CONNEKT

SEMINAR

Researching Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Times of Covid-19

PRESENTATION

In times when uncertainty is the norm and social distance is more a rule for survival than etiquette, interdisciplinary, cross-regional and collaborative research projects are more at a stake than ever. Adaptation to such complex times is an essential measure to mitigate the risk of research isolated from the scholar, practitioner and policy-maker circles not directly involved in CONNEKT. Therefore, what was initially conceived as an academic seminar to discuss CONNEKT's theoretical and conceptual framework evolved into a unique opportunity to share with external actors, experts, community-led practitioners and policy-makers our main concerns regarding the gaps in researching radicalisation and violent extremism.

Faced with the Covid-19 pandemic in its initial phase, CONNEKT has adapted to current restriction measures on mobility and social interactions with its consequent requirement to adapt the envisaged research methodologies. How is empirical research going to depend on the evolution of Covid-19, both globally and locally, and how can we adapt methodologies to the new settings? Bridging the gap left by the absence of personal physical interactions between researchers, researchers and participants and participants themselves, requires methodological elasticity and creative approaches in order to find spaces for discussion, interaction and exchange, both in formal and informal settings. This Seminar, framed within the WP3

"Tacking Stock of Baseline Research" of the CONNEKT project, was precisely an attempt to create a first informal discussion setting where researchers, stakeholders and policy-makers could connect and interact in a fluid environment.

The parallel sessions provided a space for discussion within the frame of each level of analysis (macro, meso and micro) reaching a vivid and concise brainstorming of ideas, questions and concerns that will serve to prepare the ground for the next research stages. However, and more importantly, Covid-19 has an impact on the daily lives of all participants involved, adding new variables to the equation that the project attempts to understand: What drives young people to radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Balkan regions? Is the pandemic a new emerging driver or does it intensify or interact with other socio-economic, religious or technological drivers?

There is growing literature on how violent groups are seizing the pandemic to enhance their capabilities, both in recruiting and operating. At the same time, restrictions and exceptional laws lead to a legitimate concern about the potential harmful effects they have on the freedoms and liberties of citizens, which become much more acute in fragile or authoritarian settings. Polarisation of the political spectrum, instrumentalisation of the pandemic and the increase of intolerance and socio-economic divides as a result of the crisis are signals that the equation to understand the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism might become far more complicated in the near future.

After four parallel sessions, devoted to discussing the seven pre-determined drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism from the macro (national and transnational), meso (community) and micro (individual) levels, and a fourth one dealing with prevention, a joint debate addressed the fundamental question of the repercussions for the European Union (EU). Particularly involving policy-makers and other institutional representatives that constitute potential targets of CONNEKT's research results, the final session expressed expectations, needs and potential applications of CONNEKT's research providing a particular EU perspective.

The valuable contributions of all participants, nourished with their own experiences in the field, revealed the complexity of the phenomenon by covering different points on the globe, from the MENA region to the Balkans, the Sahel and obviously Europe.

The event was jointly organised by the IEMed and the ULB (as WP3 leader) and involved, among other external stakeholders, researchers from other H2020 sister projects, and other members of the CONNEKT Consortium.

SESSION 1: MACRO RESEARCH ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM DRIVERS

The goal of this session was to discuss the contribution of the driving factors identified by CONNEKT to the equation of radicalisation and violent extremism at the macro level. These include the effect of religious discourses and institutions, socio-economic deprivation and territorial inequalities, socio-political demands against the prevailing principles, and transnational dynamics.

Questioning the role of religion and its link with political ideology

Religion is polymorphic, and whether it is defined as faith, as ideology or as political activism, it may have a narrower or wider impact (at the level of the individual or on the whole community) and constitutes a substantial change on the research perspective. But apart from being a term that is subject of controversy, the role of religion has been highly contested during the session. The panel has stated that countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) policies risk using outdated practices which have been broadly focused on religiosity and have ignored development factors and other human needs. Furthermore, since CONNEKT is concerned with youth, the lessening interest that Maghrebi youngsters have in religion has been hinted at. As for their feeling of national belonging, this is often more related to cultural artefacts than to religious identity.

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Not only was the relative importance of religion questioned but its very conceptualisation as a driver of radicalisation, turning it into a potential factor of resilience instead. In this regard, it has been argued that religious institutions often act as constraining forces establishing red lines. Accordingly, research in the Balkans has shown how the traditional practice of Islam is in fact a protective factor, and that those who radicalise in Islamic movements are mostly converts.

