Polarisation is often equated with “us–them” thinking. To a certain extent that is accurate. However, as we shall see, this description does not fully capture the many dimensions of the phenomenon. Generally speaking, it is more useful to describe polarisation as both encompassing the sharpening of a position within a group of like-minded people and the clustering of groups into opposing camps, the ideological or socio-emotional distance between those groups widening as a consequence.

In this section, we briefly discuss some insights from the literature. Although more and more research on polarisation in the European context is being conducted, a significant part of the literature covers the US context. The empirical results of this US research cannot be directly transferred to the Western European context, though.⁵ Research on the situation in the United States has nonetheless produced a number of interesting definitions and conceptual insights. It is useful to dwell on these definitions and conceptualisations as they offer insights into different types of polarisation. Below we first consider polarisation *in* groups of like-minded people. Then we look at polarisation *between* groups. Regarding the latter, we look at thematic, ideological, affective and social polarisation. To conclude the section, we examine the relationship between polarisation and conflict.

1.1 Polarisation in groups of like-minded people

What happens when a group of like-minded people enter into a discussion about a certain topic? A remarkable observation: as a result of such a conversation, the chances are that such a group collectively arrives at a sharper (“more extreme”) point of view than the position the participants took individually *before* the conversation. In short, entering into a discussion with like-minded people can have the effect of reinforcing and sharpening the initial views of the participants.⁶ If, for instance, you get a group of climate-change sceptics to talk to each other, there is a good chance that the conversation will only make them more sceptical. Similarly, if you get a group of left-leaning people talking about the need for redistribution through taxation and social security, the conversation is likely to reinforce the positions they held previously.

In the literature, this phenomenon has come to be known as group-induced polarisation or – more succinctly – **group polarisation**. Group polarisation can occur in very different contexts, from a group of people in a neighbourhood to students in a class who, by talking about a certain subject, move together to a sharper standpoint on a certain issue. In other cases, it may be a group of engaged citizens or activists coming together to decide on taking political action. Importantly, as researcher Cass Sunstein notes, the mechanism of group polarisation may also play a role in the violent radicalisation of groups of extremists and terrorists.⁷

The mechanisms behind group polarisation

Research into group polarisation theory has shown that, on average, discussions in groups of like-minded people do not tend to a more moderate position: instead, they reinforce and sharpen their positions as a result of the conversation – they polarise.⁸ In order to explain this phenomenon, researchers have examined two tracks. Besides explanations that emphasise the importance of social status and reputation through conformity, group polarisation theory also emphasises the exchange of information. Participants in a discussion are confirmed and reinforced by (like-minded) others in the positions they previously held more cautiously. Moreover, during the discussion, they hear new arguments that reinforce their positions. Because they hear others repeat these arguments, the like-minded discussion partners polarise more and more, and their points of view become more entrenched.⁹

Group-induced polarisation is a collective phenomenon. It refers to the sharpening (or “becoming more extreme”) of the views of a group of like-minded people on a certain topic. In groups, of course, other processes than the reinforcement of substantive points of view are also at play. People base part of their identity on the groups with whom they feel connected. And these social-identification processes in turn have effects on the perception of and relationships with other groups. These social-psychological dynamics play an important role in affective and social forms of polarisation. We discuss these dynamics in more detail below.

1.2 Thematic and ideological polarisation

Group polarisation theory maps out polarisation dynamics in groups of like-minded people. But in the wider society, polarisation of course also refers to dynamics *between* groups. In a first variant, polarisation describes the process of the hardening of opposing positions, opinions or beliefs on certain issues between people or groups. In other words: groups that polarise, move from a moderate position in the middle of a spectrum of possible positions on a topic to the poles at the opposite ends of the spectrum. This dynamic can increase the ideological distance between those groups. Classic examples are increasing differences between left and right or between progressive and conservative. But it can also be about concrete, substantive themes on which people or groups polarise: for example, positions on higher or lower taxes.

The literature refers to these dynamics as **thematic** (“*issue-based*”) and **ideological polarisation**. In recent years, research into these types of polarisation has been dominated by studies of the situation in the United States. The political system and the electorate there have been strongly polarised for years.¹⁰ Many of the insights from US research on polarisation are specific to the situation in the United States and cannot easily be transferred to the Western European context. Nevertheless, in order to frame comparisons properly it is useful to look briefly at polarisation in the United States. Considering the US context is also helpful to help us identify some specific risks of polarisation.

A special feature of the polarised situation in the United States, for example, is that various political and social fault lines have begun to converge increasingly. The deep divide between Democrats and Republicans is not just about politics and ideology, it is also about religion, race and culture.¹¹ Democrats and Republicans, or liberals and conservatives, increasingly lead separate lives. Opportunities to meet each other in person – for example, in associations to which they both belong – have decreased. When different fault lines therefore start to converge along one major fault line, as is increasingly being happening in the United States, and society becomes divided between two large, opposing groups, then the “other” easily becomes a stranger to be avoided – and possibly also an enemy.¹²

These insights into the convergence of different political, social and cultural fault lines are useful for estimating the degree and possible effects of polarisation in a society.

They are also meaningful when attempting to fathom the levels of polarisation in local contexts. If various fault lines converge, the polarisation dynamics between groups may be more pernicious than when this is not the case. Although it does not necessarily pose problems when people from different groups living in a neighbourhood do not meet each other in sports clubs or cultural associations and therefore do not have overlapping group memberships or contact opportunities (they can live alongside each other in a non-violent manner), when tensions or conflicts arise between these groups the absence of meaningful contact and distance between them can quickly deepen into distrust and polarisation can easily take on damaging forms.

All this makes clear that there is often more to polarisation than just increasing opposition between people or groups based on their positions with regard to certain topics or their ideology and world views. Emotions, social relations and identification processes very quickly come into play. These dimensions of polarisation are captured in the literature by concepts such as affective and social polarisation.

1.3 Affective and social polarisation

When researchers speak of **affective polarisation**, they refer to the dynamics of increasing dislike, distrust and hate between people from different parties or groups.¹³ Communication scholars Baldwin Van Gorp et al, who study affective polarisation in the Flemish context, describe it this way:

“The different parties have withdrawn, as it were, each in their own moat, shooting back and forth with live ammunition. Deliberating and coming to an agreement seems impossible. The opponents label each other as narrow-minded and hypocritical, simply because they do not share each other’s point of view.”¹⁴

Research indicates that people often think that other people and groups hold more extreme positions and are at a further distance from their own group on certain topics (ie more polarised) than is actually the case. Yet this **perceived polarisation** can have real effects, fuelling affective polarisation between groups.¹⁵

Affective polarisation can arise from or go hand in hand with fierce opposition between groups over certain topics or their ideological world views. For example, if someone is a member of a group that is an advocate either in favour of or against climate action, they are making a substantive point. But very quickly other issues can also come into play. Group membership then begins to be linked to a broader world view and to social-identification processes. The fight with opponents grows into more than a purely ideological conflict. With the growing distance, dislike and distrust between the groups increase. Certainly, when it concerns symbolically charged topics, discussions about content can lead to or be accompanied by affective polarisation. For example, debates about the headscarf deal with issues such as the position of women in society and the state’s neutrality. During these debates, however, “we–they” discourses may also emerge and produce affective polarisation. Nevertheless, ideological and affective

polarisation do not necessarily have to go hand in hand. In some situations, there can be clear ideological opposition or conflict without there being any affective polarisation. In these cases, people or groups hold divergent or opposing standpoints ideologically or philosophically, but do not distrust or reject one another. In other cases, there may be a great deal of distrust or even dislike between parties, without the substantive positions of the groups being very far apart. In other words, the ways in which ideological and affective polarisation are related is a question that we must always examine in concrete situations.¹⁶

When increasing opposition between groups results effectively in fierce us-versus-them thinking, and ideological and social fault lines begin to converge, affective polarisation can affect social relationships deeply. One consequence, for example, may be a decrease in the willingness of groups to maintain social contacts or cooperate with one another.¹⁷ As political scientists Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer point out, it is then no longer simply a matter of opposing points of view, but of social identities that are placed in strong opposition to one another and subsequently charged with negative perceptions and stereotypes. As a result, more and more people begin to feel the pressure to fit into one of the camps. The neutral middle ground then shrinks and narrows. In extreme cases, groups begin to see the other as a threat and intergroup relations become hostile.¹⁸ Political scientist Lilliana Mason defines this dynamic as **social polarisation**. Social polarisation is more about who “we” and “they” are, about identity, than about differences in opinion or vision. In the context of the United States, where various social fault lines have begun to converge on a large scale, party and ideological preferences have even become “mega-identities”, according to Mason. These identities not only include political views, but are also connected to philosophies of life, ethnicities and even places of residence.¹⁹ The literature now contains a growing number of studies on the differences between “progressives” and “conservatives” in the United States.²⁰ *Liberals* drive a Prius, *conservatives* a pick-up truck, writes the US journalist Ezra Klein. They are clichés, but research indicates that they do explain part of reality.²¹

The study of affective and social polarisation draws heavily on insights from social psychology, more specifically theories such as *realistic group conflict theory* (RGCT) and *social identity theory*. According to RGCT, conflicts and antagonism between groups stem from opposing interests or competition over (scarce) resources.²² Social identity theory confirms that conflicts often arise from a struggle over interests or resources, but it emphasises that polarisation between groups can also arise without an objective conflict of interests. A research tradition started by psychologist Henri Tajfel shows that people very easily step into a group perspective. Identification with a group already happens, for example, when, as part of an experiment, they are randomly placed in a group to play a game, even without coming into contact with the other members of their group. Very quickly they identify with their “own” group and see an opposition with another group, even if there is no conflict of interest or previous history of hostility towards that other group.²³ People easily identify with groups for various reasons: to reinforce a positive self-image, to distinguish themselves from others or to reduce feelings of insecurity.²⁴ Social identities help people better understand

themselves, their social environment and their relationships with others. Group identities are therefore important for people's psychological well-being. Those who belong to youth movements or support sports teams, for example, derive feelings of belonging and solidarity from them.

Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that group identification goes beyond a mere positive assessment of one's own group (*ingroup bias*). Social identity formation can then lead to rivalry with and possibly even hostility to other groups (*outgroup bias*).²⁵ According to moral psychologist and neuroscientist Joshua Greene, this is because our brains are evolutionarily wired to function in cooperation *within* groups, but not necessarily for cooperation *between* groups. This makes it easy for us to think in terms of "us" versus "them". According to Greene, not only are people always a little "tribalistic", but different groups also have different values and cooperation agreements. This can create distance. Groups also differ in the things they endow with moral authority, such as leaders, texts, institutions or social practices.²⁶ How people think and judge about what they consider morally and politically just is also strongly influenced by their group ties. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls this "strategic" or "motivated reasoning": moral judgement is to a significant extent a matter of rationalising intuitions that are (usually unconsciously) influenced by dynamics such as group identification processes. Haidt sums up this process with a metaphor: our brain is like the rider (the rationalising) of an elephant (the intuitions), where the rider's function is primarily to serve the elephant.²⁷

In the light of all this, an important question is: How and when exactly do group dynamics and social identities lead to affective polarisation and (possibly increasingly hostile) conflict? This question is relevant not only at the societal level, but also in local contexts such as the school or the neighbourhood. As RGCT suggests, antagonism and conflict between groups can arise from opposing interests or competition over (scarce or not) resources, such as money, all kinds of movable or immovable property, and power or status.²⁸ If these conflicts are not properly managed, the struggle for interests or resources can escalate and lead to increasing hostility.²⁹

The social identity theory argues that affective polarisation and conflict can arise not only from competition over resources, but also from the dynamics of group identification itself. Now, according to the theory, this is not necessary: in many cases, identification with a group does not lead automatically to polarisation and clashes with other groups.³⁰ The relationship between the groups then remains one of sporting rivalry, such as that between different youth movements or supporters of different sports teams. "We" and "they" can coexist peacefully, or maintain a sporting relationship of "us" against "them", without the competition inevitably resulting in bitter affective polarisation or hostility.

