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## **PREVENTION AND COUNTERING OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALIZATION IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

### **Abstract**

Over the last two decades, especially following 9/11, radicalization has gained strength and prominence, especially in Europe. Among the many manifestations of radicalization, the right-wing extremism and Islamist radicalization stand out as its most prominent forms in Europe. The immensely destructive power of this phenomenon has been a major concern of most European countries and has resulted in a number of publications and policies that attempt to treat this issue. This paper first lays out the varying definitions regarding radicalization and looks into the factors and mechanisms that could lead to it. This is achieved through a thorough desk research and overview of various policies, European initiatives, actions, and documents working on countering radicalization. It then discusses the most prominent and potential space for radicalization this being the on-line space. In doing so, the paper looks into the great potential of youth work for countering radicalisation as well as of good educational practices that address the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Radicalisation, counter radicalisation, far-left extremism, far-rights extremism, terrorism, interculturality, youth work



## RADICALISATION

### Definition and factors of radicalisation

There are numerous definitions of radicalization which makes it difficult to enwrap the concept in one single explanation. A well formulated and frequently cited definition comes from Schmid, according to whom radicalization is:

*An individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. (Schmid, 2011: 678-9)*

What is noticeable from it is that radicalisation is a process, in which the dominant political order, dialogue, and tolerance are rejected, thus leading towards either non-violent or violent tactics that may sometimes, but not always potentially lead to terrorist acts. This definition brings into focus a very important distinction between violent and non-violent manifestations of radicalization. According to Bartlett and Miller (2011) radicalization is not always violent, but it is merely a refusal of the *status quo*. The transitioning towards violent tactics and terrorist acts is absolutely not a straightforward line of events and should not be considered as such. Radicals are not *per se* violent, and while radicals might share some of the characteristics of the above-mentioned definition, some also have willingness to engage in critical thinking (Bartlett and Miller 2012: 2). It must be noted that this is a prevalent definition of radicalisation in mainstream political debates but is also highly criticized for not offering solid explanation on the mechanism that lead to political violence (Dzhekova et al., 2016). Although the radicals do not always have to be violent, the focus of this paper is violent radicalisation that gains prevalence through the online platforms, and the possible means of countering it primarily through youth work.

Many studies regarding the factors of radicalization agree that there is no single cause of terrorism or a standard path of radicalisation towards terrorism. There is a general belief that the underlying motive for radicalisation is the desire for belonging and the quest for collective identity. One of the crucial factors influencing radicalisation that leads to an aggressive act is the loss of identity and search for it due to social rejection, that is, the sentiment that something is missing in one's life. This is especially true for the second/third generation of migrants who are unsuccessfully integrated in the society (mainly in one of the EU countries). The factor of lack of integration of second/third generation of migrants in Europe is usually tied to the rise of Islamist terrorism mainly referred to as home grown terrorism in this context (Precht, 2007). Islamist terrorism is by no means the only home grown form of this phenomenon, and as Precht explains, the hallmarks of this kind of terrorism can already be recognized throughout the 1970-1980s where "small groups of left-wing, nationalist or separatist groups were responsible for several terrorist attacks in Europe" (22). As he explains, such were the cases of Rote Armee Fraktion in

Germany (RAF), Action Directe in France, Belgium's Cellules Communistes Combattants (CCC), Greece's Revolutionary Organisation 17 November (17N) and the Red Brigades in Italy as well as separatist movements like Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Basque Separatist Group (ETA) in Spain. The difference though is that those former left-wing terrorist actions were mainly ideologically motivated while the home grown terrorism today is predominantly religiously inspired.