Governance and accountability of the state is key to understand radicalisation and violent extremism in its national context

Religious institutions in the MENA region – Ministries of Religious Endowments or Islamic Affairs, Ulama Schools, etc. – are state institutions run by state officials. Thus, the separation of religion from political ideology has been further questioned while the functionality of the state has been highlighted. In this respect, assessing the transparency and accountability of the state is key to understanding the phenomenon of radicalisation

and violent extremism in its national context. As part of this approach, the protective role of religious institutions was questioned since these are often highly politicised or corrupt.

Ultimately, it was suggested that instead of creating a new discipline with PVE studies, we still need to talk about governance and political violence, reviewing and further exploring the social movement and conflict dynamics theories that look onto who holds the right to use the force and whether peoples' dignity is being denied by governments.

Difficulties in assessing and countering the role of classic economic macro factors

In the framework of macroeconomics, socio-economic exclusion was considered a factor that many perpetrators of terrorist attacks have in common. As an example, the Casablanca bombings in 2003 proved to be not a question of religion but rather an issue of basic needs and dignity not being met, in accordance with Maslow's pyramid. Nonetheless, the panel expressed the difficulty of obtaining objective data in this regard. Evidence connecting socio-economic inequality and radicalisation is very inconsistent because many of the subjects participating in these studies do not identify that specific set of variables as an important motto explaining their behaviour. On the other hand, research conducted in Kosovo has shown how people being recruited by extremist movements come from the upper class or the lower class, with the middle class less affected by the phenomenon. The notion of relative deprivation was recalled to complete the picture of the complex contribution of these factors to understanding the process of radicalisation.

Turning to the actions implemented in the field, it was noted that there are many programmes dealing with socio-economic issues in the Balkans, but not enough of them target the underlying structural factors, such as economic deprivation and territorial inequality. In this respect, it is also true that reducing inequalities remains a chimera for most PVE policies. Instead, certain socio-political demands would seem to be easier to achieve. As a final remark, there was discussion about to what extent there was a process of pathologising the phenomenon of radicalisation and violent extremism in order to blame the individual and avoid holding authorities and institutions accountable for it.

The effect of Covid-19 and its related state measures as an intensifier of macro drivers

Lastly, there has been a general agreement on conceiving the pandemic as an intensifier of drivers, rather than as a driver in itself. Therefore, its inclusion as an important variable should be mainstreamed at the different levels of the research. Additionally, special attention should be paid to authoritarian responses from states whose legitimacy is already undermined. In such contexts, restrictive measures are expected to bring light to existing grievances and fears, to sharpen existing social polarisation and

inequalities, and to further empower authoritarian and far right tendencies in societies and parliaments.

SESSION 2: MESO RESEARCH ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM DRIVERS

The meso research focuses on the level in which the individual relates to her/his family, neighbourhood, school, peer group, religious and ethnic communities, etc. In this framework, this panel tackled two main issues: firstly, how the drivers identified in CONNEKT interact with social entities and local stakeholders and, secondly, how to translate research at the meso level into preventive actions by taking a clear stance against security-driven approaches. With this aim, the important role of communities was underlined and methodological practices to create meaningful spaces for dialogue and consultation were explored.

The radical milieu: the influence of narratives and local leaders at the community level

The role of communities in understanding radicalisation processes has been historically overlooked by research. Whether because the focus has been too broad (at the macro level) or too narrow (at the micro level), little attention has been paid to the immediate social context in which a person's daily life develops. If reducing the phenomenon of violent extremism to psychological issues offers an over-simplistic view, the problem is too complex to be solely addressed through structural factors. Therefore, researchers are compelled to pay attention to specific contexts in order to gain a deep and meaningful understanding.

Religion is commonly the first driver that comes to mind when talking about radicalisation, especially when considering the MENA region and the Balkans. Nevertheless, participants looked beyond religious radicalisation and pointed at the influence of opinion leaders and the narrative structure of the messages they convey. In this respect, it was suggested that understanding the balance of power among institutions and stakeholders behind religious or ideological discourses turned out to be more important than analysing these narratives per se. In this context, we may ask: How do these opinion leaders interact with other state institutions and local actors? How are they perceived by the community?

In addition, regarding religion as a driver, the lack of evidence on the causal link between espousing Salafism and becoming a jihadist was highlighted. In a certain way, particularly in Europe, it was the lack of religious knowledge that lay behind the radicalisation process, rather than an excess of religiosity.