So, when do group and identification dynamics lead to antagonism and hostility between groups? This is the result of an ongoing and complex process. At different stages, group identity dynamics can lead to increasing polarisation, hostility, conflict and, at an extreme stage, possibly even violence. According to social psychologist

Marilynn Brewer, the risk of severe hostility arises especially when another group begins to evoke feelings of fear, loathing, disgust or hatred, or is increasingly perceived as an existential threat to one's own group. Through trajectories of increasing hostility and mechanisms such as dehumanisation, affective and social polarisation can also, in the most serious cases, lead to violence. This can take various forms, from violence between groups at school or in the neighbourhood to attacks on property or people.³¹ In conflict studies, there is research that studies the links between hostile ethnic polarisation and civil war and terror.³² And in the most extreme cases, affective and social polarisation can also be a stepping stone to mass murder and genocide.³³

The mechanisms behind increasing toxicity and hostility

Two psychological mechanisms that, according to social psychologists Samantha Moore-Berg, Boaz Hameiri and Emile Bruneau, drive hostility and potentially violent conflict between groups are meta-perceptions and dehumanisation. Meta-perceptions, or negative assessments by members of one group of what other groups think of them can poison intergroup relations. These perceptions easily act as self-fulfilling prophecies: people who think others are averse to them will behave accordingly. That has a negative impact on interaction. Dehumanisation goes beyond the distrust and aversion inherent in affective polarisation: it involves attributing animal or non-human characteristics to members of other groups. And it is associated with aggressive intentions, attitudes and behaviour.³⁴

1.4 Polarisation and conflict

As described above, polarisation can refer to opposing viewpoints, the divergence of ideological positions, increasing “us-versus-them” thinking or escalating dislike and distrust between groups. When we define conflict broadly as forms of dispute, quarrel, clash or confrontation – verbal or physical – it becomes clear that polarisation and conflict are not the same thing. In a nutshell: polarisation is about increasing distance between people and groups, whereas conflict is about collision and confrontation. In practice, as polarisation strategist Bart Brandsma emphasises, it is important to distinguish between the two phenomena.³⁵ After all, they may require different approaches. Nonetheless, there is a close connection and interaction between polarisation and conflict. The strategies and techniques that can be used to deal with polarisation and conflict are also related. Therefore, it is useful to take a closer look at the differences and the interrelations between the two phenomena.

On the one hand, polarisation can be a catalyst for conflict. When people or groups take up ever sharper opposing positions on an issue and their views harden ideologically, this can easily lead to clashes and confrontations. Trade unions and employers' organisations, for example, may drift apart over the question of whether cuts or pay rises are in order. In practice, this can lead to heated discussions, clashes, sometimes

even to strike action. Affective and social polarisation can also lead to conflict. As a result of social identification processes, the distance between groups can increase. Growing distrust between the groups can then result in sharply escalating conflicts – for example, when members of both groups clash over real interests or resources or when they fuel their mutual hostility through mutual negative interactions.

On the other hand, conflict can function as a driving force behind polarisation. A fierce discussion on a controversial issue or a verbal or physical confrontation, for example, can have the effect of increasing and deepening both the ideological opposition and the distance, mistrust and mutual dislike between people of different groups. For example, a heated argument between members of different groups in the neighbourhood can lead to increasing polarisation.

Through these complex interactions, polarisation and conflict can reinforce each other mutually.³⁶

In practice, however, it is often difficult to make a clear distinction between polarisation and conflict. Making this distinction is further complicated when we take into account that a number of people have a tendency to look at society through the lens of “conflict frames”. Research shows that some people are more preoccupied with and perceive of a greater degree of tension and opposition in society than others. As sociologists Spruyt et al note, some people even see the whole of society through the lens of conflict. These conflicts, tensions and oppositions are framed in terms of broad and abstractly defined categories, such as men versus women, left versus right, people versus elite.³⁷ Van Drunen, Spruyt and Van Droogenbroeck emphasise, however, that this kind of conflict-thinking is not the same as polarisation. Conflict-thinking is about perceiving conflict in society, whereas in the case of polarisation people also express a preference for a group or choose sides in a certain opposition. It is possible that people perceive a great deal of conflict in society without taking sides or taking a position in the perceived conflicts. Nevertheless, as the researchers note, people who score high on (affective) polarisation are also likely to perceive high levels of conflict in society.³⁸

Although the perception of conflict in society does not necessarily imply that these conflicts and tensions are as real and profound as they are perceived, conflict-thinking can nevertheless entail very strong emotions such as anger and fear.³⁹ When people start to take sides in the perceived conflict, polarise along the fault lines of the conflict and begin to express these emotions aggressively, conflict-thinking can easily lead to effective clashes. Consider, for example, someone who interprets the whole of society as a great hostile struggle between left and right and takes sides in that struggle. Not all people with a left- or right-wing preference will share this idea of a hostile struggle. For example, they may still see plenty of opportunities for cooperation or compromise. Moreover, there are many people who position themselves in the political centre. Still, when the first person assertively expresses their views of the left-right conflict frame, this can lead to fierce discussions or arguments, for example on an online forum or in the classroom, when other people want to counter the expressed

view or when people who admit to belonging to the “other” camp want to defend “their” group.

Summary

Polarisation comes in different forms. In order to intervene in or react to polarisation adequately and effectively, practitioners and professionals should first identify the kind of polarisation they are confronted with in concrete situations.

Thematic or ideological polarisation refers to the sharpening of viewpoints in a group of like-minded people or between different groups.

Affective or social polarisation refers to a growing socio-emotional distance between groups. Distrust increases between the groups. Behind these dynamics social identification processes are at play. Group identities ensure cohesion in groups and make cooperation possible. On the other hand, they can also lead to us-versus-them thinking and, in serious cases, hostility between groups.

All of these forms of polarisation can lead to conflict: heated debates, quarrels, sometimes even (verbal or physical) violence. Ideological plurality and conflicts are, of course, characteristic of every democratic society, but when various socio-political fault lines start to converge and polarisation leads to mistrust and mutual dislike, the risk of conflict and sometimes even violence increases. These conflicts, in turn, can reinforce polarisation.

2



The meaning of polarisation and conflict

In the previous section, we discussed polarisation and conflict from a descriptive and a conceptual perspective. We considered various types of polarisation and the way polarisation relates to conflict. In this section we consider what polarisation and conflict mean from a normative point of view:

- Is polarisation a “normal” phenomenon in a pluralistic democratic society?
- Or does it pose a threat and is it harmful to democracy?⁴⁰
- Or do the answers to these questions depend on the concrete form and situation in which polarisation occurs?
- How, then, can we distinguish between “democratic” and harmful or “toxic” forms of polarisation?

These are not merely academic questions. They have a direct practical and societal relevance.

2.1 The ambivalence of polarisation

The way in which scholars assess the meaning of polarisation seems to depend in part on the type of polarisation they are studying. With regard to affective and social polarisation, many authors emphasise the risks and the negative consequences. Lilliana Mason, for example, views social polarisation as a source of deep divisions. When polarised groups begin to distrust and see each other as a threat and even an enemy, cooperation and compromise become increasingly difficult. Intergroup relations are governed by prejudice, stereotyping and emotions such as anger, dislike or even hatred.⁴¹

Political scientists Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer analyse “pernicious” forms of polarisation which, once they are set in motion, self-reinforcingly result in distrust and suspicion that, in extreme cases, can lead to disrupted social contacts with other groups. According to McCoy and Somer, the opposition then takes on a Manichean

character and is perceived as a struggle between good and evil. At the interpersonal and intergroup levels, this severely jeopardises peaceful coexistence. At a societal level, democracy is in trouble.⁴² Nonetheless, McCoy and Murat, as do other researchers, point out that polarisation is not an exclusively pernicious or negative phenomenon. On the contrary, polarisation can also play a positive role in democracy.

In 2009, the Netherlands Council for Social Development (RMO) published a book on polarisation in which the ambivalent meaning of polarisation was framed as both “threatening and enriching”.⁴³ In its advice on “Polarisation within borders”, the RMO took the ambivalence of polarisation as a starting point. On the one hand, according to the RMO, polarisation can add value to democracy. It is a means of forming and binding groups and group identities, which can be important, for example, for emancipating minorities. In democracies, groups also play a role in representing different political and social interests. On the other hand, the RMO noted, polarisation entails serious risks such as a narrowing of public debates, the creation of distance between social groups, the escalation of antagonisms and social instability.⁴⁴

Therefore, from the normative point of view of pluralistic democracy and non-violence, polarisation is an ambivalent phenomenon. What does this mean in practical terms? Some authors assert, for example, that group-induced polarisation can be important for mobilising political ideas and interests. This certainly applies to groups that find themselves in a disadvantaged social position and who are striving for equal rights.⁴⁵ In his book, *Going to Extremes*, Cass Sunstein gives the example of the abolitionist movement in the 19th century. Group polarisation can move people from indifference to concern and engagement, while endless discussions with a multitude of views can sometimes result in a lack of willingness to take action. But Sunstein points out the risks of polarising discussions. For example, there is a danger that people will take unfounded positions, merely as a result of group dynamics and social pressure. In extreme cases, group polarisation can result in violence and a threat to social cohesion, as in the case of hate groups and terrorist cells.⁴⁶

Some political scientists point out that ideological polarisation can go hand in hand with increased participation and political engagement on the part of voters and party supporters – ideologically polarised elections often attract record voter turnout. Furthermore, polarisation creates party-political profiling. For voters this not only clarifies the options to choose between, it also increases the stakes of elections. For party supporters, it matters who comes to power. On the other hand, ideological polarisation can lead to large sections of the public dropping out, for instance because they do not identify with politics that are played out too much in black-and-white terms.⁴⁷ Besides ideological polarisation, affective party-political polarisation has also been found to correlate to high voter turnout and greater political participation.⁴⁸

But here, too, there are drawbacks and negative consequences. Affective polarisation can lead to a decrease in satisfaction with democracy. This may have something to do with the fact that losing an election to a political enemy goes hand in hand with a more negative appreciation of the democratic process itself.⁴⁹ Therefore, polarisation can

undermine the trust in democracy within the party that is not in power. This makes governance more complex.⁵⁰ The situation in the United States is a striking example: transfers of power are hotly contested and only increase the divide between partisans. And cross-party cooperation becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

Another way of mapping the ambivalent meaning of polarisation is to examine how polarisation and democracy relate to each other. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer distinguish three possible scenarios.