Furthermore, according to Precht (2007) these youngsters are socially isolated, disenchanting, alienated, unemployed and most importantly non-integrated members of a society that they feel distant from. The sentiments of alienation, inability to find acceptance, identity and purpose denied to them in the real, offline world, pushes these young people to go to social networks and the cyber space in a pursuit of sense, belonging and reduction of anxieties. The most vulnerable of them are those who are at a stage of life where they are seeking an identity, while looking for approval and validation. In this context, "home grown terrorism can be viewed as a sociological phenomenon where issues such as belonging, identity, group dynamics, and values are important elements in the transformation process [...] (Precht, 2007)

The common denominator in the process of individual radicalisation is the search for identity, be it religious, ethnic, and/or political accompanied by the lack of integration and socialization. This line of thinking is supported by current research according to which, "radicalisation is a process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, democracy." (Koehler 2014) The result of such depluralization is the belief that no other alternative interpretations of political concepts and the world exist. The more individuals have internalized the notion "that no other alternative interpretations of their (prioritized) political concepts exist (or are relevant), the more we can speak of (and show) a degree of radicalisation." (Koehler 2014) In such environments, where there is no cultural diversity and/or plurality of ideas, it is really a challenge to create individualized senses of plurality within the youngsters. This sense is necessary in order to develop a strong feeling of openness towards the other and thus ensure minimum or no degree of radicalisation.

## ON-LINE RADICALISATION

### Reasons, processes and means

While the internet may not be the key instrument of radicalisation, it can definitely accelerate the radicalisation and the occurrence of manifest forms of aggression and extremism. Long exposure to images depicting various atrocities committed by any institution or a state accompanied by evaluative, judging, and hate spreading language by charismatic leaders may push 'silent' individuals into fully fledged radicals. The question at stake is why is the internet such an appealing and effective platform for radicalisation? One way of looking at it is to say that it creates more opportunities to become radicalized by: providing an 'echo chamber' (a place where individuals find their ideas supported and

echoed by other like-minded individuals); allowing radicalisation to occur without physical contact; and increasing opportunities for self-radicalisation (Von Behr, I. et al., 2013).

It is easily accessible, offers great networking opportunities with like-minded individuals, in addition to being cheap, unregulated, and it offers anonymity which motivates individuals to speak or act out more radical online as they would normally do offline. As Kohler points out:

*The Internet provides a space to share crucial information connected to the chosen lifestyle, such as banned literature, music, clothes and manuals, as well as the possibility to directly shape the ideology* (Kohler 2014: 119)

The internet also offers the possibility to research or post information in degrees of anonymity, and under little government surveillance or control, a sense of anonymity that allows people to believe they can hide their real identities and avoid responsibility for their actions. Vulnerabilities for online radicalisation are present in any society. Therefore, it could be assumed that online radicalisation could happen within any geographical region with Internet access. Muslims have proven to be particular targets of radicalisation online. With a growing population in Europe due to the young age of Muslims on the continent, migration and the recent refugee situation, it is imperative to consider the influence of Islamophobia and the political environment in Europe as possible influences for these individuals to be radicalised (Ferraguto et al., 2018).

Far-right violent extremism is now becoming a serious threat to European communities. Some governments in Europe recognize this threat more than others, and carve policies that address this phenomenon popularly called the alt-right, that is, alternative-right movement. Germany has for example established a specialist centre focused on far-right and far-left extremism, the Gemeinsame Extremismus- und Terrorismusabwehrzentrum (GETZ). Far-right violent extremists believe to have the correct and most 'pure' interpretation of the 'true identity', thus justifying acts of violence or hate speech against anyone not fitting within that interpretation.

Left-wing extremists aims at challenging the existing state and social order by replacing democracy with a communist or anarchist system. To achieve this, these groups or individuals participate in social protests and actions, which can range from open agitations to some serious acts of violence. A single issue, rather than a social, political or religious cause in the gravitational center of this extremism. The themes range from animal rights to environment, abortion and nuclear technology. The main motivation behind those actions is the urge to force the society to change its attitudes towards a certain cause.