The discussion moved on to classical macro drivers. Even if literature often presents the phenomenon as a product of failed integration by highlighting socio-economic

deprivation, Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as an example of indigenous religious communities that are not marginalised and yet are suffering radicalisation. In post-conflict societies, such as in the Balkans, it could be argued that the legacy of war is an important factor to understand the spread of radicalisation. However, there were disagreements concerning the extent of this element as an explaining factor, in the same way as the deprivation and marginalisation hypotheses were questioned and the impact of opinion leaders raised as an underestimated factor.

The role of such local leaders centred the debate as they are considered to gain increasing influence, popularity and trust among and from communities. Those actors are not particular imams that can be located in specific mosques but a whole network that is trying to advocate for principles that oppose the mainstream values of democratic societies. Post-war Western Balkans assisted the arrival of Salafi and Wahhabi actors who have been gaining increasing influence in some Muslim communities during the past decades. Evidence presented seems to suggest that, at least in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Salafi movement is a political movement that, in the context of a weak state, may impede any attempt to introduce alternative narratives.

Turning our attention to Tunisia, an unsolved question prevails: Why did certain parts of the country fall under the influence of violent extremism and others under the same exact conditions did not? Taking field research conducted in the Balkans as a departing point, it seems that the smaller and more enclosed in itself a community is, the more susceptible it is to radicalisation. In contast, ethnic diversity and exposure to different points of view are presented as factors that would make a community more resilient to extremist movements. As reported in the Western Balkans, narrow communities with no standing local leaders are more exposed to risks, especially in bordering areas. That seems to be the case of small towns or villages in which access to different sources of information and alternative narratives is extremely limited. In this context, when a charismatic opinion leader reaches one community, this personality may be able to fill that vacuum and have a great influence over populations. Effectively, as was revealed, the mapping of foreign fighters' recruitment follows the patterns of local leaders in the region. How to identify the communities that are more exposed to such radical influences was one of the main issues discussed from the point of view of research methodology.

Best practices on community-based prevention: bottom-up design and engagement from local partners

The meso level seems to be the perfect layer in research to analyse the interaction between individuals and society. The discussion explored the idea that there is no national/territorial distribution of radicalisation but rather hotbeds at the community level, such as the cities of Gafsa and Ben Gardane in Tunisia or the peripheral neighbourhood of Sidi Moumen in Casablanca. The existence of those "pockets

of radicalisation" – as referred to by one of the participants – supports the idea of understanding radicalisation as a process of socialisation. Thus, rather than deploying national scale fieldwork, spotting community contexts to conduct research would seem a more productive approach with a view to translating the results into operational PVE measures.

But how to define a target community before going to the field? This is one of the key issues that will determine CONNEKT's research and transition from WP4 (macro) to WP5 (meso). According to participants, communities are not completely self-contained categories and they overlap, since people engage and relate to different communities at the same time. That is one of the reasons why the methodological design of CONNEKT ruled out the pre-selection of target communities prior to fieldwork and this is precisely why research transition from WP4 to WP5 is so paramount. Besides, regarding the prevention approach, WP5 envisages two separate phases of research. This back-and-forth movement will allow for the refining and narrowing of the case-study selection based on the empirical research at both the macro and the micro levels.

Turning the discussion to prevention, any research in the social sciences aspires to have an impact on society, more commonly through its contribution to policy-making. However, as a matter of fact, public policies are not focused on the population's real concerns, probably because national authorities are disconnected from local grievances. In this respect, speakers identified the lack of meaningful consultation methods on the ground as a major weakness in the field of PVE. Again, participants referred to the common practice of research exclusively targeting marginal communities that risk becoming stigmatised.

Among the major weaknesses of PVE is the lack of consultation methods that allow for the identification of vulnerable communities beyond stigmatisation and marginality

In this regard, three important points were raised. Firstly, the negative impact of framing the interventions under labels such as "C/PVE", since it blurs the difference between "CT" (counter-terrorism) and prevention. On the ground, preachers, NGO members and other actors whose practices are not framed under PVE policies are effectively carrying out preventive actions in the field of radicalisation. Secondly, it was recalled that not only official authorities can stand as legitimate actors. In many contexts, the presence of security and political actors has proven to be counterproductive. Thirdly, the importance of going to the fieldwork to conduct the empirical research was highlighted. Actually, communities have their own safe spaces where they can

speak. Eluding the fieldwork only leads researchers to observe subjects outside their context.