In a first scenario, polarisation leads to a crisis of democracy. Democratic institutions are torn apart or paralysed by rival, intransigent and mutually exclusive expectations. Rigid political identities are set against each other in antagonistic ways. As a result, groups within both political elites and the wider population may become less committed to democratic norms. They begin to support ideologies that are sceptical of democracy. This form of polarisation is therefore dangerous for a pluralistic democratic society.

In a second scenario, polarisation is a consequence of a crisis in democracy. For example, polarisation may emerge when the “moderate centres” of liberal democracy are unable to create a space where alternative movements can engage in democratic conflict without existentially threatening each other or democracy.

In a third scenario, polarisation can enrich and deepen democracy. For example, it can facilitate the mobilisation of movements which seek social change such as equal rights for disadvantaged social groups. These movements often do so in ways that could be described as polarising. On the basis of a powerful and mobilising collective identity, they enter into conflict with opponents in order to bring about social change.⁵¹

Historical examples of the ambivalent dynamic of polarisation are many; through polarisation, various movements such as the radical democrats in the 18th and 19th century, the syndicalists and the suffragettes succeeded in mobilising and putting issues on the political agenda and in bringing about social change. In some cases, however, the antagonisms and conflicts resulting from these political actions became violent and destructive. Also, today there are many activist movements mobilising in polarising ways to bring their issues to the centre of the public debate in a sometimes polarising way, from climate and gender to decolonisation. Not infrequently, this polarisation leads to tensions, sometimes even to conflicts. The question then is how as a society we can engage with these tensions and conflicts in such a way that they do not become violent or destructive?

2.2 An agonistic perspective on peace

Plurality and difference of opinion are integral parts of an open, free and democratic society. We usually negotiate this diversity through dialogue, discussion and bargaining. But sometimes the opposition becomes so sharp that it leads to conflict.

The question then is: How should we deal with these conflicts? A philosophical perspective that is often put forward in this context is agonistics. In recent years, the concept has surfaced in various contexts, from fields such as heritage, museum management⁵² and war remembrance⁵³ to pedagogy.⁵⁴ In the context of this report it is useful to dwell on it for a moment. In political theory, various approaches to agonistics have been developed. The approach that is probably mentioned the most is that of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. Broadly sketched, Mouffe argues that at any moment a political and societal order can be challenged. Conflict is therefore at the centre of her approach to politics. In doing so, she seeks distance from deliberative theories that focus mainly on the search for consensus through reasonable dialogue. According to Mouffe, conflict is inevitable in politics. Nonetheless, when conflict manifests itself in antagonistic and hostile ways, plural democratic societies must transform the antagonism and hostility into a struggle between adversaries – in agonistics.⁵⁵

Agonistic approaches to democratic politics offer some insights that are relevant in the context of this report. First, they emphasise that conflict and power constitute politics. Activist voices contesting hegemonic structures or relationships, for example, are part of democracy. These voices may cause tension and friction, yet as long as they do not become undemocratic or violent, they have their place in democratic politics.⁵⁶ Second, collective forms of identification are part and parcel of politics. People feel closely associated with certain groups and less so with others. This is in line with the insights from social identity theory discussed above. An agonistic approach to politics does not exclude thinking in terms of “us” and “them”, but emphasises that it should take the form of a non-violent struggle between adversaries rather than a bitter confrontation between enemies. Finally, it is emphasised that politics is sometimes driven by political emotions such as indignation, anger or unease. This insight, too, is relevant if we want to take into account, for example, that activism or partisanship can go hand in hand with a certain degree of polarisation.

Given the central role of conflict in agonistic political theories, it is not surprising that insights from these theories were picked up in conflict and peace studies to develop the notion of an agonistic peace. As peace researcher Lisa Strömbom argues, this notion does not conceptualise peace as the creation of harmonious relations between former enemies or as the end of conflict as such. The focus is on transforming violent and hostile relationships into agonistic ones in which conflict and contestation are not eliminated but given shape in non-violent manifestations. In other words, within a peaceful democratic framework the parties to a conflict no longer see each other as enemies but as adversaries.⁵⁷

The literature on agonistic peace deals primarily with peacebuilding in contexts of intractable violent conflict, such as in the Middle East, Afghanistan or Central Africa. The aim is to end and transform violent conflicts into non-violent and respectful relationships between conflicting parties. Nonetheless, this literature offers interesting insights for societies which are not tormented by large-scale violent conflicts but where professionals and policymakers are looking for ways to deal with rising

oppositions' tensions in non-violent ways.⁵⁸ One link between the latter contexts and agonistic notions of peace is conflict transformation.

A key insight of conflict transformation is that conflict, however disruptive and painful, is normal and inevitable in human relationships. According to peace researcher John Paul Lederach, the energy released in conflict suggests that there is often much more at stake than a mere dispute over a particular issue. Lederach gives the example of a family arguing about who should do the dishes. The object of the conflict is rather banal. But according to Lederach, the energy that may be released in family rows may indicate that deeper-lying issues resonate in recurring conflict episodes: the relationships between family members, mutual expectations and issues of decision-making power.⁵⁹ The same applies to conflicts in the public sphere – for example, when conflicts erupt over topics such as decolonisation or migration. Here, too, a complex interplay of issues is at stake, such as the nature of societal relations, identity and power.

Lederach distinguishes between conflict resolution or management, on the one hand, and conflict transformation, on the other. Based on his long experience in the practice of peacebuilding, he argues that the first terms (resolution, management) may come across as negative and raise suspicions on the part of people involved in conflict, such as activists. To them, Lederach notes, conflict resolution or management carries with it dangers of co-optation or attempts to get rid of a conflict, whereas people might have seen conflict as a way of raising particular issues. It might seem as if the conflict “manager” or “fixer” might want to get rid of the conflict as quickly as possible, while they want to put deep-rooted problems on the agenda.⁶⁰

In the same vein, peace researcher Oliver Ramsbotham emphasises that the goal of conflict management is not to “solve” or suppress conflicts as quickly as possible. Conflict is an inescapable feature of social development. In the struggle against an unjust situation, there may be a need for more and not less conflict.⁶¹ The aim of conflict management, Ramsbotham notes, is above all to deal with and transform conflicts constructively so that they may contribute to social change. Of course, conflicts do not always lead to positive change; in practice, they often lead to long-term cycles of pain and negative energy.⁶²

Peace researcher Katherine Bickmore aptly captures the ambivalent nature of conflict with her metaphor of conflict as oxygen: an essential and inescapable element of life, and at the same time explosive. Conflict is unavoidable in human relationships. However, they do not necessarily have to end in harm or violence. Whether conflicts explode in the faces of the conflicting parties depends to a large extent on how they are handled: in either destructive or constructive and non-violent ways.⁶³

3



From theory to practice: three suggestions

How to navigate polarisation and conflict? How to deal with them constructively? And how to avoid them becoming pernicious or toxic?

In recent years, numerous training programmes have been developed to enhance practitioners' skills to enable them to respond adequately to polarisation and conflict. It is, however, often not clear how effective these training programmes are. Anecdotal evidence, moreover, suggests that in their professional practice regarding polarisation and conflict practitioners stumble on a number of issues and obstacles. First, the observation is that some professionals seem to turn too exclusively to one method, technique or frame of reference and apply it in a wide variety of situations and scenarios. This is not always the most effective way to go about dealing with a situation. Second, the multitude of available strategies and methods can make it difficult for professionals to see the wood for the trees and to know which to select. Which technique or strategy should they apply in which situation? And how do the conceptual and theoretical frameworks behind this multitude of approaches relate to each other? Third, practical experience has raised a number of complex issues and questions among practitioners and professionals which require not only constant reflection, but possibly also further training. These include:

- How can different types of polarisation and conflict be distinguished in practice?
- When is polarisation a democratic dynamic and when does it become problematic and pernicious?
- How can professionals be attentive to the contestation dynamics and power issues that can underly polarisation and conflict?

It is not the aim of this report to offer a comprehensive overview of the available techniques and strategies to deal with polarisation and conflict. That has already been done very well by others.⁶⁴ Here we take a somewhat alternative approach. In the light of the previous discussion on the different forms of polarisation and the ambivalent meaning of polarisation and conflict, we formulate three suggestions that might be

helpful for policymakers and practitioners who want to engage with polarisation and conflict in non-violent and peaceful ways:

- Focus not only on the middle, but also reflect on the boundaries of the sphere within which plurality, conflict and polarisation can be played out in non-violent ways. Where the boundaries of such a framework exactly lie is often muddled and depends on the specific context in which professionals have to act (societal public debate, social media, the neighbourhood, the school, youth work, etc).
- In order to choose the most adequate and fitting approach, it is best to take into account and analyse the specific scenario and context in which a case of polarisation or conflict occurs.
- In order to deal constructively with conflict and polarisation, it is important to reflect on the position and attitude professionals want or have to take in a specific case of polarisation or conflict.

Before we elaborate on these suggestions, it is useful to summarise some key insights from the literature we discussed above:

Polarisation and conflict: some key insights

- **Polarisation** manifests itself in **different types**. In thematic and ideological polarisation opinions, points of view and world views diverge. In affective and social polarisation, social identities are set against each other and distance and distrust between people and groups grow. **Polarisation and conflict are** closely related, but they are different phenomena. It is important to keep in mind the multifaceted nature of polarisation and conflict and not to lump all forms of opposition, tension or confrontation together under the same heading of polarisation.
- Polarisation and conflict are integral to an open and pluralistic democratic society. **"Democratic" polarisation** can be an engine of social change. Nevertheless, polarisation can get out of hand and become **pernicious**. Ideological polarisation can lead to hostile quarrels and clashes. In social polarisation, us-versus-them thinking can take on negative forms and become hostile. In extreme cases, polarisation can lead to violence.
- From all of this we can filter a **normative guideline** for policy and practice: There are pernicious forms of polarisation that put pressure on peaceful coexistence. It is best to prevent or to depolarise these. At the same time, it is best to keep the space for plurality, difference of opinion and political action as open as possible, even if this leads to tensions and conflicts.

Suggestion 1: Reflect on the space for plurality, conflict and polarisation

The literature and training practices on polarisation often emphasise the importance of the middle. In and from that middle, the idea goes, you can look for connection with people who are still willing to think more subtly and who are reluctant to go along with polarised black-and-white and us-versus-them thinking. From the middle, the movement of groups towards the poles can be slowed down and reversed.⁶⁵ Philosopher Uwe Peters, for example, suggests that political polarisation can be reduced by regularly reminding people that the vast majority of people, of whatever persuasion, do not feel distrust or aversion towards their political opponents.⁶⁶ Other authors note that depoliticising conversations⁶⁷ and searching for an overarching, unifying identity (eg everyone is a pupil at the same school) can have a depoliticising effect.⁶⁸

Focusing on the middle is warranted. Nevertheless, there are reasons to target efforts to deal with polarisation and conflict not only at the middle. As agonistic theory suggests, democracy is not only about consensus and reasonable deliberation: it also involves divergent views, disagreements and activist efforts for change. As we mentioned above, these can lead to all kinds of tension and conflict. That is not necessarily a problem. From the perspective of peace, the main concern is that these conflicts and tensions do not result in violence and injustice. Therefore the focus of polarisation strategies shifts somewhat: not only connection in the middle is important, but thorough reflection is also needed on how we can create spaces that are as open as possible to plurality, differences of opinion and (activist) pursuits of social change. The underlying idea here is that free, open and democratic societies should, to the greatest extent possible, be resistant to the legitimate “shocks of democracy”: clashes of opinion, disagreements and oppositions. If we focus too single-mindedly on consensus and reasonable deliberation, there is a risk that we will push away or ban certain (eg activist) voices as being too polarising, or that we will not even hear these voices in the spaces we consider as being open to democratic debate.

