CONNEKT

COUNTRY PAPER
ON MICRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism
in the light of individual dynamics in MENA and the Balkans

BULGARIA

Stefan Ralchev, Alexander Gerganov

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BULGARIA

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Introduction

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The objective of this report is to analyse individual root causes of violent extremism (VE) considering the seven drivers identified in the CONNEKT project: religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, digital socialisation, socio-political issues (claims and grievances), and education, culture and leisure opportunities.

The main research question is what are the drivers of radicalisation and VE at the individual level in Bulgaria, not only from the point of view of personal values and beliefs but also considering processes of primary and secondary socialisation that have an influence on individuals.

Such processes can present very diverse patterns due to the combination of factors, in some cases common to different communities but in others caused by specific situations of a specific social environment. This report focuses on the interaction of different factors observed in the Bulgarian sample of young people aged 15-30. These individual factors are critical for understanding the potential drivers of VE and can be very useful to verify, discard or refine patterns, contexts and drivers identified at the macro and meso levels.

THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT

1) Demography. Bulgaria has been grappling with a declining population, a phenomenon attributed to factors such as low birth rates, emigration, and an aging population. According to the last census (2021), the population dwindled to 6.5 million from 7.4 million in 2011.[1] The consequences of this demographic shift are multifaceted, impacting sectors such as healthcare, social services, and the labour market. Efforts to address these demographic challenges may involve initiatives to encourage family growth, attract skilled professionals, and provide adequate support for the elderly population.

2) Economy. After the negative impact of COVID-19 in 2020-21, Bulgaria in 2023 has been working towards sustained economic growth (Gross Domestic Product [GDP] grew 3.9% in 2022[2]), with a focus on sectors such as technology, tourism, and renewable energy. However, economic disparities persist, with certain regions facing greater challenges than others. While urban centres may experience robust economic development, rural areas might contend with issues such as unemployment and limited access to resources. Strategies to promote balanced economic growth may involve targeted investments, skill development programmes, and fostering innovation across diverse sectors.

3) Social context. Bulgaria's social fabric in 2023 reflects a blend of traditional values and modern influences. Social issues, including education, healthcare, and social inequality, remain focal points

[1] National Statistical Institute, https://census2021.bg/

[2] National Statistical Institute, https://shorturl.at/cnvw6

for policy-makers. Initiatives aimed at enhancing social cohesion, promoting inclusivity, and addressing disparities are integral to the country's social agenda. The younger generation is well connected through digital platforms, a facet of social dynamics and discussions.

4) Politics. Bulgaria experienced a relatively long period of almost two years without a regularly elected government in 2021-23 due to the specificity of its parliamentary system. No party or coalition could form a government, and the country went through five election cycles. This estranged voters, leading to an ever lower turnout (40.6% in April 2023[3]) and political disaffection.

[3] Central Electoral Commission, https://www.cik.bg/bg/37

Methodological approach

A National Youth Survey was carried out in Bulgaria among 400 citizens aged 15-30. The sample for the survey was non-representative (quota sample) but it covered the whole country and can provide good approximation for the Bulgarian population aged 15-30. The main objective of the survey was to study the weight that different factors related to intimate or broad social environments have in the individual dynamics that could potentially lead to VE in Bulgaria.

The geographical regions for Bulgaria covered the whole country. There are six regions of planning that were chosen for the survey:

BG31 Northwestern
BG32 Northern Central
BG33 Northeastern
BG34 Southeastern
BG41 Southwestern
BG42 Southern Central

The six regions covered the whole country and guaranteed a balanced sample that was as close to a national representative survey as possible. The selection of regions always allowed the comparison of the different regions with each other.

The NUTS 2 level regions were chosen instead of the NUTS 3 level (where there are 28 regions), because the sample size would allow some regional comparisons at the level of NUTS 2, but not at the level of NUTS 3. The sample was not boosted for any particular region as all 6 regions are important in the context of the study; the sample was stratified, proportional to the population size of the regions.

The survey was conducted through a face-to-face interview among young Bulgarian people aged 15-30 and used a translated common questionnaire, which was administered in all countries where the survey was conducted.

A fieldwork agency was subcontracted to conduct a survey among the target group using a standardised questionnaire which was provided in Bulgarian by CSD. The survey fieldwork and data processing went through the following steps:

Step 1: Sampling

In order to ensure the quality of the information collected and a sufficient number of observations to ensure the application of the statistical methods of analysis and therefore to answer the objectives of the assignment, a sample was drawn that took into account the proportions of the target population. The sample was a non-representative quota sample, formed by age, sex, education and type of locality. In selecting the specific representatives of the target groups, the set criteria were respected and procedures

were applied to prevent the impact of factors related to the target group itself on the selection results. A sample size of 400 completed interviews with persons from the target group was achieved. The method of data collection was a face-to-face survey.

Step 2. Questionnaire

A questionnaire provided by CSD in Bulgarian was used for the purpose of the study. The fieldwork agency programmed the questionnaire in their specialised survey software (Lime Survey). The programmed questionnaire was used to conduct the face-to-face surveys using tablets operated by the agency's survey network.

Step 3. Training of interviewers

Prior to the start of fieldwork (when conducting the face-to-face survey), interviewers received training. They were familiarised with the objectives and methodology of the survey, the schedule and the way of working, the objectives and the specifics of the questionnaire. They were also provided with explicit written instructions. The training of the interviewers included a detailed examination of the questionnaire (question by question) and a playback of the questionnaire in a real situation through a simulation of the interview. In this way, the interviewers were prepared for the process of interviewing the sample persons.

Step 4. Fieldwork

Once the training of the network of interviewers was completed, the actual fieldwork began. Throughout the fieldwork, the interviewers were supported and supervised by designated supervisors and fieldwork officers. They answered questions that arose in the process and sought solutions to problems that emerged. Regular contact was made with the interviewing teams to follow up on sample performance, problems and difficulties encountered.

Step 5. Preparation of a software solution for logical view of the data

The preparation for logical view of data in statistical processing software started with creating a preliminary model for logical view of the collected data and checking for consistency. The model allowed for logical checking of the collected information at two levels:

- the first logical inspection and logical control is performed at the level of the individual questionnaire, while coding the information;
- the second level of logical control is performed before the statistical processing of the data and the review of the relationship and consistency between the individual indicators.

Step 6: Verification and logical inspection of the information collected

The data file underwent repeated logical inspection, which included reviewing the frequency distributions of individual questions to detect mis-entered values or labels, producing crosstabs to detect logical inconsistencies, and more. These errors were cleared after checking in the original source. After this procedure, the file was ready to be used in the next stage of processing for analysis purposes.