Furthermore, communities are generally considered only in terms of diagnosis but not in terms of solutions. As asserted during the session, civil society constitutes a credible voice capable of disseminating alternative narratives. Besides, most of the time communities do not need any external voices because they already have their own recognised local leaders who can assume this role.

Engaging youth was signalled as another urgent issue. They usually appear as beneficiaries at the receiving end of interventions. However, the transformative potential of including youngsters from the very beginning of PVE programmes, from the design phase and throughout its implementation, is still a pending issue. In a similar vein, the crucial role of women at the community level, not only within the family but also as neighbourhood leaders, was raised.

In this context, engaging youth involves not only asking interviewees about their relation with Salafism but also asking about their personal journey: where they come from, what their expectations in life are, how they feel anchored in society and how they perceive it, what their political opinions are, and their thoughts about international relations. This kind of in-depth interview will allow us to go beyond the psychologisation of research participants in order to consider and understand their political engagement, among other aspects.

Ultimately, these methodological practices would bring the chance to design PVE policy responses from a bottom-up design. Participants brought in the example of leisure programmes that became channels of venting out frustrations and ways of social participation that, in turn, have a preventive effect in the field of radicalisation.

The issue of how to deal with Salafism turned out to be recurrent in the different discussions held. At this point, the dilemma was whether to collaborate with certain Salafi leaders with great influence in Muslim communities in the Balkans or not. And more importantly: should we ban narratives that may foster extremism, or should we allow pluralism and avoid marginalising certain ideas, relegating them to the radical milieu? Again, the discussion explored the need to differentiate between radical ideas – which should be seen as the legitimate expression of peoples' perceptions and grievances – and violence.

Thus, the ultimate objective of PVE should be preventing the use of violent means, but not ideologies per se.

Reviewing the concept of resilience: building agency without blaming communities

Under the new trend of community resilience, PVE programmes are more and more focused on strengthening the ability of communities to use their available resources to respond to radicalisation drivers. But assessing to what extent certain communities are resilient or not seems to be challenging. A three-dimensional approach was put forward: awareness (do people realise radicalisation might be a problem for them?), attitude (are they willing to act and to do something about it?) and action (how do they plan to stand up to the challenge?). The concept of agency was put forward as the community capacity to act and take decisions independently from government entities.

Moreover, there was a concern regarding the risk of falling into the "trap" of resilience, i.e., focusing exclusively on the communities targeted by extremist ideologies and overlooking the senders of such ideas. Assessing the vulnerability of communities entails the risk of removing the responsibility from those spreading extremist narratives and even from holding governments accountable for the problem.

The context of Covid-19 and its impact on radicalisation processes: the aggravation of socio-economic factors and the implementation of repressive measures

The direct effects of the pandemic on the economy may intensify existing socio-economic drivers, such as unemployment, and even change current victimisation narratives. Growing social frustration provoked by this new crisis could fuel extremist reactions. But beyond that, repressive exceptional measures might become in certain cases permanent through legal amendments, thereby enhancing the risks of aggravating existing grievances. In certain contexts, giving ground to the restriction of civil liberties might lead to the alienation of populations, the spread of extremist narratives and ultimately result in violent responses as a reaction to those repressive measures.

On the other hand, Covid-19 restrictions are imposing serious impediments to fieldwork research since the access to communities has become very limited or even impossible. This might also alter the capacity of violent extremist networks to recruit physically and thus intensify online propaganda. To what extent this is a new paradigm is still to be studied, since there are still controversies regarding the degree of successful online radicalisation versus personal connections in a radical milieu.

SESSION 3: MICRO RESEARCH ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM DRIVERS

When addressing the research at the micro level, the main challenge is trying to encompass the drivers focusing on the individual dynamics that interrelate with the meso and macro levels. In fact, most of the research in the domain of violent extremism and radicalisation has been produced at this level of analysis. The systematic review of the existing literature identifies micro root causes – such as perceived deprivation, adventure/excitement, political grievance, and the quest for significance – and

micro root events – death of a loved one, divorce, imprisonment, etc. However, focusing solely on that micro analysis entails the risk of psychologisation (and more commonly psychiatrisation) of the "radical" subject as de-politicised and removed from the social context. That reductionist approach entirely blames the individual and eludes any external responsibility, misleading the interpretation of the phenomenon and paving the way for the securitisation of C/PVE policies.