## YOUTH WORK

Europe needs its young people, just as young people need Europe. Young people will contribute actively to Europe's democratic values and its economic prosperity. Young people have a responsibility to make this contribution but, in order to do so countries have a responsibility to establish the conditions, opportunities and experiences for young people to

flourish. The package needed is a mosaic of enabling and formative experiences in addition to formal schooling, such as mobility, exchanges, advice and information, counselling, guidance and coaching, engagement with new technologies and social media, and social and political participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making. Young people learn through a variety of means, across a spectrum of formality, but the learning needs of young people, particularly around the acquisition of what are often called 'life skills' (such as critical thinking, teamwork, communication, problem solving and decision making), can often be met through youth work. That is, through planned and purposeful out-of-school learning that is aligned with the idea of 'non-formal learning'.

According to the European Agenda on Security (2015), the OSCE report "Working with youth and for youth" (2015) and the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (2016), nowadays young people are increasingly confronted with the threat of radicalisation. The process of radicalisation affects the European youth equally encompassing political, social, or religious affiliations and leads to the same outcome: militancy based on a radical ideology of hate and exclusion, on which for instance both young neo-Nazis and young Muslim extremists draw. Budget cuts have left youth work and young people particularly vulnerable.

Within the core values of youth work is to provide safe and participatory space, to experience different situations and learn from them, learn how to behave in different situations, and empower young people to participate, no matter of their background. Thanks to innovative ITC tools, the participants engaging in youth work processes can enjoy a more open-access approach to non-formal education, facilitating the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities. The learning activities within youth work are created to attend the young people's interests, on a voluntary basis and learner-centered, thanks to a holistic approach based on intercultural, safe environments of trust and sharing experiences.

## TOOLS, PRACTICES AND APPROACHES

### **Countering on-line radicalisation-European initiatives**

There are many initiatives and attempts to combat on-line radicalisation and extremism. Governments can play a key role in this initiative by creating awareness and build capacity to ensure alternative voices. This can be done by equipping groups with the skills and knowledge to design messages and disseminate them among those most susceptible to online radicalisation. Counter-messaging is a process in which people are exposed to messages specifically designed to counter the appeal of extremism. In the cyberspace, these messages can be delivered through websites, blogs, videos, Facebook groups, Tweets, and other types of online media. Another way of counteracting on-line radicalisation is by visiting virtual places where extremist messages are being produced and engage actual and potential violent extremists in dialogue and discussion (Neuman 2013). One of the most

important and efficient mechanisms to combat on-line extremism is by fostering media literacy.

This may be carried out in different forms, through awareness raising campaigns warning about grooming behavior, spreading information about the likely consequences of becoming involved in violent extremist activity, and reminders to always question people's online identities. This can also take more institutional forms like "being embedded in the wider curriculum on media literacy that teaches young people how to use media critically, to evaluate and question sources, and to distinguish information that is plausible and trustworthy from information that is not" (Neuman 2013:448). Many governments are making efforts to invest in the education of the public through different Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiatives and programs. In the past few years there have been attempts to formalize such initiatives and institutionalize them in many European countries.<sup>1</sup> The identification and prediction of online radicalisation and civil unrest events is possible through the use of different algorithms, techniques and tools to counter and combat cyber-extremism and predicting protest related events in much advance.<sup>2</sup>

There have also been few private initiatives in several European countries such as the British online hash tag based initiative "Not in My Name" (voicing the attitude of young Muslims who do not support radicalism; initiated by young British Muslims in order to "show their solidarity against ISIS and their actions."), and *Exit Germany* providing alternative exits for members of extreme ideologies, particularly right wing, and other measures undertaken by SNS. In 2018, Twitter partnered with academics to apply new measures regarding hate speech, and changing the metrics of the social media application. Facebook also went on to prohibit hate speech on the website.