Step 7. Cleaning the collected survey data and preparing a technical report

Once the information had passed through all the stages of control, the data was submitted in the required

format template and a technical report of the fieldwork was prepared. A clean SPSS file with 400 interviews was submitted by the fieldwork agency in the predefined SPSS template.

A technical report describing the methodology, duration of fieldwork, refusal and non-detection rates of respondents, difficulties associated with fieldwork, methodology of calculating the weighting variable(s), etc. was also submitted.

Duration of fieldwork and response rates:
The fieldwork took place between 20 March and 10 April 2023 and was followed by data processing before the final SPSS file was submitted to CSD. As a result of the fieldwork of 477 units of youth aged 15-30, the following number of surveys were completed. The percentage of refusals was 16.1%.

Difficulties related to fieldwork:
During the fieldwork, interviewers were assisted and supervised by the designated supervisors and field survey officers. No major difficulties or problems with the fieldwork were identified.

Methodology of calculation of weight variable(s):
No weighting variable had to be added in this study. The quota sampling used and its correct implementation accurately reflect the structure of the general population in terms of the main quota attributes (type of locality, gender, age, and education) for the whole sample as well as for individual segments.

Research results

THE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The objective of the National Youth Surveys was to examine the way in which young individuals interact with various drivers on a personal level. Through the use of surveys, the collected data aims to offer analytical insights and a comprehensive understanding of the connections that young people establish with these drivers. This includes identifying the extent to which they may be more susceptible or vulnerable to specific drivers compared to others. The analysis primarily focuses on the seven CONNEKT recognised drivers of VE: religion, territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, education, culture, access to leisure, digital socialisation, and political issues (claims and grievances). However, an additional variable, "exposure to violence", has been incorporated to explore the correlation between the seven pre-identified drivers and this variable. This approach allows for the comparison of percentages among individuals with, for instance, high religious commitment and low political grievances, in relation to their level of exposure to violence across the eight countries included in the survey. Furthermore, the survey seeks to gauge the youth's perspectives on preventing violent extremism (PVE). The questionnaire is not designed to delve into the participants' intentions regarding VE, as such an exploration would necessitate a more in-depth psychological approach.

The ensuing data analysis was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relevance granted by responders to each driver?
RQ2: How do the drivers interact with each other?
RQ3: How exposure to violence has an impact on the perception of the drivers?
RQ4: What is the opinion of youth regarding public policies on PVE?

Judging by the results of the survey in Bulgaria, it can be concluded that at micro level young people do not perceive religion as an important factor in their life: they identify with a certain faith but do not see themselves as religious, do not attend services, and do not see the religious communities in their area to be influential. Yet religion was ranked as the number one most important factor for radicalisation by the second largest number of respondents when directly asked. The largest number of respondents identified economics as the most important factor for radicalisation, yet the majority of youngsters and parents perceive themselves to be middle class or lower middle class. Most of the interviewed youth feel safe in their neighbourhood, city or country but a quarter cannot answer the question with yes or no. When asked whether they have engaged in a violent conflict in different contexts, one of the highest percentage (around 13%) of replies referred to happenings in the neighbourhood. An overwhelming majority of young people use the Internet, mostly to access social networks; at the same three fifths do not know about and four fifths have never used a Virtual Private Network (VPN). This may mean the digitalisation driver is less well expressed in Bulgaria (indeed when directly asked about the importance of the digital space as a factor for radicalisation, most youngsters, around 20%, gave a neutral answer). Political parties, the media, and the judiciary have earned significant distrust, with almost 80% of respondents declaring to fully distrust or generally distrust political parties, followed by the media, and the judiciary; politics was ranked as the most important factor for radicalisation by the third largest number of interviewees. As regards the foreign

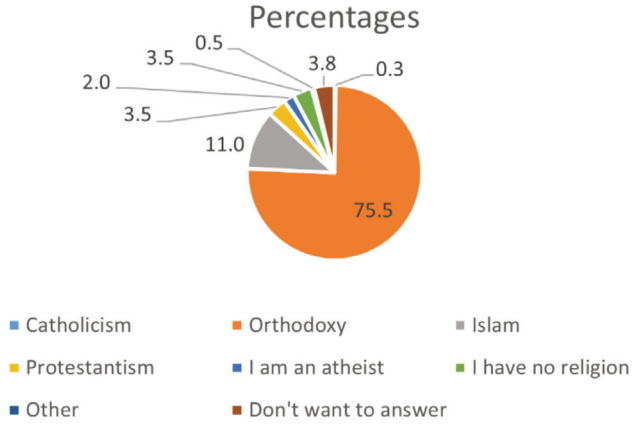
influence factor, the large majority of young people in Bulgaria point to the European Union (EU) as the most influential one, followed by the United States (US) and Russia. Yet when asked about Bulgarian policy towards Ukraine, which is a common EU policy based on values, they are split between for and against. Youngsters love listening to music and engaging with friends but quite a lower number do sports or volunteering work. They do not see the Bulgarian diaspora as influential. As regards prevention, young people in Bulgaria are sceptical about religious education but more favourable towards existing state policies and monitoring social networks.

ANALYSING THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The pre-defined micro-level drivers to potential radicalisation tendencies are presented below.