Focusing solely on individual root causes entails the risk of psychologising and depoliticising the "radical" subject and detaching him/her from the social context

Picturing the complexity of the phenomenon: misconceptions on VE and radicalisation at the micro level

Concerning general assumptions on violent extremism and radicalisation, the importance of religion as a driver was played down. Conversely, religious affiliation was considered a way of framing a political choice (in the case of some jihadists both in the MENA region and the Balkans), a territorial conflict or an essential struggle for survival (in the Sahel), an identity claim (for Amazigh and Kabyle communities in the Maghreb) or even a profit-oriented activity (for some sub-Saharan individuals trying to reach Europe who remain blocked in the Sahel).

Understanding the role of "radicalised" subjects as rational decision-makers, whether driven by political, economic or other reasons, implies a drastic change in the paradigm that is currently guiding the research. Under this premise, the phenomenon of radicalisation would be understood as a coherent response and, thus, allowing any ordinary person to identify – or even empathise with – the reasons that led to embrace an extremist position.

In any case, the idea that individuals may be swinging back and forth – in a more conscious or unconscious way – on their extremist ideas, clearly refutes the preconceived notion of "radicalised" subjects as having a monolithic identity. As has been stated in recent research, mostly in the Sahel, individuals that adhere to radical movements are not completely radicalised when they first enter, in the sense that they do not identify themselves with the ideology of those groups or stand up for their ultimate goals. On the contrary, they seem to negotiate their status and to move in and out for different reasons. These movements suggest a dynamism that pictures radicalisation not as a state but as a process.
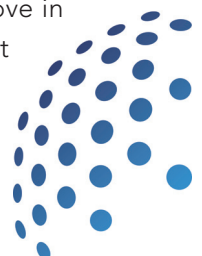
Deficiencies in research methods and gaps in the state-of-the-art

Firstly, framing the phenomenon of radicalisation as a process implies taking into account the context around the individual and the effect of external factors that interact at the individual level. Individuals are not isolated entities, particularly in our digital age. The feeling of frustration and relative deprivation can be fuelled by the globalisation process. Even when referring to the so-called "lone wolfs", these socially-isolated individuals are exposed to online extremist materials and groups acting as powerful secondary socialisation agencies. Therefore, analysing drivers of radicalisation by ignoring the interplay between the micro, meso and macro levels can only lead researchers to biased and incomplete conclusions.

Despite the difficulties of conducting empirical research and collecting raw data in the field of radicalisation, which most individuals are reluctant to talk about, there is a general consensus regarding the importance of working with primary data. Besides, the need to put young people at the centre of any intervention was underlined. Youths are commonly excluded from decision-making processes and from any kind of political activity and, therefore, PVE programmes should confront that trend.

Finally, studies carried out in the neighbourhoods with the highest occurrence of radicalisation in the MENA region underlined the absence of cultural activity: cinemas, youth centres, cultural facilities, etc. Instead, cultural and associative activities are centralised in big cities. A deeper understanding of the effect of these cultural and leisure opportunities was called for in order to complete the picture of drivers leading to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Portraying the multiplicity of the phenomenon: the mosaic of radicalisations

The multiplicity of the phenomenon of radicalisation was an overriding umbrella for the whole discussion. The mere existence of the term "balkanisation", for example, denotes the specificity of the conflicts in that region. Youngsters in the Western Balkans with no apparent connection with the events in Syria felt compelled to act since they perceived that injustices suffered by their communities in the 90s were being repeated somewhere else. Even if that young generation have no direct memory of the crimes committed in the past, the unfinished process of transitional justice in the Balkans and their personal contact with a corrupted society (such as paying bribes for getting a job or witnessing exploitation situations) have nourished the tension that arises from the discrepancy between what society should be and what it really is. Against that background in which the state cannot deal with its own past and is not able to offer alternatives, some violent extremist groups offer young people some alternative for allegedly achieving a fairer society.

Recent studies have shown that recruited youngsters are quite similar to their peers. At this level of analysis, we should accept that there will always be individual

specificities and external variables that are almost impossible to register or even to be codified. Recognition of such limitations is a first step towards an improved understanding of the phenomenon.

SESSION 4: APPROACHING PREVENTION FROM A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

During this session, prevention initiatives involving institutions and social groups at the local level were explored and discussed as long-term social investments against radicalisation trends.