## COUNTERING RADICALISATION THROUGH EDUCATION

The policies listed and discussed above together with the numerous security responses are important yet insufficient in the treatment of the underlying conditions or radicalisation and the formation of violent extremist youth groups. Macaluso(2016) points to the ambivalent relationship between radicalisation and education and the dangers of intervening at the level of primary and secondary education when attempting to identify early signs of radicalisation. Her argument that instead of reinforcing counter radicalisation measures,

1 The 2014 Paris Declaration on "Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Era" states that it is high time to place MIL at the core of instruction at all levels of formal education, and it needs to be promoted in non-formal and informal educational setting as well. In this context, UNESCO has launched the timely Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (MILID) Yearbook 2016, entitled *Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalisation and Extremism*, "highlighting the need for such literacy to be carried out in schools and outside schools, including families (Alava et al., 2017).

2 Some of the techniques include Clustering, Logistic Regression and Dynamic Query Expansion, graph modeling, Classification KNN, Naive Bayes, Support Vector Machine, Rule Based Classifier, Decision Tree, Clustering (Blog Spider), Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA), Topical Crawler/Link Analysis (Breadth First Search, Depth First Search, Best First Search) and Keyword Based Flagging (KBF) Text classification (automatic and semi-supervised learning), clustering (unsupervised learning).

“schools should be a forum in which values are questioned and openly discussed, in which critical thinking and the exchange of different ideas and perspectives are encouraged” (2016: 1) should seriously be taken into consideration when discussing good educational activities addressing radicalisation.

The European Commission Department for Immigration and Home Affairs has launched the Radicalisation Awareness Network focusing on the need to better equip teachers so they can play a crucial role in preventing radicalisation. The Education Working Group RAN EDU<sup>3</sup> is the one focused on bringing together first-line education practitioners throughout Europe to empower them to counter radicalisation. RAN research and policy papers emphasize the fact that extremist ideologies are most often based on unchallenged leadership and absolute authority. Among others methods, the authors list “teaching about immigration as a regular social phenomenon, exploring biographical work on diverse family histories, and comparing representations of diversity in contemporary literature, film and arts.” (RAN EDU Policy Paper 2018: 13)<sup>4</sup>. The Finish National Agency for Education on the *Prevention of Violent Radicalisation* emphasizes the fact that the key point for addressing this issue within education is to enhance empathy and interaction skills and to do things collectively.

The UNESCO’s *Teacher’s Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism* (2016) lists a number of useful aspects to be taken into account when trying to constructively address radicalisation in the classroom. Discussions are often a very productive way of engaging young people in channeling out their ideas and opinions yet they must be carried out under a set of guidelines in order to be more successful when treating this highly volatile issue. Among the suggestions listed are preparing well before the class discussion in order to reduce the fear of discussing controversial topics (2016: 21). Among the topics that can open a constructive discussion and touch the basis of violent extremism the UNESCO’s guide lists citizenship, history, religious beliefs, languages, freedom of expression and the internet, gender equality and gender-based violence, and art. The debate on citizenship can engage students in a discussion on belonging, identity, justice. The history topic is indeed a volatile one but can engage the students in critical thinking about political violence, prejudice, hate propaganda, and racism. Such topics including the ones from the sphere of religion, gender and art can be brought into any class, and adjusted to the needs of that particular class, while still engaging the students in a critical thinking process and paving the way towards a constructive curriculum transformation.

## CONCLUSION

The paper analysed the rapidly growing phenomenon of radicalisation. It did so by first defining it and then looking into the factors, mechanism, and various forms of radicalisation. The most prominent forms, right-wing and religious based radicalisation have

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3 More detailed information on the Radicalisation Awareness Network can be found at [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-edu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu_en)

4 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran\\_edu\\_transforming\\_schools\\_into\\_labs\\_for\\_democracy\\_2018\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_transforming_schools_into_labs_for_democracy_2018_en.pdf)

been analyzed into more details together with the providing a detailed list of the numerous EU initiatives, actions and policies taken to counter it. This has been achieved through a thorough desk research and overview of various policies, European initiatives, actions, and documents working on countering radicalization. The axes of the paper was placed on the most prominent and potent space for radicalization this being the on-line space. A possible set of strategies that governments can employ in trying to combat on-line radicalisation could be by exploiting the cyberspace in order to gain strategic intelligence about terrorist groups' intentions and networks. This could also help them gain tactical intelligence on terrorist operations and collect evidence useful in prosecutions. What can help in this respect, beside cooperation with the citizens are the achievements of the Social Informatics and Intelligence and Security informatics (Agarwal and Sureka, 2015).