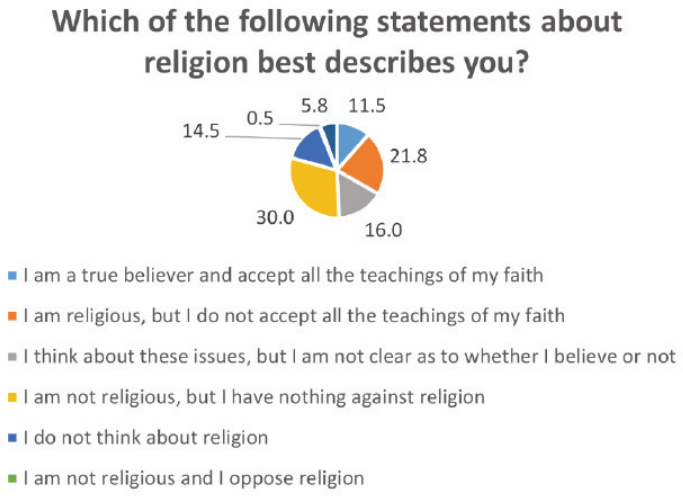
Religion

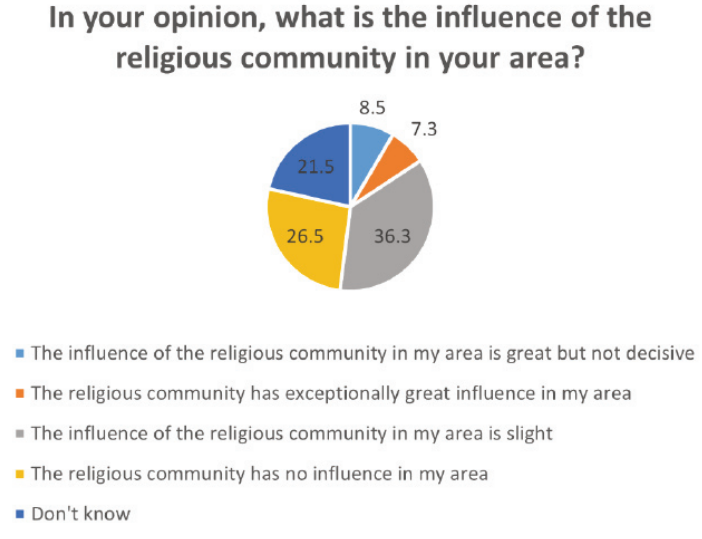
The survey examined the role played by religious reference, through religious institutions or the activation of religious affiliations, as a factor that can enhance or dismantle the process of polarisation with respect to other groups or religious communities. The results for Bulgaria showed that the majority of the participants identify as Orthodox Christians (75.5%), with smaller proportions identifying as Muslims (11.0%), Protestants (3.5%), and atheists (2.0%). There were respondents who indicated having no religion (3.5%), while a very small percentage chose "Other" (0.5%), and some preferred not to answer (3.8%).



In terms of attitudes towards religion, a considerable proportion (30.0%) indicated that they are not religious but have no objections to religion. Similarly, a relevant share (21.8%) identified as religious but do not fully accept all teachings of their faith, while a lower proportion of respondents (16.0%) mentioned that they think about religious issues but are uncertain about their beliefs.

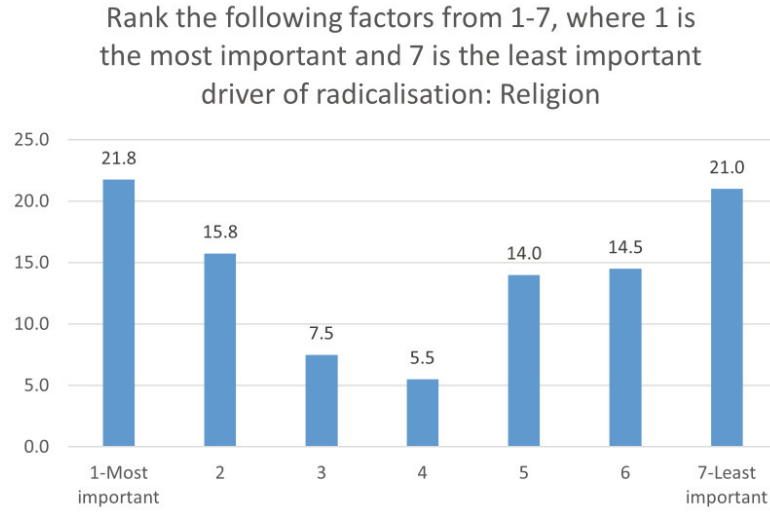
In addition, a substantial portion of respondents perceive the influence of the religious community in their area as slight (36.3%) or non-existent (26.5%). However, a smaller percentage believes the influence is great but not decisive (85%) or exceptionally great (7.3%). Approximately one fifth of the respondents (21.5%) expressed uncertainty regarding the religious community's influence.





Very few of the Bulgarian participants in the survey attend religious services regularly or often (12%). Similarly, only 18.5% of the respondents report praying regularly or often. Only religious holidays are celebrated by most of the young people in Bulgaria (32% celebrate them regularly and 38.5% often).

The survey findings demonstrate that religion in Bulgaria does not play a significant role in the lives of young people and hence religion as a driver for VE cannot be assigned a decisive role at the micro level. Yet when directly asked which is the most important factor for radicalisation, 21.8% of youths assigned to religion significant importance as a driver:

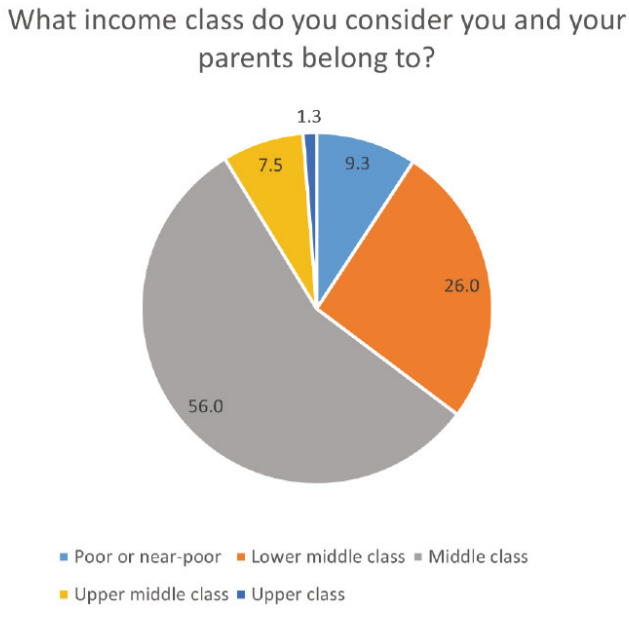


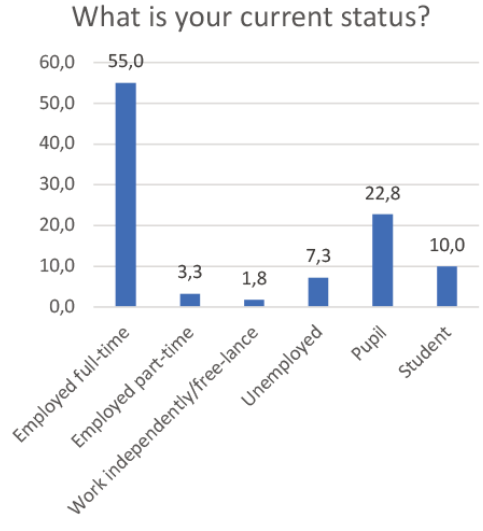
For comparison, in the meso-level research in Bulgaria one of the case studies identified resilience to radical Islam in the selected community. And macro-level research displayed an institutional emphasis on the potential risk of Islamic radicalisation in certain communities in Bulgaria and among the refugee flows from the conflict in Syria. One conclusion is that perceptions of institutions and the public in Bulgaria tend to coincide when the risk of religious (Islamic) radicalisation is concerned, possibly as a result of the public discourse after the conflict in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