Multi-agency cooperation at the local level for long-term responses

Complementary to traditional counter-terrorism activities, the Danish approach has served as an example of a PVE policy based on multi-agency cooperation in which schools and universities play a key role in strengthening youngsters' critical thinking. The proper organisation and coordination among all actors involved was also highlighted for the British context: from educators and social service providers to police and intelligence and security services. Similarly, local and municipal levels were identified as spaces where social life is being articulated, although generally speaking, in most places there is a clear lack of implementation of long-term programmes and projects aimed at preventing radicalisation of young people.

The search for short-term and urgent solutions, which are usually subject to political mandates, was particularly criticised over the session. Participants largely agreed on the fact that a complex problem such as radicalisation requires coherent and long-term responses. Prevention in this field, as in health and other social issues, should be a long-term state investment.

On the other hand, the lack of cooperation among scholars, policy-makers and Muslim communities is also a matter of concern. The support of the whole community was considered crucial for the effectiveness of PVE efforts, especially taking into account the limitations of governments' operating machines.

Embracing a holistic approach which avoids stigmatisation: beyond religion and education

Differentiating between the notion of radicalisation and the idea of Islam was central in the discussion, insisting on the counterproductive effects of making a direct correlation between these terms. Making assumptions that victimise and criminalise the groups under study, which happens to be mostly Muslim communities, entails risks and may potentially trigger reactionary responses based on suspicion and mistrust. Hasty premises can therefore lead to damaging policies, under the pretext of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism.

Participants underlined the need for a more inclusive and holistic approach in the search for responses. The diversification of the sources of violent extremism implies that not only religion but a multiplicity of intervening factors from the socio-political and economic dimensions should be taken into account. Spaces where critical thinking is promoted and young people can feel safe and comfortable to express and share their personal concerns are needed, allowing a case-by-case assessment by trained professionals willing to support them without bias or prejudice. The education system is a very structured environment that enables the creation of this sort of space, but what happens out of school time? As reported, after-school settings in which leisure time management becomes a challenge can accelerate the marginalisation and social exclusion of youngsters. Because of this, more efforts should focus on youth leisure opportunities.

The symbolic impact of language and cultural metaphors

The impact of discourses and the need for a responsible use of language was also discussed, along with the lack of consensus regarding the concept of social resilience. Despite the increasing popularity of these ideas, the existence of different translations and meanings creates confusion and complicates the development of concrete PVE policies. Such terms may be used for building stronger communities but, at the same time, their complex and abstract nature makes them difficult to be translated into operational interventions at the local level.

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The notion of social resilience should not be an alibi to elude accountability from institutions and hold communities responsible for rejecting extremism without support

Social resilience can be understood as a moral obligation of individuals, creating a set of values that make people believe that it is their own responsibility to resist and reject extremist attitudes. That approach may therefore forget who should be held accountable for some of the main drivers of radicalisation, such as socio-economic and other structural factors. As a result, people are too often left alone without any institutional support, nor community-based solutions.

POLICY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

HOW CAN CONNEKT SERVE THE EU'S CHALLENGES CONCERNING C/PVE?

Research on radicalisation has been primarily focused on European/Western societies and individuals, whereas research on non-Western European societies is

less advanced and less integrated in the global epistemic community. However, the threat posed by violent extremist individuals and groups cannot be circumscribed to any boundaries or territories, since it is genuinely a global threat. The transnational nature of radical movements and violent extremist groups cannot be addressed from a uniquely European or even less a Western European approach. The dynamics of migrations, diasporas and constant flux of people on the move pose a challenge for understanding new relational modes and fluxes that security and countering radicalisation practitioners have to address. This is visible through the very different trajectories of the two young perpetrators of Nice and Vienna: the former being a 21-year old Tunisian recently arrived in Europe and the latter a 20-year old Austrian-born citizen of North Macedonia origin.

The impact of transnational dynamics and C/PVE policies on EU security

After a series of home-grown terrorist attacks in Europe, the transnational dimension of the phenomenon is undeniable today. Any state cannot conceive designing a national C/PVE strategy ignoring related supra-state factors. This is why an international response to the phenomenon of violent extremism has been articulated in the last decades at different levels. The EU, which was a marginal actor in the 2000s, has managed to be a central actor today. In this respect, the EU regional capacity-building efforts in North Africa and the Western Balkans are claimed to be essential, as is its bilateral cooperation with Morocco, Tunisia or Turkey.