This means that we should keep the space for democratic forms of polarisation and conflict as open as possible. Within that space, we should try to deal with differences of opinion and conflicts in non-violent ways. But, as we have pointed out, polarisation and conflict can become pernicious and toxic. For example, when disagreement and conflict is no longer played out as rivalry between adversaries but rather as an increasingly hostile or even violent struggle between enemies. When we think about the spaces within which democratic forms of polarisation and conflict can take shape without violence, we must therefore also think about when polarisation becomes pernicious and dangerous – and therefore about the boundaries of those spaces.

Boundaries can, of course, be drawn in different ways. In this section, our main aim is to describe in broad outlines, based on insights from the literature, some of the boundaries that indicate when polarisation becomes harmful or toxic, or threatens to

become so. We distinguish between two types of boundary: those drawn by the constitutional and legal framework of a plural democratic society, on the one hand, and those based on concerns about peaceful, non-violent coexistence, on the other.

In a democratic state, the **constitution** enshrines fundamental rights such as freedom and equal rights. Therefore the constitutional framework provides ample space for polarisation and conflict to be played out in a democratic, non-violent way.⁶⁹ At the same time, the constitution lays down a number of rules that allow the government to intervene when ideological oppositions and group conflicts derail and become destructive. The prohibition of violence, for example, is a cornerstone of the constitutional order. Therefore, so that the freedom to polarise some actors does not come at the expense of the freedom of others, the constitution guards the boundaries between democratic and violent polarisation.⁷⁰ In addition, society considers certain things so important that they are set down in **laws**. For example, incitement to violence, certain forms of hate speech and discrimination are prohibited by law (in Belgium, eg the Anti-Racism Act and the Anti-Discrimination Act).

Therefore, in addition to violence – the most important limit to polarisation a peaceful, constitutional democracy sets – certain statements and opinions are also bounded by law. In case of transgressions, the police and the judicial system can intervene. Actions linked to these interventions are repressive. It is therefore up to the (constitutional) legislative branch of government to decide where these “hard” boundaries of polarisation lie and subsequently to the courts to pass judgment in the event of possible transgressions of these boundaries. The debate on where the legal boundaries of speech and hate speech lie remains as topical as ever. Where those boundaries ultimately are drawn is in a democratic society a matter of public and parliamentary debate.

The legal framework sets “hard” boundaries on things such as violence and hate crimes. As our review of the literature above showed, there are also forms of polarisation that in themselves do not violate any laws but which can nevertheless have harmful effects on peaceful coexistence: for example, because they foment hostility between groups or because they pave the way for (extremist) violence. In a pluralistic democratic legal order, it is crucial to keep the spaces for freedom of expression and political action as open as possible. Nevertheless, based on concerns about peaceful and non-violent coexistence, it is useful to reflect on when polarisation becomes so pernicious and harmful to society that, even though no laws are transgressed, some form of action or intervention might be useful – for instance, in a classroom, in a neighbourhood or on social media.

Unlike legislation, these frameworks for non-violent, peaceful coexistence do not draw hard boundaries. Although legal boundaries are also seldom unambiguous and evolve with time and context, they are usually quite clear. If you punch someone in the face in the street, you can expect the police and perhaps a judge to interfere. But when polarisation becomes so harmful that it threatens peaceful coexistence is much less clear. That is why it is perhaps better to speak of “border regions” instead of boundaries. Ultimately, it is about the norms and values we want to nourish in an open

and plural society. Moreover, all these concerns are very context-specific. Where border regions lie will vary as a function of the context and the concrete situation. Statements (such as severe insults) that fall under free speech on an online forum or in the public debate, for example, may be considered undesirable or unacceptable in a pedagogical space such as the classroom. So, when we talk about border regions in this report, it is above all an invitation to reflect on how we want to maintain certain norms and values that guarantee non-violent peaceful coexistence in different social contexts.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider which actions we might want to link to possible context-sensitive transgressions of certain norms and values. In contrast to the enforcement of legal boundaries, “guarding” the softer border regions of peaceful coexistence is not about repression but about creating spaces where differences of opinion, democratic forms of conflict and polarisation and community building can be played out without becoming so toxic or pernicious that they put pressure on non-violent coexistence. These strategies entail instruments and techniques of a nature other than repressive methods, such as dialogue, mediation, cooperation and learning to disagree.

In what follows, we formulate some suggestions to inspire reflection and dialogue on these complex issues. Our guiding principle remains that in a plural, free and democratic society it is best to keep spaces for different opinions and contestation as open as possible, even when this leads to fierce conflicts and oppositions. So where, then, do possible border regions emerge or, in other words, when do polarisation and conflict become so harmful that they, dependent as they are on the specific context, warrant some kind of (preventive or reactive) intervention on the part of practitioners such as local authorities, teachers and youth workers?

- Polarisation becomes harmful when it is accompanied by systematically repeated forms of **verbal violence**, such as toxic insults, hate speech and threats, hidden or explicit. This is not language that is punishable by law, but it can nevertheless put pressure on society and peaceful coexistence, for example, because it incites hostility between people and groups or prepares the way for violence.⁷¹ Research by Textgain indicates that the use of toxic language online is increasing. For example, between 2015 and 2020, the number of posts on social media that were offensive, racist, sexist or threatening increased, while their toxicity also increased.⁷²
- Polarisation can also become harmful when people and groups no longer regard each other as democratic opponents or adversaries in a conflict but as **enemies**. The rivalry is no longer a question of political or ideological opposition; it turns into affective polarisation that threatens to become destructive. This dynamic can become self-reinforcing when different societal fault lines begin to converge and people from one group no longer have any contact with people from other groups and only irreconcilable hostility remains. When groups no longer accept a shared framework within which they can manage their conflicts in a non-violent way, this threatens to put pressure on coexistence and those conflicts can become destructive. When these dynamics manifest themselves at the level of society, Somer and McCoy note, democracy can come under pressure.⁷³ And if these dynamics persist, conflict studies and insights from social psychology

indicate (see above), the risk of violence also increases.⁷⁴ This is why agonistic approaches to peace place such a strong emphasis on the importance of transforming hostility into agonistic conflict management in a non-violent, democratic framework.

- Finally, polarisation is dangerous when it strengthens people and groups in their movement towards **extremism and violent radicalisation**. Extremism is understood here as being the rejection of the democratic legal order. Radicalisation is dangerous when it tends towards violence.⁷⁵

Finding ways to move forward when polarisation and conflict tend to become harmful is therefore a question of finding the difficult balance between keeping spaces as open as possible for plurality, disagreement and political action and being aware that certain forms of conflict and polarisation can become so pernicious and toxic that they put pressure on these open spaces themselves, because they result in hostility and risk paving the way for violence. As noted above, finding this balance and judging when certain statements or dynamics risk transgressing border regions very much depends on specific contexts and concrete situations. How we want to react to possibly pernicious forms of conflict and polarisation, in other words, will be different in contexts such as public debates in the media, parliament or on social media, in neighbourhoods or in schools. In public debates, for example, certain statements or insults may belong to the freedom of expression, whereas in the classroom there may be good pedagogical reasons to take action somehow.

How action is taken to deal with harmful polarisation dynamics also depends on the function and position of the different actors involved. Judges, police officers, teachers, local authorities or youth workers all have their own specific role to play. Methods and techniques will also differ as a function of the situation and context. In some cases, repressive action is required – for example, when polarisation leads to violence. In other cases, dialogic techniques or mediative strategies may be useful.⁷⁶

Some examples:

- A judge who has to examine whether a certain polarising statement is punishable by law will test it against the legal framework. If the statement breaks the law, the judge will pass a sentence. If the statement falls within the scope of freedom of expression, the accused will be acquitted.
- A moderator on an online forum ideally leaves as much space as possible for diverse opinions. Disagreement, conflict and polarisation are part of this. However, a moderator might consider some statements or posts as unacceptable, either because they violate legal boundaries or because they are inconsistent with the rules and conventions of the forum. The moderator will then act, for example, by reporting the post, informing the poster that their remarks transgress the rules of the forum, or by deleting the comment.
- A prevention officer in a municipality is confronted with tensions and polarisation dynamics in a neighbourhood. First, they will analyse the situation and assess how the conflict and polarisation exactly plays out. Are there still contacts between members of different groups, for example in a sports club, or

are increasingly homogeneous groups drifting apart, no longer having any contact? And are they starting to treat each other with hostility? Depending on the answers to these kinds of question, the officer will decide on the best course of action to take and which intervention might be most adequate.

- Teachers can suddenly be startled by confrontational statements from pupils in the classroom, a heated discussion about a polarising topic or increasing opposition between different groups of pupils. It is then important that they assess the situation adequately. Is it a fierce discussion about a topic on which pupils have very different points of view? Or is it a matter of affective and social polarisation that is becoming harmful to coexistence in the school? Are any boundaries being transgressed? Is the safety of pupils in the school at risk? Depending on the concrete situation, the teacher will choose a specific strategy or intervention that defuses harmful antagonisms but, at the same time, keeps the space for substantive dissent or positive forms of group identification as open as possible.⁷⁷

These reflections on context-sensitivity bring us to a second suggestion.

Suggestion 2: Take into account different scenarios and contexts

The spectrum of techniques and strategies to deal with polarisation that is on offer in training for professionals and practitioners has expanded substantially in recent years. How to choose the most adequate and effective approach? This is not always easy. It is sometimes difficult to see the wood for the trees and to choose the most appropriate and relevant approach in a concrete situation.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, choosing the “right” approach is important if practitioners want to be as effective as possible.

It is not the aim of this report to develop a practical or comprehensive strategy on how to deal with polarisation. Nor will we give a detailed overview of the many techniques and practical approaches that are on offer. For this we refer to the publication *Theories and Approaches to Polarisation* of the Dutch Knowledge Platform Integration & Society (KIS). In that report, KIS develops a series of concrete practical approaches based on scientific literature.⁷⁹ Instead, in this part of the report, we mainly want to point out two elements that are important to deal with in an effective manner in the case of polarisation and in choosing the most appropriate approach: first, it is important to consider different scenarios in which polarisation may occur and, second, it is best to take into account the specifics of the context in which practitioners have to act.