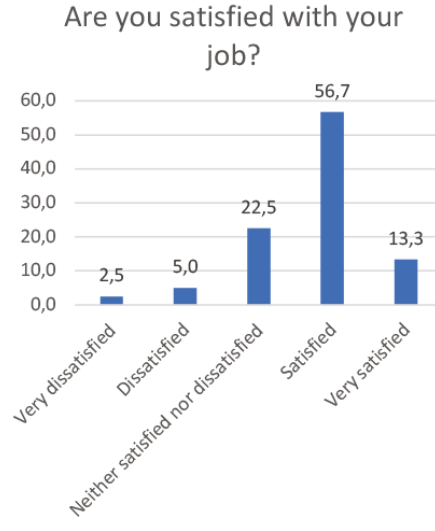
Economic deprivation

By economic deprivation as a driver for radicalisation and VE, CONNEKT understands the inequality that is experienced by sectors of the population living in precarious social conditions, and that turns them into fragile subjects. Facing social determinism suggesting that living in marginal contexts favours youth extremism, other arguments are emerging offering a more nuanced point of view regarding these processes. Placing the arguments into their contexts is one of the premises of this project, since this allows us to understand the social meanings youngsters are referring to.

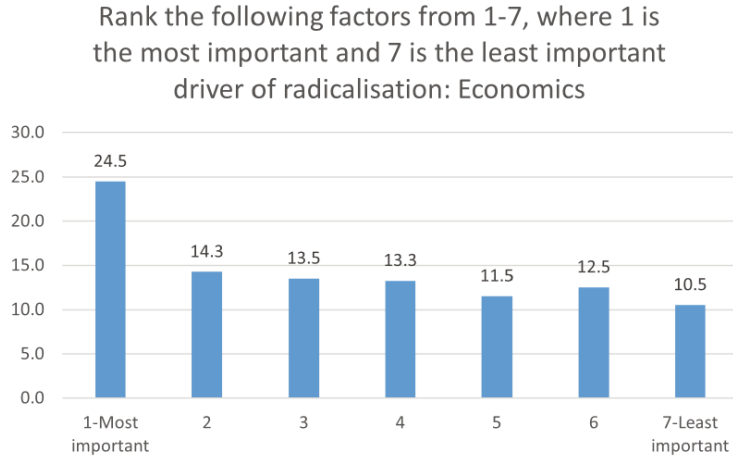
The survey results in Bulgaria showed that the majority of respondents (56.0%) and their parents (54.3%) consider themselves to be in the middle class. Additionally, a relevant share of respondents sees themselves as belonging to the lower middle class (26.0%), while a smaller percentage identifies with the upper middle class (7.5%). Similarly, for their parents, a significant proportion perceives them as being in the lower middle class (24.80%), while approximately one in 10 respondents considers their parents' income to be poor or near-poor (11.8%). Most of the youth participants said they were employed, and of those the majority said they were satisfied with their job.







Yet when asked to rank the significance of economics for radicalisation, the plurality gave it a "most important" value:

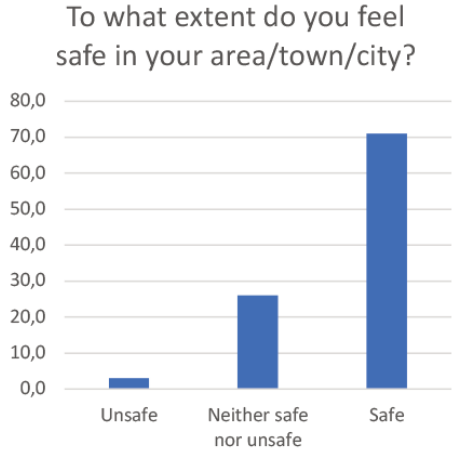


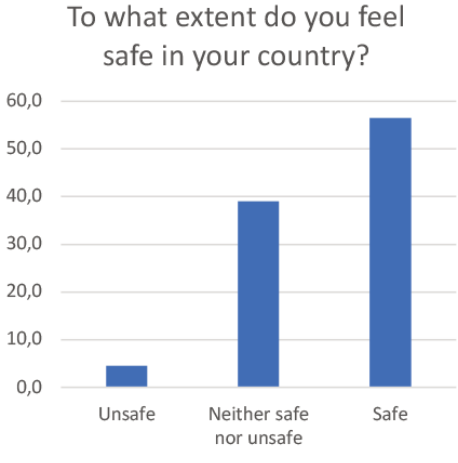
Economic development was identified as a societal problem by respondents in the meso-level research in Bulgaria, too, especially in one case study focusing on football supporters. At the macro level, institutions ascribed to it lesser importance as a driver for radicalisation. These discrepancies may be rooted in the perceptions of youth in Bulgaria regarding their expectations for early realisation and aspirations for economic wellbeing.

Territorial inequalities

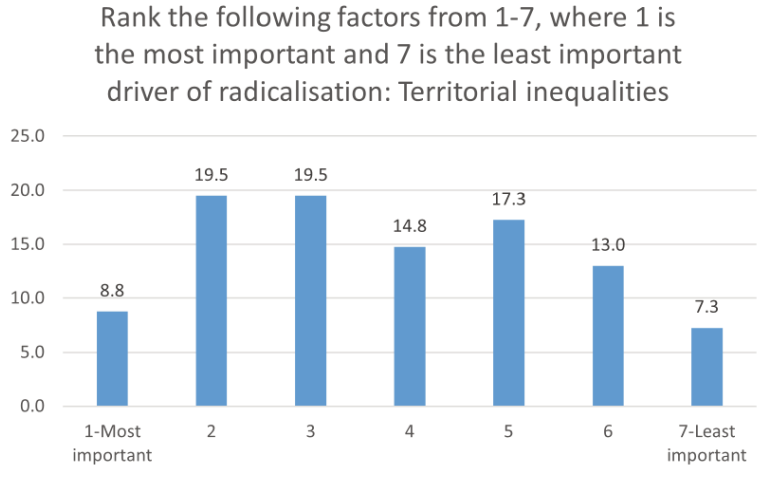
According to CONNEKT's approach, territorial disparities within a country could account for certain perceptions of injustice that contribute to extremist and violent narratives. While the divide between rural and urban areas may bring about such inequality perceptions, the combination of urban and peri-urban spaces, coupled with unequal opportunities and economic hardships, could create a conducive environment for the radicalisation process.