The paper also analysed the great potential of youth work for countering radicalisation as well as of good educational practices that address the phenomenon. Although this requires a much more detailed research, it should be emphasized that Youth work provides tools and practices where young people are and feel active and involved, tools that valorise young people in their multiple and diverse identity. With the fast pace of events taking place today in term of youth extremism and "radicalisation" there is an urgent need to harmonise initiatives at both national and European level. One of the main roles of youth work, in the context of prevention work, is to support and promote youth participation through different youth work activities. This is done through stimulating continuous, meaningful participation of young people as a main condition for inclusiveness, sustainability and peace. One of the most commonly used approaches in youth work is directly developing professional and social skills by steering young people towards different learning opportunities with different organisations, movements and/or institutions. Through this youth work is creating opportunities for young people to share goals and aspirations with adults in addition to one another; capitalize on their experiences and assets; and engage in multiple areas, including social, emotional, moral, spiritual, civic, vocational, physical, cognitive, personal and cultural development. In the field of prevention, youth work has the responsibility to recognize the specific grievances or vulnerabilities that young people may have, acknowledge the inequalities in the society and develop violence-prevention strategies that go beyond simple security responses and encompass prevention of violence in the family, school and community.

Finally, in addition to the numerous policies and strategies for countering radicalization, this paper discussed the crucial role that education plays in the process. A set of policies papers have been looked at, and the overall conclusion is that schools must be the environment which cultivates the democratic school ethos. On the long run, this approach should encourage the freedom of opinion, discussion and respect of minority rights, equality before the law, and the right to life as core principles of democracy. One example is the Finish National Agency for Education brochure on the Prevention of violent radicalisation in schools and educational institutions. The authors of this brochure emphasize that the key point for addressing this issue within education is to enhance empathy and interaction skills and to do things collectively. As the authors specify, "the young person about whose situation there are concerns must be included in everything and an attempt must be made to include the person in the community instead of, for example, excluding the person because

of the threat he or she may pose.” (2018, 13).<sup>5</sup> Some of the cornerstones of successfully addressing radicalisation in education is, according to the authors of this work, tied to several aspects, which we believe can be solid concluding remarks of this paper. Firstly, teachers must have basic knowledge of violent extremism. In addition to this, they need to be well informed and possibly trained on the possible signs and reasons of radicalisation as well as the influence of the media, given the proliferation of on-line radicalisation. Finally, they must have some practical tools and the confidence to have a discussion with children and young people about a number of controversial topics.

The issue of radicalization, especially its prominent right-wing and religious based forms pose a serious challenge today. Clearly, preventing violent extremism and radicalization in Europe is a complex and ongoing challenge that requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves addressing the underlying social, economic, and political factors that can lead to radicalization, as well as working to counter extremist ideologies through education, media, youth work, and other means. Effective prevention efforts also require close collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and communities, as well as a commitment to human rights, equality, and inclusiveness. While progress has been made in addressing this issue, much work remains to be done to fully address the threat of extremism and ensure the safety and security of people.

The set of European initiatives, strategies, educational practices and highly important youth work activities can hopefully serve an important role in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism as well as pave the way towards future practices and actions that governments, NGOs, and educational institutions should undertake.

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<sup>5</sup> A detailed overview of the brochure can be found at <https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/prevention-of-violent-radicalisation-in-schools-and-educational-institutions.pdf>

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