Distinguishing between **different scenarios** makes sense for several reasons. First, as we analysed above, polarisation and conflict are complex and ambivalent phenomena. Insights and conceptual distinctions from the scientific literature help us to develop a firmer grip on the phenomenon in practice and to distinguish between different forms of polarisation (eg ideological and affective) and assess whether one is dealing with democratic or with pernicious polarisation. Second, a distinction between different

scenarios provides guidance when having to choose the most adequate and effective approach.⁸⁰ In other words, to make an informed decision on the most appropriate approach it is imperative for practitioners first to try to identify the specific situation and the form of polarisation they are faced with. Such a “scenario-sensitive” approach may seem obvious, but in practice it remains an important challenge for professionals. To inspire reflection, below we describe a possible distinction between three scenarios in which polarisation and conflict can occur.⁸¹

Next, it is important for practitioners to have an eye on the specific **context** in which polarisation occurs. The peculiarities of that context determine both the opportunities and the limits of their actions. A classroom, where teachers try to create open and pedagogically safe places for young people to explore their differences of opinion and identities, for example, is a different kind of space from a public online platform, where moderators try to facilitate an open discussion between people who do not engage in “face-to-face” contact. Below we focus mainly on contexts in which the intended target audience of this report (local prevention officials, education professionals, and youth and social workers) have to work and deal with polarisation.⁸²

1. Acute polarisation

In a first scenario, polarisation occurs in an acute way. In some cases, this may involve dangerous forms of polarisation, such as when group polarisation threatens to result in violent extremism. In this case, it is up to the police, the security services and preventive services to act. In other cases, it might be a case of worryingly increasing mutual distrust and hostile antagonism between people or groups at school or in a neighbourhood. In some cases, this increasing affective polarisation can lead to bitter conflicts and possibly violent clashes between “us” and “them”.

A first step in dealing with acute polarisation is to identify who exactly is polarising and in what context this is happening: Is it about individuals or groups of students at school or residents in the neighbourhood or on an online platform? And how do these opposing positions relate to polarisation in larger strands of public opinion?⁸³ Second, it is important to assess the nature of the polarisation: Is it about polarisation on a single theme or are several fault lines beginning to converge? Is it about escalating ideological oppositions – for example, when people or groups take radical or opposing positions on a particular theme and set themselves off against competing groups? Or does the polarisation take on an affective load and do the groups display mutual distrust, dislike or even hatred? Is it a democratic (eg activist) form of polarisation or does the polarisation threaten to become hostile and harmful? Third, it is important to assess the intensity and scale of the polarisation – for example, by looking at the distance between, the homogeneity within and the size of the opposing groups.⁸⁴

Depending on the nature and intensity of the polarisation, and on the specific context, different techniques and approaches can be used to deal with the polarisation and the ensuing conflicts.

In the case of pernicious forms of affective or social polarisation, attempts at dialogue or bridge-building between representatives of the opposing camps are often fruitless. As Bart Brandsma argues, such attempts often only provide the fuel that further propels the polarisation. *Polarisation pushers* are not interested in a sincere dialogue, but will use the dialogue only as a platform to propel polarisation further. A better strategy, according to Brandsma, is to defuse the polarisation by moving to the middle, seeking a connection with the people in that middle based on an issue or a dilemma that is not about identity, and in this way slowing down the attraction and growth of the poles.⁸⁵ In a classroom, in the neighbourhood or online, this can be done by talking to the group of pupils or people who still want to think and talk about issues in a nuanced and cooperative way. Research suggests that this strategy can work. For instance, depoliticising issues or making party preferences (or group identities) less salient can mitigate contradictions.⁸⁶

In other cases, attempts at transformation can perhaps be made to move polarised people and groups from an antagonistic and hostile position to a more agonistic one. This can be done, for example, through mediation or contact between pupils or people in the neighbourhood (see also below).

One way of assessing which approach might work in a specific situation is to look at who is polarising and what motivates them. As for the pushers of polarisation, it is useful, for example, to look at the strategy behind the polarisation. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer note that toxic polarisation is often initiated as an intentional tactic by political entrepreneurs. These “polarisation entrepreneurs” activate political fault lines as a means of winning supporters and weakening opponents. These tactics can be extremely effective but, as McCoy and Somer point out, they are not without risk.⁸⁷ Bart Brandsma points out that there is little point in continuing to engage in dialogue or mediation with virulent polarisation pushers. Polarisation is then not about a conflict between concrete parties that a facilitator could mediate but about broader affective and social polarisation dynamics that are fuelled by the pushers’ discourses on opposing identities.⁸⁸ However, one pusher might not be like another. For example, students in the classroom or social activists can be particularly vehement in their discourse and take radical positions without necessarily engaging in toxic polarisation. In such cases, it may be that the polarisation and the resulting conflicts are driven by legitimate concerns or grievances. When these kinds of opposition lead to clashes, dialogue or mediation techniques adopted from conflict transformation can offer ways to deal with these situations.

2. Diverging views and increasing contradictions

In some situations, practitioners may intuit that ideological or affective polarisation is increasing in their classroom, in a neighbourhood or on an online platform. It may, however, also be the case that ideological or social distance between groups or communities is increasing invisibly, below the waterline as it were. Another scenario is

that groups of like-minded people become polarised – for example, groups of pupils at school who reinforce each other in a shared belief or world view.

Distance between people or groups is not necessarily a problem. For example, there may be people or groups living side by side in a neighbourhood or on different online platforms without having significant contact with each other, but who also do not display significant levels of mutual mistrust or hostility. When tensions and hostility between distant groups do increase, however, and there is a risk of harmful conflict, it may be necessary to start working on these oppositions and tensions. In this way, polarisation dynamics can be prevented from becoming acute, pernicious or possibly even violent. In addition to this preventive value, these kinds of effort can have an intrinsic value: bringing people in contact with each other or increasing mutual understanding and inspiring people to live together non-violently despite sharp differences of opinion. For this type of intervention it can be useful to turn to insights from conflict transformation to try to explore questions relating to relations, expectations, needs, interests or identity and power issues that may lie behind the polarisation or conflict dynamics. In this way, one can try to ensure that polarisation remains non-violent and does not become harmful.

To do this in concrete situations, practitioners can turn to a variety of strategies and techniques, as described in the paragraphs that follow.

Conversations and discussions in **groups of like-minded people** – for example, pupils in a classroom or neighbours – can lead to the polarisation of those groups. In cases where that group polarisation could take on a harmful or hostile form – for example, because hateful or anti-democratic attitudes are being reinforced – the literature offers points of departure for mitigating the polarisation dynamics. Groups that are actively guided by a facilitator to respect deliberative rules and which are challenged to explore different points of view polarise less than groups in which this does not happen. Groups that are given nuanced, balanced and multi-sided information about an issue to be discussed before the discussion starts appear to polarise less. And, finally, there also appears to be less group polarisation when the outcome of a discussion is left open and there is no (not even implicit) requirement of consensus.⁸⁹

In order to manage increasing distance and distrust **between groups**, the literature and training practice often refer to the contact hypothesis. In short, this theory states that contact between groups is related to lower levels of stereotyping and prejudice. This correlation has been confirmed in a large number of empirical studies.⁹⁰ Although encounters between members of different groups can be useful and can actually contribute to reducing prejudice and stereotyping, they remain a challenge: one should not expect prejudice to disappear just because of an encounter. It is also possible that contacts could lead to greater distance. It is therefore important to pay careful attention to the preconditions under which contact between the members of groups can effectively lead to the reduction of distance and distrust between those groups. Gordon Allport, one of the originators of the contact theory, formulated four conditions:

- the people who make contact should have equal status;

- they work on common objectives;
- contact takes place in an atmosphere of cooperation; and
- the contact is “institutionally” supported – for example, by a local authority or a school.⁹¹

Other preconditions mentioned in the literature are the importance of good facilitation of the contact meeting, taking sufficient account of risks and of sensitivities between the groups, and the duration of the contact, prolonged and deep contact being more likely to promote more positive effects.⁹²

On the basis of the categorisation processes at play in the formation of group identities, the literature also suggests several strategies for shaping these intergroup contacts.⁹³ First, one can try to reduce the “us-versus-them” antagonism by either emphasising the differences between members of the other group or highlighting the individuality of members of the other group (“de-categorisation”). A second strategy is to look for an overarching identity that the groups can share (eg all those involved are students at the same school; we all live in the same municipality).⁹⁴ A point to note, however, is that if such an overarching identity is insufficiently open and plural, it may pose a threat to minority groups with a lower social status.⁹⁵ Because these two strategies sometimes pay insufficient attention to the importance of the positive aspects of social identities,⁹⁶ the literature formulates some additional approaches. For instance, one can focus both on creating an overarching identity and on confirming the identity of the subgroups. In addition, efforts can also be made to identify common third groups to which both polarising groups belong. Members of the two groups realise that they share membership in a third group.

Each of these strategies can be effective under certain conditions, but they all have their limitations.⁹⁷ Social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew therefore suggests that the different strategies may complement one another. For example, while highlighting differences between members of the other group may be useful in the early stages of contact when mutual distrust is at its highest, highlighting the positive aspects of the social identities of the groups involved may be of value when contact is more established.⁹⁸

Positive contacts and encounters can take shape in different ways and contexts, from the school and the neighbourhood to online platforms.⁹⁹ Dialogue is an important method in these efforts. Dialogue can be useful both to mitigate the possible negative effects of ideological and affective polarisation and to handle conflicts in an open and non-violent way. According to peace researcher John Paul Lederach, it is best to take a broad approach to dialogue. Such a broad approach includes not only talks and conversations, but also joint project work, artistic methods or methods that are, besides the exchange of arguments, also open to expressing emotions and dealing with people in their physicality.¹⁰⁰

An example of such a method is *Deep Democracy*, a technique that deliberately explores disagreements and divergent opinions, even if they are below the waterline.¹⁰¹ It is

important to think carefully about the objectives that dialogues should serve. In some cases, the aim of discussions may be to reach a compromise or consensus (eg as part of a decision-making process). In other cases, dialogues are useful for developing mutual understanding and listening skills, or at least the recognition and acceptance that people have different opinions. A more general aim may be for people to recognise the importance of living together non-violently and avoiding hostility.

For an explanation of concrete approaches and their theoretical foundations we recommend the report *Theories and Approaches to Polarisation* by the Dutch Knowledge Platform Integration & Society (KIS).¹⁰²

3. Practising plurality, positive identity development and democratic conflict

Practice makes progress. The idea in this scenario is that it can be both intrinsically useful and potentially preventive to work in relatively peaceful periods with target audiences (pupils, youths, communities in neighbourhoods) in order to enhance mutual understanding and develop skills related to positive identity development, plurality and ideological disagreement. These efforts can certainly be valuable in education and youth work, but it can also work in other contexts, such as in neighbourhood work or that on online platforms. The spectrum of possible strategies and forms of working is broad: dialogue, philosophical conversations, cooperation in projects, artistic methods. To prevent these exercises from dragging on endlessly and to ensure that they actually lead to a better understanding of one another's points of view and a greater willingness to listen, it is important that they are well prepared and actively guided and facilitated.¹⁰³

Suggestion 3: Reflect on position and basic attitude

How should one navigate polarisation and conflict in different contexts and situations and, if they threaten to get out of hand, how does one defuse or prevent destructive antagonisms and tensions? More than merely applying concrete strategies and techniques, working in the force field of polarisation and conflict is first and foremost a matter of reflecting on position and developing a mediative basic attitude.

First, it is important for practitioners to think carefully about how they want to position themselves with regard to the specific episodes of polarisation and conflict they have to deal with. Different people take on different roles in society: that of politician, activist, opinion-maker, journalist, policymaker, judge, prevention official, teacher, youth worker, social worker, police officer, mediator. These roles determine the specific positions that these actors assume – or have to assume – with regard to particular instances of polarisation and conflict.