The micro-level survey in Bulgaria showed that the majority of respondents feel safe in their neighbourhood (73.0%), area/town/city (71.0%), and country (56.5%). A small percentage feel unsafe in their neighbourhood (3.3%), area/town/city (3.0%), and country (4.5%), while a significant proportion feel neither safe nor unsafe in these respective areas (ranging from 23.8% to 39.0%).





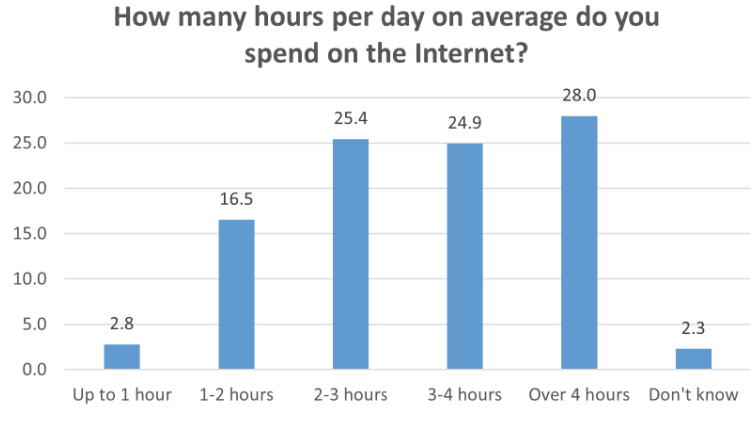
When directly asked whether territorial inequalities are an important factor for radicalisation, youths' answers corresponded to their sense of safety:



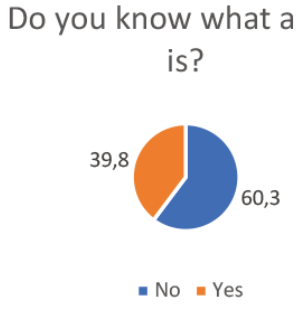
Digital socialisation

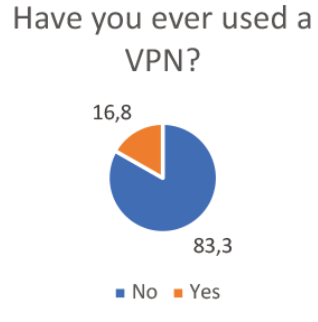
CONNEKT takes into account the transformative process of integrating digital technologies into everyday life. The advent of communication technologies has introduced fresh elements into the realm of VE, closely intertwined and significantly influencing the formation of narratives. Consequently, the level of transnationalism and the extent of digitalisation among targeted populations should be evaluated as factors that either propel or facilitate radicalisation and VE. Aspects like digital literacy and the availability of digital tools warrant thorough investigation in this context.

Micro-level research in Bulgaria demonstrates that the vast majority of respondents (98.3%) have Internet access, while only a small percentage (1.8%) reported that they do not have access to the Internet. Among those having access, the majority spends considerable time online. 28% spend over 4 hours per day on the Internet, followed by 25.4% spending 2-3 hours, and 24.9% spending 3-4 hours. A smaller percentage spends 1-2 hours (16.5%), and only a small percentage spends up to 1 hour (2.8%). The most prevalent purposes include for accessing social networks (84.5%), communicating with friends/family via platforms (75.8%), and watching videos/listening to music (69.8%).

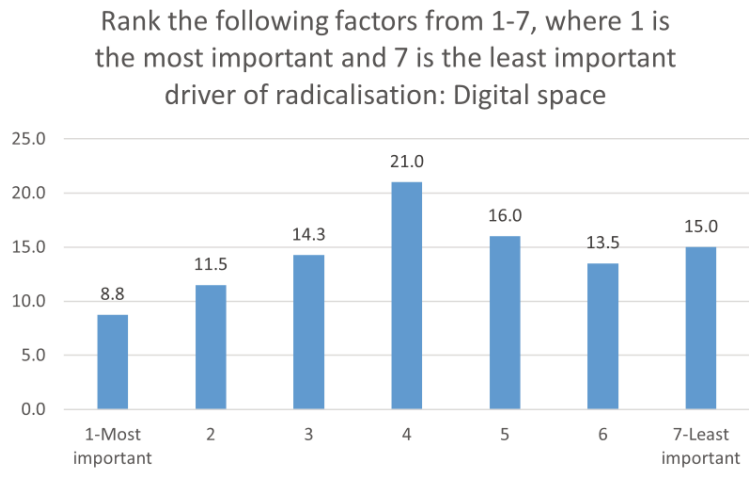


The survey included questions about VPN awareness and use, as VPN is a tool for establishing anonymity online and in a way may be regarded as accompanying the use of extremist narratives. Data showed that 60.3% of respondents do not know what a VPN is, while 39.8% responded affirmatively. It revealed that 83.3% of respondents have not used a VPN, while 16.8% reported having used one. Among the respondents who use a VPN, the primary reasons include accessing regionally restricted content (5.3%), followed by protecting their location on the social media (4.8%), and seeking more independence and privacy (4.5%); more than half of the answers in each category, however, were negative (i.e., they denied using a VPN for accessing restricted content, for privacy on the social media, etc.).





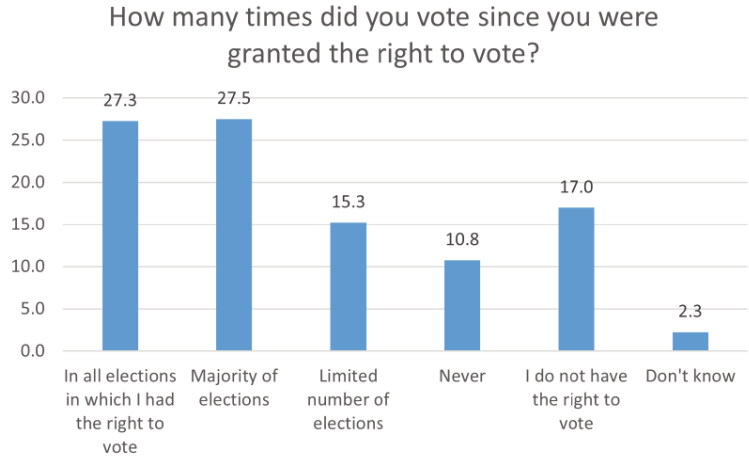
When directly asked in the survey whether the digital space is an important factor for radicalisation, most youths assigned it medium values, possibly revealing they do not strongly believe in its impact:



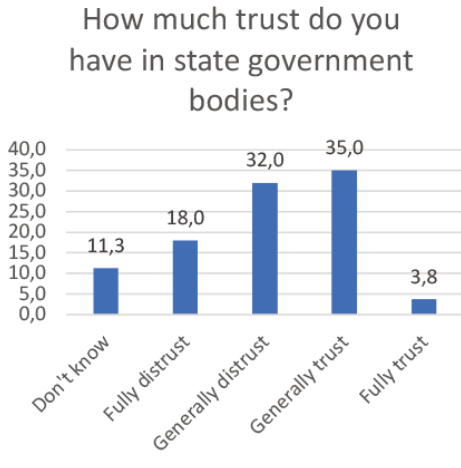
An analysis of survey results regarding the social digitalisation driver points to a visible potential for communication technologies and digitalisation to influence young people in Bulgaria, including towards radical beliefs, although currently they are not perceived as such. This chimes with the conclusions of the macro- and meso-level analysis. Indeed, institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs) recognised the huge role the social media play vis-à-vis the young. Significantly, the case studies for Bulgaria at meso level included observation of Facebook groups of football supporters and ultra-conservative formations; extremist narratives were very present and largely amplified in comparison with what tends to be shared by those individuals in real life or in ordinary media.

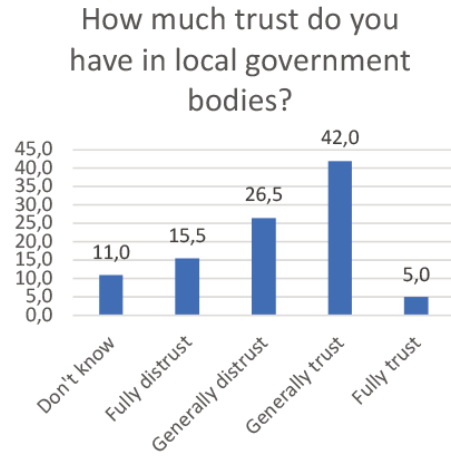
Political issues

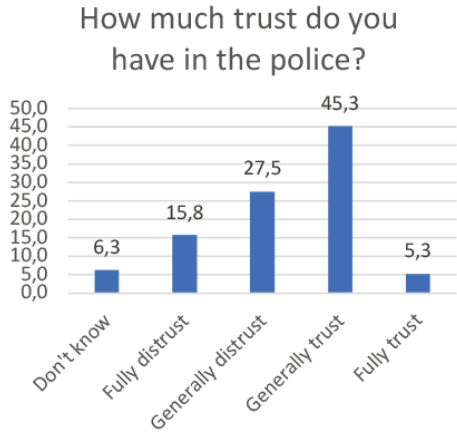
In the case of Bulgaria, political grievances in the micro-level survey were explored mainly vis-à-vis participation (or political disaffection), trust in institutions and other actors, and satisfaction with public services, possibly paving the way for radicalisation processes. In terms of voting frequency among respondents since being granted the right to vote, a substantial portion of respondents reported voting in all elections in which they had the right to vote (27.3%) or in the majority of elections (27.5%). A significant share mentioned voting in a limited number of elections (15.3%), while a smaller percentage indicated that they never voted (10.8%).

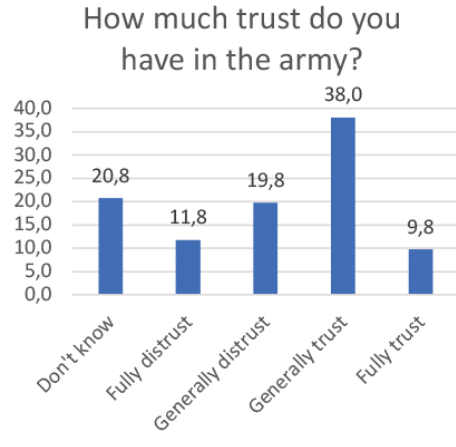


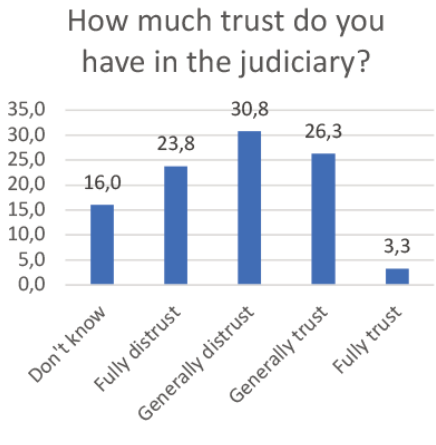
As regards the level of trust in various institutions among the respondents. Overall, the police, the army, and local government bodies appear to have garnered a generally high level of trust. More than half of respondents (50.6%) indicated a general and full trust in the police, while this share accounts to 47.8% for the army and 47.0% for the local government bodies. On the other hand, political parties, the media, and the judiciary have earned significant distrust. A combined 79.8% of respondents declared to fully distrust or generally distrust political parties, followed by the media (56.5%), and the judiciary (54.6%).