The contribution of technology-assisted research may strengthen the surveillance policy at the EU borders, and the EU agenda on migration was mentioned as an opportunity to be used in this respect. However, the impact of some domestic policies such as removals of citizenships and expulsions is commonly undermined. Ignoring the effect of these security policies on the perception of certain European communities or third countries populations, as well as the impact of CT/PVE measures on certain communities, might entail significant risks.

As discussed previously, some communities are more frequently targeted when implementing C/PVE programmes. This is the case of stigmatised minorities such as the Muslim community and other racialised groups in Europe. The negative impact of the security measures seems to be largely undermined by authorities. Furthermore, some groups like the Roma are beyond the line, in the sense that they are not even covered by research or public policies. Other radical religious communities, such as the evangelists, are under-scrutinised. Similarly, far-right groups in some European countries are off the security radar.

The ambiguity under the "radicalisation" umbrella also focused part of the discussion. By way of an example, being "radical" in Berlin is substantially different from being "radical" in Cairo, as citizens of the two countries do not enjoy the same rights.

Therefore, national C/PVE policies need to balance its security dimension with respect for human rights. Radicalisation and extremism are not crimes in states respecting freedom of thought, and embracing "radical" ideas, even if they challenge the status quo, is not a crime per se. C/PVE policies not having the right balance between security and fundamental rights, whether affecting all citizens (in the case of authoritarian regimes) or specifically certain communities (in the case of racialised communities in Europe), could foster violent reactions and constitute a driver in themselves.

The important contribution of primary data and programme evaluation for policy-making

Not so long ago, violent extremism was not considered a topic for research. In turn, for policy-makers and practitioners, it was exclusively a matter of intelligence agencies and state security forces. As a matter of fact, in 2009, there was only one C/PVE financing instrument. It is only during the last decade that the first programmes on violent extremism and radicalisation were launched, and those instruments were initially focused exclusively on CT. PVE is a very recent approach and that explains why instruments are still extremely limited. The first tool to be implemented was that of the counter-narratives, which today has proved to be insufficient.

With the aim of assessing what works and what is useless at the level of policy-making recommendations, the EU funded a multi-activity group that attempted to leave behind any presumption and make conclusions based on the results of empirical research. Primary data collected in the field in North Africa and the Sahel provided interesting results: religion was surprisingly relegated at the end of a violent extremism drivers' list. In contrast, factors such as the discrimination of marginalised groups, weak governments, and restrictions of rights and freedoms, appeared in the top positions.

Nonetheless, the difficulty of accessing primary data is constantly highlighted. In Kosovo, for example, researchers do not have the opportunity to interview foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) nor the families of returnees. To do so, they need special permission from the Kosovo police that is generally denied. In the Balkans, it has been estimated that only 4-5% of the research conducted on violent extremism and radicalisation is based on raw data. Conversely, 96% of data contained in the published reports is recycled.

Another common complaint was the insufficient evaluation of C/PVE programmes. For that matter, there should be a permanent assessment of what has worked and what has failed in this field, particularly at a European level.

Donors, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners working together for a common goal

From the donor's perspective, one of the issues raised was the complexity of the proposals' selection. Some local organisations saw an opportunity of funding their

own purposes –sometimes even involving violent means – through EU programmes. Thus, some proposals fell under suspicion. In any case, that was an arduous task due to the particularity of each context and the multiplicity of drivers implied. Such need to refer to the context is exemplified by how climate change and access to water is one important factor of radicalisation in the Sahel, whereas it does not play any role in a European context.

From the reverse perspective, the impact of donor-driven research at the local level was also discussed as a potential distorting factor. To what extent are donors working based on the real needs of the communities in which C/PVE are applied? In many cases, it seems that funds are allocated following other criteria. A paradoxical situation is when, for example, civil society organizations (CSOs) are collecting primary data in the field but local authorities prioritise secondary data contained in foreign reports. That is especially problematic in the context of corrupted public administrations in which local interventions might be politicised.