For politicians, activists or opinion-makers, polarisation and conflict are part of the game. Politics is often about taking clear ideological positions and setting them against

those of other parties. Activists try in a fiery manner to bring about social change. Like politicians, they want to mobilise groups (and group identities) to boost their political agenda. This can lead to tensions and conflicts. That is not a problem in itself, though: it is part and parcel of democratic politics. As we argued above, though, it is crucial to keep the space for clashes of opinion, disagreements and opposite viewpoints as open as possible. Yet polarisation and conflict can become pernicious and toxic. The Dutch RMO therefore wrote in 2009 that

“groups that want to engage in political or societal action will have to make trade-offs between a sharp positioning and the preservation of their relations with other groups – groups with which they are likely to want to do business in the future.”¹⁰⁴

A useful guideline may therefore be that oppositions and conflicts are best played out on an agonistic playing field so that they do not become antagonistic or hostile.

In this report, we mainly want to provide a frame of reference for professionals who are expected to deal with polarisation and conflicts in a mediating way: trainers, prevention officers, teachers, social workers, police officers, service-providers in public services – How can they work in a mediating way? Generally speaking, this is not a matter of merely applying particular methods and techniques. As John Paul Lederach writes, a focus on concrete action schemes and strategies is important, but it is not the only way to be effective in conflict transformation.¹⁰⁵ Marjan Verplancke, Alexander Van Leuven and Christophe Busch of the Hannah Arendt Institute explain it as follows:

“Many of us are looking for action schemes, checklists and scenarios to deal with polarisation. However, this confuses the distinction Hannah Arendt made between ‘work’ and ‘action’. For Arendt, going through check lists and implementing step-by-step action plans on automatic pilot is work. But dealing with polarisation in the classroom, in the neighbourhood or in an online context is the domain of action par excellence: there is no recipe book, no roadmap. We can only very imperfectly predict the consequences of our actions. This means that teachers, social workers, civil servants or police officers who want to deal with polarisation will not only have to acquire ... skills, but also and especially prepare themselves for the unpredictability of the complex dynamics of polarisation. Acting professionally – reflecting critically not only on the situation but also on their own practice – is always central to this.”¹⁰⁶

In the same vein, conflict researcher Peter T Coleman quotes Karl Popper’s distinction between two different types of problem: *clock problems*, which are of a more mechanical, controllable and predictable nature and which can be repaired and fixed through technical problem-solving methods; and *cloud problems*, which are highly irregular, disorderly, uncontrollable and unpredictable, and which may prove unresponsive to standard problem-solving techniques and require alternative methods. Divisive conflict and polarisation dynamics often fall in the latter category of problems.¹⁰⁷

Dealing with polarisation and conflict, in other words, is not a matter of instrumental rationality. Policymakers and practitioners can turn to a wide variety of action schemes

and techniques but, ultimately, they will have to navigate their own way through the unruly reality of polarisation and conflict. This requires not only that they reflect carefully about their position; it also implies that they work on and develop a certain attitude. Lederach considers building peace and non-violence as a matter of imagination, an ability to see something in difficult situations that can be used to go beyond the immediate problem and create something new. That still sounds quite abstract. What does such a basic attitude involve in more practical terms? And what skills are involved?

Lederach mentions, among other things, the ability to see situations as dilemmas and not to want to solve paradoxes too quickly.¹⁰⁸ A willingness to listen and an open, curious and questioning attitude are crucial. The importance of such an open and questioning attitude is reflected in the central role that questioning techniques play in many depolarisation and conflict management techniques. The importance of open and empathic questioning can be seen, for example, in conflict mediation techniques, in dialogues and philosophical discussions, in the depolarisation strategies of Bart Brandsma, in *Deep Democracy*, and so on. By asking open questions, listening actively and speaking in a mediating tone of voice, conflict mediators try to explore the emotions, interests and needs behind episodes of polarisation or conflict. It is also crucial to look carefully. Not just at what is happening right in front of our eyes, but at the episode of the conflict or polarisation dynamic. To understand what is happening, it is best also to look at the context, the underlying patterns, the human relationships, the emotions and needs, the identity issues, the socio-economic and political structures, and the power dynamics.¹⁰⁹ This is how Lederach summarises his approach to conflict transformation:

“A transformative approach seeks to understand specific episodes of conflict not in isolation, but as embedded in broader patterns. ... In order to tap the positive potential of conflict, we need to focus on less visible issues such as relationships between people and groups, rather than concentrating unilaterally on the content of the struggle which is often much more visible. The issues that people fight over are important and require a creative response. Nevertheless, relationships and relations weave a web of connections that forms the broader context of conflict – the human ecosystem in which certain issues emerge and come to life.”¹¹⁰

To summarise: dealing with polarisation and conflict in constructive ways involves more than the instrumental application of a set of techniques and action schemes. What is crucial is to act from the basis of a mediating attitude. This attitude consists of key skills such as active listening, open questioning and careful observation. In this way, practitioners can find out what is going on behind the opposition or confrontation. From this basic mediating attitude they can deal with polarisation in various situations and, in the light of the concrete context and situation, choose specific techniques or methods.

Three suggestions for dealing peacefully with polarisation and conflict

- Reflect on ways to create spaces that are as open as possible to plurality, differences of opinion and (activist) pursuits of social change. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the boundaries when polarisation and conflict become pernicious and toxic. This reflection will enable democratic forms of polarisation and conflict to be accommodated non-violently; and it will lead to pernicious and toxic polarisation and conflict being defused and transformed or prevented.
- Take into account the different scenarios in which polarisation and conflict occur and decide on an approach as a function of the concrete situation and context (such as in neighbourhoods, classrooms and online platforms).
- Reflect on position and basic attitude.

4

Conclusion



Polarisation is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon. Dealing with polarisation, in both policy and practice, will inevitably also be complex. In order to get a foothold, it makes sense for policymakers and practitioners to keep reflecting on the frames of reference they use.

With this report, we wanted to feed this reflection. To this end, we have described the broad outlines of such a possible frame of reference. In doing so, we have put forward a number of elements. In order to avoid lumping every opposition, clash or conflict into the same category of polarisation, we discussed the different manifestations of polarisation and explained the distinction between polarisation and conflict. Second, we stressed the ambivalent meaning of polarisation and its complex relation to democracy and power. In an open and free democracy, plurality and disagreement can result in episodes polarisation and conflict, but not all of these episodes are necessarily harmful. Third, we offered three approaches that we hope will inspire policy and practice:

- the importance of reflecting on the spaces in which polarisation and conflict can play out non-violently;
- the different scenarios in which polarisation can occur; and
- the basic mediating attitude according to which polarisation and conflict can be dealt with.

The importance of dealing in non-violent ways with polarisation and conflict will only increase in the coming years. In all likelihood, the tensions and conflicts in our society will not diminish, as they seem to be related to profound transformations that society has been going through for a few decades now.

Alan Abramowitz argues that the polarisation in the United States reflects the profound ways in which the country has changed since the 1950s. Technological change, globalisation, migration, increasing diversity and changes in family structures and gender roles are, he says, received differently by different groups. On the one hand,

Abramowitz sees groups that welcome these changes. On the other hand, there are groups that react with reticence.¹¹¹

In Europe, too, the sharp divisions and tensions we are experiencing today are linked to far-reaching social transformations and crises.¹¹² As Van Drunen et al point out, crises such as the economic recession of 2008 and the refugee crisis of 2015 are often accompanied by discourses that place sharp us-versus-them divisions at their centre.¹¹³ The COVID crisis seems to have intensified that dynamic once again.

In our hyper-modern societies, many things seem to have become volatile or fluid.¹¹⁴ In the search for something to hold onto, some individuals or groups resort to old “solids”, whereas others welcome fluidity or seek solace in new “solids”. All of this seems to go hand in hand with a hardening of attitudes on a whole range of themes that are controversial today: identity, migration and decolonisation, to name but three. In line with the hardening of attitudes, tensions, polarisation and conflicts are also increasing.

How do we best deal with this? How do we look for connection, while keeping the space for plurality and difference of opinion as open as possible and preventing or defusing harmful forms of polarisation and conflict? The stakes arising from these questions are high: How do we want to live together in an open, democratic and non-violent way?

Endnotes

- ¹ In order to gain a tentative view of the ways in which polarisation is framed in the Flemish press, from 1 to 31 March 2021 we collected via gopress.be all the articles in which the terms "polarisatie", "polarisering" or "polarising" appeared. This yielded 116 mentions, with one article sometimes yielding several mentions – for example, when both a journalist and an interviewee used the term. First, we considered how the term is mentioned conceptually: without or with an adjective (eg an adjective such as "political", "toxic"); without or with further explanation (eg "polarisation is ..."); and whether a distinction was made between different forms of polarisation (eg between "ideological" and "social" polarisation). Of the 116 times that the term "polarization" was mentioned, in seven cases it was used with an adjective (eg "political" or "social" polarisation), while in one case a further explanation was given ("Polarisation ensures that we quickly define the other group as a category and dismiss them in a negative way"). This means that in more than 90% of the cases the term "polarization" was used without an adjective or further explanation. Second, we looked at how polarisation is framed normatively, that is, as a negative, a positive or an ambivalent phenomenon. In two cases, polarisation was described as a phenomenon that can sometimes be positive, while in 20 cases the term was used without an explicit normative or value-laden judgement being attached to it. In about 80% of the mentions, polarisation was framed as a negative social phenomenon. (With thanks to Simon Thijs.)
- ² Some researchers therefore suggest that the way we talk about polarisation matters. According to philosopher Uwe Peters, claims about increasing polarisation may lead to *more* polarisation because, in the light of such claims, people might start to shape their thinking and behaviour in such a way that social division only increases. He also notes that some studies suggest that people sometimes perceive there to be more polarisation than there actually is. See U Peters, "How (many) descriptive claims about political polarization exacerbate polarization." (2021) *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 9(1), 25, 30, 32.
- ³ See N Charkaoui, "De ene polarisatie is de andere niet." *MO Magazine*, 30 December 2020.
- ⁴ On this distinction, see B Brandsma, *Polarisatie. Inzicht in de Dynamiek van Wij-Zij Denken* (BB in Media, 2016), 45ff.
- ⁵ See R Fletcher, A Cornia & RK Nielsen, "How polarized are online and offline news audiences? A comparative analysis of twelve countries." (2020) *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(2), 169–195.
- ⁶ CR Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); H Lamm & DG Myers, "Group induced polarization of attitudes and behavior." (1978) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 11, 145–195; K Strandberg, S Himmelroos & K Grönlund, "Do discussions in like-minded groups necessarily lead to more extreme opinions? Deliberative democracy and group polarization." (2019) *International Political Science Review*, 40(1), 41–57.
- ⁷ CR Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ⁸ CR Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); S Moscovici, "The discovery of group polarization," in: D Granberg & G Sarup (eds), *Social Judgment and Intergroup Relations* (New York: Springer, 1992), 107–127; H Lamm & DG Myers, "Group-induced polarization of attitudes and behavior." (1978) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 11, 145–195.
- ⁹ M Brauer, CM Judd & MD Gliner, "The effects of repeated expressions on attitude polarization during group discussions." (1995) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 1014–1029.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, A Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment. Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018); A Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); MJ Hetherington, "Review article: Putting polarization in perspective." (2009) *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(2), 413–448. Exactly how ideologically polarised public opinion in the United States is has long been the subject of debate among US researchers. Answers seem to depend on what researchers measure and whom they research: among the general public or among partisans, the engaged electorate or the people who subscribe to one of the two major political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. Among these partisans, Alan Abramowitz (2010) finds, for example, that for several decades they have held increasingly consistent positions on various issues, such as cultural, economic and social issues, and national security. The more consistent these ideological positions are, according to Abramowitz, the stronger their preference for a particular political party. As a result, according to him, over the course of the past half-century Democratic voters have become increasingly clustered on the left side of the ideological spectrum and Republicans on the right side of that spectrum. This clustering and increased ideological consistency are closely related to a phenomenon that researchers call *party sorting*. Until the 1950s, ideology and party identification did not coincide in the United States. Both parties included progressives (*liberals*) and conservatives. After the 1960s, however, a profound transformation took place that resulted in ideology and party preference increasingly coinciding: the Democrats are now the party of progressives, the Republicans of conservatives (Abramowitz, 2018, 19–42). Although it is possible that *party sorting* and ideological clustering do not lead to polarisation (in the sense of ever-increasing distance), according to Abramowitz, this is the case in the United States: partisans are growing further and further apart (Abramowitz, 2018, 101–102).
- ¹¹ A Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment. Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018), 8, 15, 58.
- ¹² L Mason, *Uncivil Agreement. How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2018), 7–8; SJ Westwood, S Iyengar, S Walgrave, RL Leonisio, L Miller & O Strijbis, "The tie that divides: Cross-national evidence of the primacy of partyism." (2018) *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(2), 333–354; J McCoy & M Somer, "Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies." (2019) *The ANNALS*