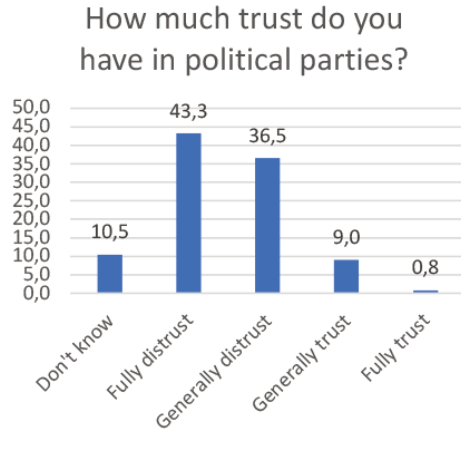




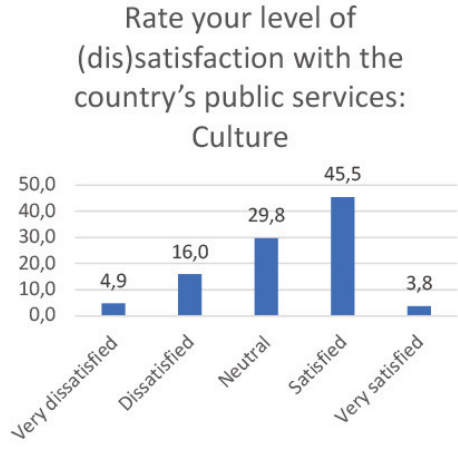


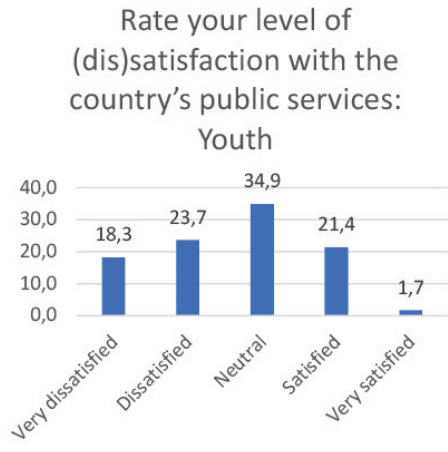


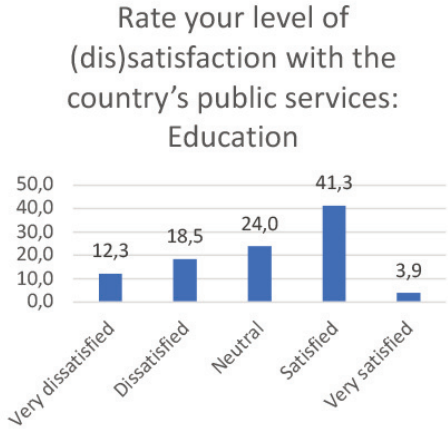


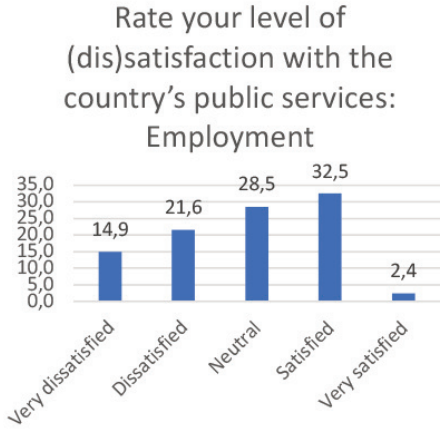


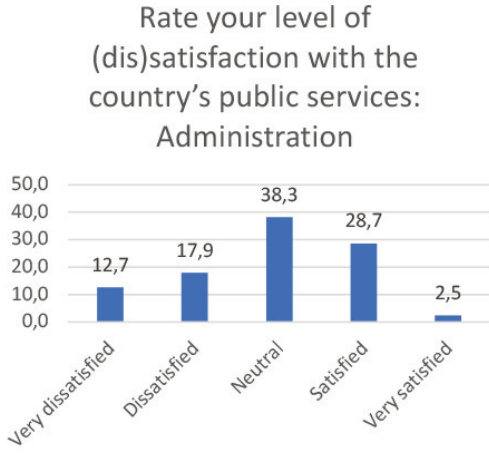
Regarding the young respondents' levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the country's public services across various sectors, culture receives a relatively high level of satisfaction, with 42.0% expressing satisfaction and 3.5% indicating very high satisfaction. Health and environmental services display more balanced feedback, with health services showing 28.5% neutral responses and environmental services receiving 27.8% satisfaction. Youth services receive mixed responses, with 31.0% neutral and 20.5% satisfied and very satisfied, while education services show a substantial level of satisfaction (39.5%), and 3.8% very high satisfaction. Employment services receive 30.5% satisfaction, and administration services garner 34.8% neutrality.



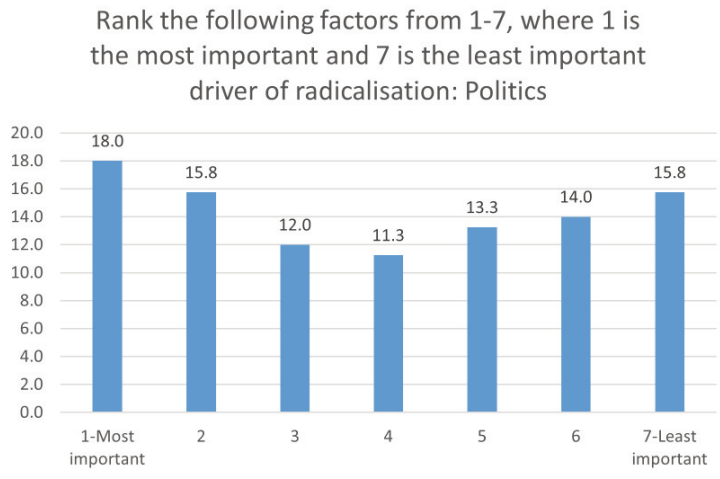








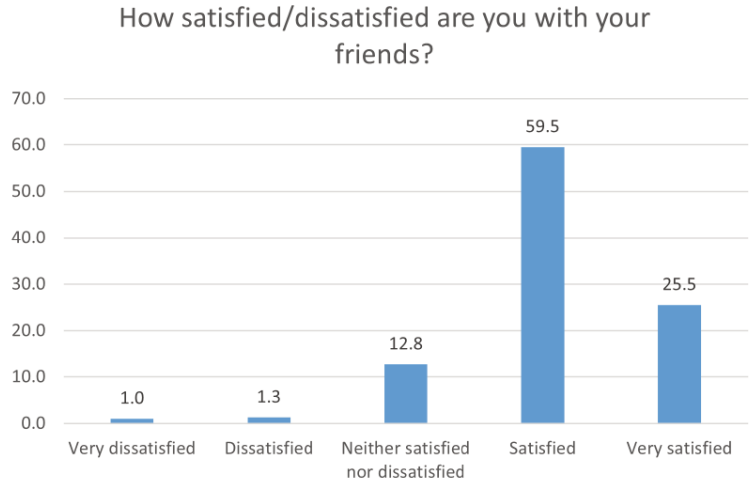
When directly asked about the level of importance of politics as a driver for radicalisation, opinions were polarised, with the majority of respondents ascribing very high or very low values:



One conclusion from the survey results points to a visible difference in the levels of trust in institutions on the one hand (generally low, with the exception of the police and the army), and the satisfaction with public services on the other (prevailing "neutral" or "satisfied" attitudes). This may reflect a distancing of young people from political processes per se, at the same time not indicating grievances from immediate conditions as determined by those processes. Responses, however, highlight that politics is considered as potentially conducive to radicalisation tendencies. These results are in line with CONNEKT research in Bulgaria on the meso level: both case studies (football supporters and ultraconservative communities online) showed high levels of disaffection with political actors due to perceived corruption and lack of care for the good of society.