> ## C/PVE research should be based not on donors' agendas but on the real needs of local communities. To such end, availability of primary data and involvement of local stakeholders is essential

Representatives of the donor side highlighted their efforts, as far as EU-funds institutions are concerned, to abandon preconceived ideas and base their work on empirical research. Furthermore, being conscious of the political instrumentalisation and the negative impact of C/PVE measures on certain communities, they have adopted a new approach in which heavily loaded terms like "fighting" or "countering terrorism" or "violent extremism" are relegated in favour of positive denominations such as "peace building", "youth programme", "empowering", "multiculturalism", "pluralism", "social cohesion" and "inclusion". Accordingly, the promotion of cultural EU-funded theatre and arts projects is leaving the background of the security approach and engaging a new paradigm that is closer to people's concerns and needs.

For all that, close collaboration and exchange between practitioners, researchers and policy-makers was repeatedly identified as the key point to achieve results at the level of C/PVE policies. Researchers should provide their accumulative knowledge, policy-makers explain their priorities, and practitioners express the constraints of their practice. Furthermore, that interrelation needs to occur at the very beginning of the design phase of a research project. Since CSOs have long-term experience in the field, they are also entitled to draw recommendations from researchers regarding the formulation of hypothesis and assumptions. An ongoing dialogue is also required during the

implementation and evaluation. Local practitioners should inform policy-makers and researchers about the real needs and constraints in the field.

Additionally, vague and complex academic language was identified as an obstacle to the dissemination and applicability of research outputs. Researchers should bear in mind that policy-makers need to work with simple outputs easily applicable to concrete field situations. Therefore, even if research results are difficult to condense in a few guidelines, when research adheres to concrete field situations it can ease policy design and evaluation. In other words, researchers should take the risk of providing practical tools that would help decision-making at a further stage.

Widening the scope of study on violent extremism and radicalisation and sharing best practices with EU neighbours

CONNEKT has defined its objects of study including not only religious-driven radicalisation which commonly points out Muslim communities but also other types of extremism. In that respect, not including Serbia in the sample might hinder the results and miss the opportunity to draw attention to far-right extremist movements that are now proliferating in Europe. Concerning the MENA region, "the shores of the Mediterranean look to each other permanently," meaning that "Europe is not discussing solely with itself." In secularised European states there is a tendency to perceive religion as the main driver of radicalisation but what about analysing how non-EU Muslim-majority countries deal with the issue of radical religious currents?

Regarding the Balkans, the phenomenon of the repatriation of FTFs and their reintegration process is today the occasion to demonstrate the EU support and sharing best practices with third countries, especially in a region included in its enlargement strategy. The reintegration of returnees from Syria is a major challenge and an opportunity to learn about de-radicalisation. Criticism arises due to the fact that current reintegration strategies are based on recycling research data, and because of the underlined prejudices towards the communities the returnees come from. Undoubtedly, PVE measures are especially urgent in a region in which the occurrence of a terrorist attack would reignite ancient or latent conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

By way of conclusion, some discourses whose echo defined the entire discussion are assembled herein. To begin with, there was a consensus about the overemphasis given to the relevance of religion, its role as a driver and its links with political ideology. Socio-economic deprivation and territorial inequalities, in turn, seem to play an important role. However, in certain contexts, these macro factors appear to be difficult to be both assessed and targeted through prevention programmes. Instead, feelings of

relative deprivation and political grievances stand as a crucial domain to be tackled by PVE policies. The influence of local leaders at the community level was highlighted precisely because their narratives address social demands that are commonly ignored at the government level. These claims are conceived in a broad sense and cover not only strictly political demands but also the lack of spiritual, educational, cultural and leisure opportunities connected to human dignity.

This reality relates to another outstanding idea: understanding "radicalised" subjects as rational decision-makers who undertake political choices – even violent ones – in their effort to build a better future for themselves, their families or their communities. The agency of the "radical" individual clashes with a conception of social resilience that may be failing by not making authorities or other relevant actors accountable for the injustices endured by populations.

Multidisciplinary participatory research paradigms and long-term commitments are urgent to engage in a new paradigm where youth become active agents of PVE

As a process in which different drivers interact at different levels, the "mosaic of radicalisations" points to the relevance of the local context as the field of intervention. In this respect, it seems that a new paradigm based on empirical research and closer to people's concerns and needs is currently starting to be developed. To do so, research needs to adopt a multidisciplinary and participatory approach, governments should commit to a long-term span, and frontline practitioners should contribute to the project's whole lifecycle. Committed to this philosophy, CONNEKT starts conducting field research in a context in which the aggravating impact of Covid-19 will not cast a shadow on its willingness to give youths a voice as active agents and stakeholders in the understanding and prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being "the problem" into "the key" for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.

Consortium Members