- of the *American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 234–271; M Somer & J McCoy, "Déjà vu? Polarization and endangered democracies in the 21st century." (2018) *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 3–15.
- ¹³ S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- ¹⁴ B Van Gorp, J Van Hove, M Figoureaux & B Vyncke, *Anders Communiceren over Migratie en Vluchtelingen. Aan de Slag met Frames en Counterframes* (Leuven: KUL Institute for Media Studies, 2020), 10.
- ¹⁵ AM Enders & MT Armaly, "The differential effects of actual and perceived polarization." (2019) *Political Behavior*, 41, 815–839.
- ¹⁶ A Reiljan, "Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarization in European party systems." (2020) *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396; M Wagner, "Affective polarization in multiparty systems." (2021) *Electoral Studies*, vol 69.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146; SL Moore-Berg, B Hameiri & E Bruneau, "The prime psychological suspects of toxic political polarization." (2020) *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 199–200.
- ¹⁸ M Somer & J McCoy, "Transformations through polarizations and global threats to democracy." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 13–14. See also the thinking of Bart Brandsma, which summarises these dynamics into three laws and five roles: B Brandsma, *Polarisatie. Inzicht in de Dynamiek van Wij-Zij Denken* (BB in Media, 2016).
- ¹⁹ L Mason, *Uncivil Agreement. How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2018), 4–6, 14; M Motyl, "Liberals and conservatives are (geographically) dividing." In: P Valdesolo & J Graham (eds), *Social Psychology of Political Polarization* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 7–37.
- ²⁰ See, for example, J Haidt, *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 2013); A Waytz, R Iyer, L Young & J Graham, "Ideological differences in the expanse of empathy." In: P Valdesolo & J Graham (eds), *Social Psychology of Political Polarization* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 61–77.
- ²¹ For examples see E Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 43–48.
- ²² JW Jackson, "Realistic group conflict theory: A review and evaluation of the theoretical and empirical literature." (1993) *Psychological Record*, 43, 395–405.
- ²³ H Tajfel & J Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict." In: WG Austin & S Worchel (eds), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47. See also A Al Ramiah, M Hewstone & K Schmid, "Social identity and intergroup conflict." (2011) *Psychological Studies*, 56, 44–52.
- ²⁴ M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604. See also M Motyl, "Liberals and conservatives are (geographically) dividing." In: P Valdesolo & J Graham (eds), *Social Psychology of Political Polarization* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 19.
- ²⁵ A Al Ramiah, M Hewstone & K Schmid, "Social identity and intergroup conflict." (2011) *Psychological Studies*, 56, 44–52.
- ²⁶ J Greene, *Moral Tribes. Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 23, 26, 99, 293–294.
- ²⁷ J Haidt, *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 61–108.
- ²⁸ JW Jackson, "Realistic group conflict theory: A review and evaluation of the theoretical and empirical literature." (1993) *Psychological Record*, 43, 395–405.
- ²⁹ For a theoretical scheme of the different escalation stages of conflicts see, for example, F Glasl, *Handbook of Conflict Management* (SWP, 2015), 193–304.
- ³⁰ H Tajfel & J Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict." In: WG Austin & S Worchel (eds), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.
- ³¹ MB Brewer, "Ingroup identification and intergroup conflict: When does ingroup love become outgroup hate?" In: RD Ashmore, L Jussim & D Wilder (eds), *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict and Conflict Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17–41. See also M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604.
- ³² For example, Danzell, Yeh & Pfannenstiel find that ethnic polarisation increases the likelihood of terrorist violence, but that this link is particularly strong in contexts where economic conditions are poor: OE Danzell, Y-Y Yeh & M Pfannenstiel, "Determinants of domestic terrorism: An examination of ethnic polarization and economic development." (2016) *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 536–558.
- ³³ See, for example, Gregory H Stanton's, *Ten Steps to Genocide* (2016): <<http://genocidewatch.net/genocide-2/8-stages-of-genocide/>>.
- ³⁴ SL Moore-Berg, B Hameiri & E Bruneau, "The prime psychological suspects of toxic political polarization." (2020) *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 199–204. See also J McCoy & M Somer, "Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 245.
- ³⁵ See B Brandsma, *Polarisatie. Inzicht in de Dynamiek van Wij-Zij Denken* (BB in Media, 2016).
- ³⁶ For this interaction in a context of intractable conflict see T Orian Harel, I Maoz & E Halperin, "A conflict within a conflict: Intragroup ideological polarization and intergroup intractable conflict." (2020) *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 52–57.

- 37 B Spruyt, F Van Droogenbroeck & J van Noord, "Conflict thinking: Exploring the social basis of perceiving the world through the lens of social conflict." (2018) *Social Science Research*, 74, 17–18.
- 38 Y van Druenen, B Spruyt & F Van Droogenbroeck, "The salience of perceived societal conflict in Europe: A 27 country study on the development of a measure for generalized conflict thinking." (2021) *Social Indicators Research*, online.
- 39 B Spruyt, F Van Droogenbroeck & J van Noord, "Conflict thinking: Exploring the social basis of perceiving the world through the lens of social conflict." (2018) *Social Science Research*, 74, 17–18.
- 40 There are many definitions and conceptions of what "democracy" or "democratic" means. When we speak of democracy or democratic in the context of this report, we are referring to a democratic legal order in which freedom, equality, pluralism and the rule of law are central features.
- 41 See L Mason, *Uncivil Agreement. How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2018), 6, 7, 15 and 101; and U Peters, "How (many) descriptive claims about political polarization exacerbate polarization." (2021) *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 9(1), 26.
- 42 J McCoy & M Somer, "Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 236, 244; M Somer & J McCoy "Déjà vu? Polarization and endangered democracies in the 21st century." (2018) *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 8.
- 43 RMO (ed), *Polarisatie, Bedreigend en Verrijkend*, (Amsterdam: SWP, 2009). The RMO was disbanded on 1 January 2015 and merged into the Netherlands Council for Public Health and Society. See <www.raadvv.nl>.
- 44 RMO (ed), *Polariseren binnen Onze Grenzen* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2009).
- 45 K Grönlund, K Herne & M Setälä, "Does enclave deliberation polarize opinions?" (2015) *Political Behavior*, 37(4), 995–1020.
- 46 CR Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 47 A Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.
- 48 M Wagner, "Affective polarization in multiparty systems." (2021) *Electoral Studies*, vol 69; A Reiljan, "Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarization in European party systems." (2020) *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396; S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. See also A Roblain & EGT Green, "From perceived polarization of immigration attitudes to collective action." (2021) *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 80, 119, who indicate that perceived polarisation (in this case about migration) is also related to political participation and activism.
- 49 M Wagner, "Affective polarization in multiparty systems." (2021) *Electoral Studies*, vol 69; A Reiljan, "Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarization in European party systems." (2020) *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396.
- 50 S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- 51 While acknowledging the potentially positive aspects of polarization, McCoy and Somer's work is primarily concerned with harmful polarisation: M Somer & J McCoy, "Déjà vu? Polarization and endangered democracies in the 21st century." (2018) *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 7–9; M Somer & J McCoy, "Transformations through polarizations and global threats to democracy." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 10–11; J McCoy & M Somer, "Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 235.
- 52 See, for example, FARO, *Het Agonistische Museum* (Brussels: FARO, 2021).
- 53 See, for example, AC Bull & HL Hansen, "On agonistic memory." (2016) *Memory Studies*, 9(4), 390–404.
- 54 See, for example, CW Ruitenberg, "Educating political adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and radical democratic citizenship education." (2009) *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28(3), 269–281.
- 55 C Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London & New York: Verso, 2013); C Mouffe, "Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism." (1999) *Social Research*, 66(3), 745–758. In the literature, there remains a critical debate on agonistic approaches to democratic politics; see, for example, E Erman, "What is wrong with agonistic pluralism? Reflections on conflict in democratic theory." (2009) *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 35(9), 1039–1062.
- 56 This view ties in with arguments for non-violence that place the role of activism at the centre, as in J Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence. An Ethico-Political Bind* (London & New York: Verso, 2020).
- 57 L Strömbom, "Exploring analytical avenues for agonistic peace." (2020) *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23, 1–23. See also M Lehti, *From Antagonism to Agonistic Peace: Rethinking Identities and Dialogic Transformation*, Paper presented at the 57th ISA annual convention, Atlanta, Georgia, 2016.
- 58 See, for example, the workshop *Bringing Peacebuilding Home* at the Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, 4 May 2021.
- 59 JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 11.
- 60 JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 3–4, 7, 15.
- 61 O Ramsbotham, *Transforming Violent Conflict. Radical Disagreement, Dialogue and Survival* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 53.

- ⁶² JP Lederach *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 3–4, 7, 15.
- ⁶³ K Bickmore "Taking risks, building peace: Teaching conflict strategies and skills to students aged 6 to 16+." In: H Claire & C Holden (eds), *The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Issues, Stoke on Trent* (UK & Sterling, VA: Trentham Books, 2007), 131–145.
- ⁶⁴ See, for example, J Verloove, R van Wonderen & H Felten *Theorieën en Aanpakken van Polarisatie* (Utrecht: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving, 2020).
- ⁶⁵ See, for example, B Brandsma, *Polarisatie. Inzicht in de Dynamiek van Wij-Zij Denken* (BB in Media, 2016); B Van Gorp, J Van Hove, M Figoureux & B Vyncke *Anders Communiceren over Migratie en Vluchtelingen. Aan de Slag met Frames en Counterframes* (Leuven: KUL Institute for Media Studies, 2020), 12.
- ⁶⁶ U Peters, "How (many) descriptive claims about political polarization exacerbate polarization." (2021) *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 9(1), 31.
- ⁶⁷ S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- ⁶⁸ Contact and categorisation theory suggests that searching for an overarching identity which groups can share can be effective, but that in some cases it can also be short-lived. For example, when ethnic categorisations are particularly strong or when the contrasts between groups continue to polarise. See N Tausch, K Schmid & M Hewstone, "The social psychology of intergroup relations." In: G Salomon & E Cairns (eds), *Handbook on Peace Education* (New York & Hove: Psychology Press, 2014), 75–86; A Al Ramiah, M Hewstone & K Schmid, "Social identity and intergroup conflict." (2011) *Psychological Studies*, 56, 44–52; E Cuhadar & B Dayton, "The social psychology of identity and inter-group conflict: From theory to practice." (2011) *International Studies Perspectives*, 12, 273–293.
- ⁶⁹ See RMO (ed), *Polariseren binnen Onze Grenzen* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2009), 54.
- ⁷⁰ See RMO (ed), *Polariseren binnen Onze Grenzen* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2009), 56.
- ⁷¹ See on this subject, for instance, M Temmerman, R Coesemans & R Harder, *Berichten in het Grensgebied Tussen Opinie en Haat: Een Analyse van de Communicatie van Vlaamse Accounts op Sociale Media* (Brussels: VUB, 2020), 7–8.
- ⁷² T De Smedt, P Voué, S Jaki, M Röttcher & G De Pauw, *Profanity & Offensive Words (POW). Multilingual Fine-grained Lexicons for Hate Speech* (Textgain Technical Reports TGTR3, 2020); G De Pauw, T De Smedt & G Van Beek, *Studierapport Voortschrijdende Polarisering in Nederlandstalige (Vlaamse) Onlineberichten* (Antwerpen: Textgain, 2020).
- ⁷³ M Somer & J McCoy, "Transformations through polarizations and global threats to democracy." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1); J McCoy & M Somer, "Toward a theory of pernicious polarization and how it harms democracies: Comparative evidence and possible remedies." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1).
- ⁷⁴ MB Brewer, "Ingroup identification and intergroup conflict: When does ingroup love become outgroup hate?" In: RD Ashmore, L Jussim, & D Wilder (eds), *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict and Conflict Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17–41.
- ⁷⁵ For a conceptual account of violent radicalisation and extremism and a discussion of the literature, see D Cops, A Pauwels & M Van Alstein, *Gewelddadige Radicalisering en Polarisering. Beleid & Preventie in Vlaanderen: Evaluatie en Uitdagingen* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2020).
- ⁷⁶ See in this context also M Maussen & R Grillo, "Regulation of speech in multicultural societies." (2014) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(2), 185–187.
- ⁷⁷ M Van Alstein, *Omgaan met Controverse en Polarisatie in de Klas* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans Pro, 2018).
- ⁷⁸ See also the findings in the context of the evaluation of the Flemish action plan for preventing violent radicalisation and polarization: D Cops, A Pauwels & M Van Alstein, *Gewelddadige Radicalisering en Polarisering. Beleid & Preventie in Vlaanderen: Evaluatie en Uitdagingen* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2020).
- ⁷⁹ The report also indicates in which situation the theory or approach is most useful: J Verloove, R van Wonderen & H Felten, *Theorieën en Aanpakken van Polarisatie* (Utrecht: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving, 2020).
- ⁸⁰ J Verloove, R van Wonderen & H Felten, *Theorieën en Aanpakken van Polarisatie* (Utrecht: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving, 2020), 3.
- ⁸¹ KIS distinguishes four phases in polarisation: (1) rest phase (it is "cold": risk factors for the emergence of polarisation are already present); (2) discomfort (it becomes "uncomfortable": discomfort with each other, misunderstandings, alienation); (3) subcutaneous tension (it "rubs": uneasiness, irritations, negative images, increase in the feeling of being either us or them, groups avoid contact); and (4) open incidents or escalation. Specifically for controversies and polarisation in educational contexts, in the book *Omgaan met Controverse en Polarisatie in de Klas* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans Pro, 2018) we made a distinction between three scenarios: (1) the class in turmoil, (2) controversial issues in the curriculum and (3) didactic work on controversial topics.
- ⁸² We do not, for example, discuss polarisation in public opinion or in the press. Dealing with polarisation in those contexts requires policies and interventions that, given the intended audience of this report, are beyond its scope and deserve a separate exposition.
- ⁸³ See, for example, Wagner, who notes that affective polarization is both an aggregate-level and an individual-level phenomenon and that there are therefore two meanings of affective polarisation which should not be conflated: (a) each individual has a level of in- and out-group affect that may either be polarised or not (individual-level affective polarisation); and (b) each political system has an average level of such patterns of in- and out-group feelings (aggregate-level affective polarisation): M Wagner, "Affective polarization in multiparty systems." (2021) *Electoral Studies*, 69, 2.

- ⁸⁴ A Reiljan, "Fear and loathing across party lines (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems." (2020) *European Journal of Political Research*, 59(2), 376–396.
- ⁸⁵ B Brandsma, *Polarisatie. Inzicht in de Dynamiek van Wij-Zij Denken* (BB in Media, 2016), 82–91.
- ⁸⁶ S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. There is also research which indicates that ideological polarisation decreases when researchers get people to think about abstract issues rather than concrete ones. However, depolarization occurs only in the context of a shared and unifying identity. When (affective) partisan preferences remain in the foreground, abstract thinking can increase polarisation. See JL Napier & JB Luguri, "From silos to synergies. The effects of construal level on political polarization." In: P Valdesolo & J Graham (eds), *Social Psychology of Political Polarization* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 143–161.
- ⁸⁷ M Somer & J McCoy, "Transformations through polarizations and global threats to democracy." (2019) *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1), 13.
- ⁸⁸ B Brandsma, *Polarization. Understanding the Dynamics of We-They Thinking* (BB in Media, 2016), 20–23, 82–86.
- ⁸⁹ CR Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); K Grönlund, K Herne & M Setälä, "Does enclave deliberation polarize opinions?" (2015) *Political Behavior*, 37(4), 995–1020; K Strandberg, S Himmelroos & K Grönlund, "Do discussions in like-minded groups necessarily lead to more extreme opinions? Deliberative democracy and group polarization." (2019) *International Political Science Review*, 40(1), 41–57.
- ⁹⁰ TF Pettigrew & LR Tropp, "A meta-analytical test of intergroup contact theory." (2006) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783. In a more recent review Levy Paluck, Green and Green (2019) point out that a number of gaps in our knowledge remain: for example, there are not yet as many studies on the effects of contact in adults over 25 (especially with regard to the effects of contact on ethnic or racial prejudice); the extent to which contact can reduce prejudice seems to vary according to the type of prejudice; and we know little about what exactly happens during the contact interventions examined in impact studies and exactly which specific aspects of the contact can reduce prejudice. See E Levy Paluck, SA Green & DP Green, "The contact hypothesis re-evaluated." (2019) *Behavioural Public Policy*, 3(2), 152–153.
- ⁹¹ Levy Paluck, Green and Green therefore call for more research into the precise conditions under which contact can reduce prejudice: E Levy Paluck, SA Green & DP Green, "The contact hypothesis re-evaluated." (2019) *Behavioural Public Policy*, 3(2), 154.
- ⁹² See, for example, JW van de Maat, *Overbruggen van Vooroordelen door Kennismaking. Onder Welke Omstandigheden Werkt het?* (Utrecht: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving, 2016).
- ⁹³ N Tausch, K Schmid & M Hewstone, "The social psychology of intergroup relations." In: G Salomon & E Cairns (eds), *Handbook on Peace Education* (New York & Hove: Psychology Press, 2014), 75–86; A Al Ramiah, M Hewstone & K Schmid, "Social identity and intergroup conflict." (2011) *Psychological Studies*, 56, 44–52; E Cuhadar & B Dayton, "The social psychology of identity and inter-group conflict: From theory to practice." (2011) *International Studies Perspectives*, 12, 273–293; M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604.
- ⁹⁴ Research indicates that this approach can be effective, but it also has some limitations. For example, an overarching identity may be short-lived, especially when ethnic categorisations are particularly strong or when oppositions between groups are severely polarized: A Al Ramiah, M Hewstone & K Schmid, "Social identity and intergroup conflict." (2011) *Psychological Studies*, 56, 44–52; E Cuhadar & B Dayton, "The social psychology of identity and inter-group conflict: From theory to practice." (2011) *International Studies Perspectives*, 12, 273–293. See also S Iyengar, Y Lelkes, M Levendusky, N Malhotra & SJ Westwood, "The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States." (2019) *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- ⁹⁵ M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604.
- ⁹⁶ M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604.
- ⁹⁷ M Hewstone, M Rubin & H Willis, "Intergroup bias." (2002) *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575–604.
- ⁹⁸ Thomas Pettigrew, quoted in E Cuhadar & B Dayton, "The social psychology of identity and inter-group conflict: From theory to practice." (2011) *International Studies Perspectives*, 12, 278.
- ⁹⁹ For contact online see C Imperato, BH Schneider, L Caricati, Y Amichai-Hamburger & T Mancini, "Allport meets internet: A meta-analytical investigation of online intergroup contact and prejudice reduction." (2021) *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 81, 131–141.
- ¹⁰⁰ JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, (New York: Good Books, 2003), 59.
- ¹⁰¹ See, for example, F Matheusen, *Van Zondebok naar Zebra. Deep Democracy: Een Nieuwe Kijk op Besluitvorming en Conflicthantering* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2018).
- ¹⁰² J Verloove, R van Wonderen & H Felten, *Theorieën en Aanpakken van Polarisatie* (Utrecht: Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving, 2020).
- ¹⁰³ See various publications and presentations of techniques at <www.kis.nl>, <www.wij-zij.be> and <www.democratischdialogoog.be>. See also F Matheusen, *Van Zondebok naar Zebra. Deep Democracy: Een Nieuwe Kijk op Besluitvorming en Conflicthantering* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2018); K Van Rossem, *Het Filosofische Gesprek. De Basis* (Tiel: Lannoo Campus, 2020). Specifically for education see M Van Alstein, *Omgaan met Controverse en Polarisatie in de Klas* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans Pro, 2018).
- ¹⁰⁴ RMO (ed), *Polariseren Binnen Onze Grenzen* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2009), 53.
- ¹⁰⁵ JP Lederach, *The Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ix.

- ¹⁰⁶ M Verplancke, A Van Leuven & C Busch, *Digitale Disconnectie. Kaders om Radicalisering en Polarisatie beter te Begrijpen* (Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, 2021), 24–25.
- ¹⁰⁷ PT Coleman, *The Way Out. How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 34–38, 70–72.
- ¹⁰⁸ JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 52.
- ¹⁰⁹ JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 9–11, 27, 55.
- ¹¹⁰ JP Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 16–17 (our translation).
- ¹¹¹ A Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment. Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018), xvi–xvii.
- ¹¹² Spruyt et al find, for example, that people who feel alienated, have little trust in institutions and are dissatisfied with public services are more inclined to view society in terms of conflict frames. See B Spruyt, F Van Droogenbroeck & J van Noord, "Conflict thinking: Exploring the social basis of perceiving the world through the lens of social conflict." (2018) *Social Science Research*, 74, 19–20, 27–28.
- ¹¹³ Y van Drunen, B Spruyt & F Van Droogenbroeck, "The salience of perceived societal conflict in Europe: A 27 country study on the development of a measure for generalized conflict thinking." (2021) *Social Indicators Research*, online.
- ¹¹⁴ See M Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso Books, 1982/2010); Z Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity, 2000).

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