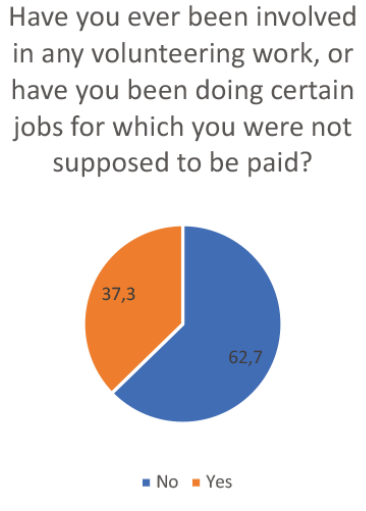
Education, culture and leisure opportunities

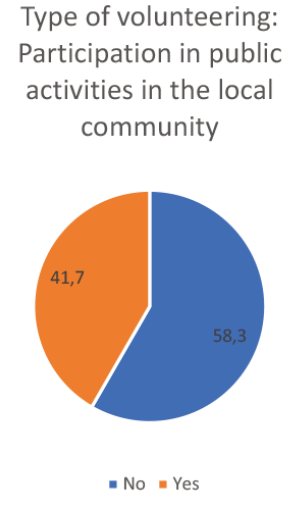
Education plays a crucial role in averting VE, yet aspects like friendships, non-formal education, civic engagement/volunteering and recreational activities are also important as domains for prevention emphasis. Micro-level research in Bulgaria also focused on levels of satisfaction with young people's friends. A considerable portion of respondents (59.5%) expressed satisfaction with their friends, while 25.5% reported being very satisfied. Additionally, 12.8% responded as being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, with a small percentage indicated being very dissatisfied (1.0%) or dissatisfied (1.3%).

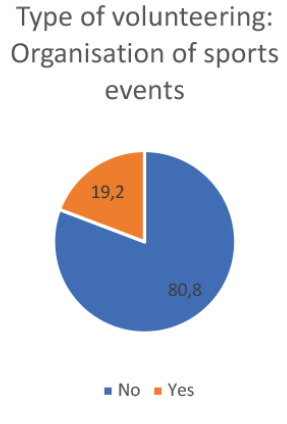


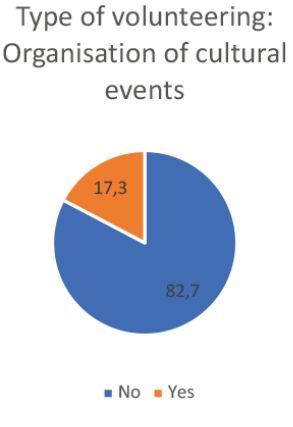
In relation to other extracurricular activities, youngsters' responses show that using the internet/web search is the most common activity, with 90.5% reporting that they often do it. The second most popular activity is listening to music, with 75% of respondents reporting that they often do it and 24.3% indicating they do it sometimes. Going out with friends and watching TV are also common, with 59.0% often engaging in the former activity and 54.8% engaging in the latter activity. Reading books/magazines is done more occasionally, with the majority of respondents (60.3%) sometimes doing it. Notably, approximately one respondents in five (18%) reported of never doing sports or reading books/magazines.

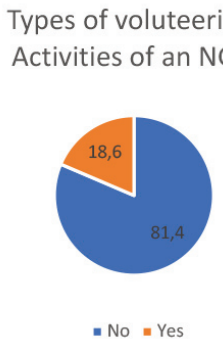
A special group of questions in the survey was dedicated to volunteerism as an activity strongly linked to prevention of radicalisation processes among youths. The majority of respondents (62.7%) indicated that they have not been involved in such activities, while the remaining share (37.3%) reported their participation in volunteering or unpaid jobs. Among those who engage in volunteerism, participation in public activities in the local community stands out with 16.3% participation. Supporting persons with special needs, the elderly, and children is also prominent (15.5%), followed by supporting a colleague in learning (10.5%). Other activities include the organisation of sports events (7.5%), activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (7.3%), and cultural events (6.8%).



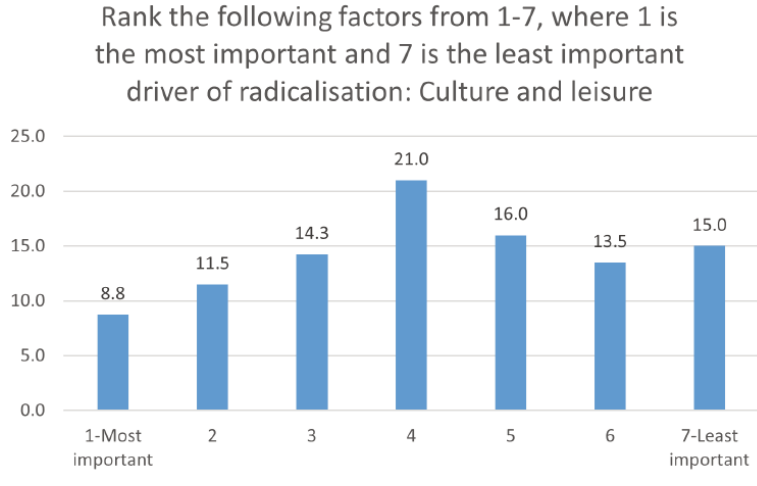








To the direct question about what they think about culture and leisure as a driver of radicalisation, the majority assigned mid-level importance to this aspect of society:



The micro-level findings correlate in a way with findings of the meso-level research in Bulgaria. Representatives of some institutions, football supporters and students expressed opinions that extracurricular activities such as engagement in sports, charity and volunteering have a positive impact when prevention of violence is concerned. In contrast, other institutional representatives assigned more importance to the family than to such activities.

That said, the survey demonstrated a worryingly high level of intolerance towards representatives of other ethnicities and nationalities. When asked about acceptable relationships with foreigners or ethnic minorities, the percentages of those who do not want any relationship are explicit:

Here are listed different relationships that we may have with people of different nationalities. If you were in a position to decide, which of these relationships would you accept? – Percentages of those who answered "I do not want to be in any relationship with them"

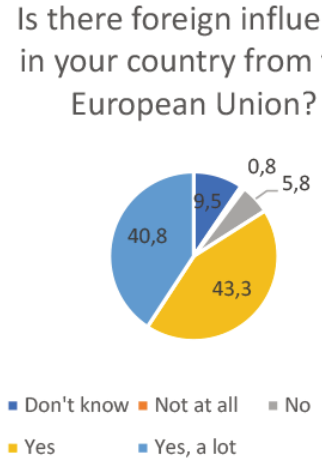
Albanians	46.3%
Americans	27.0%
Arabs	58.5%

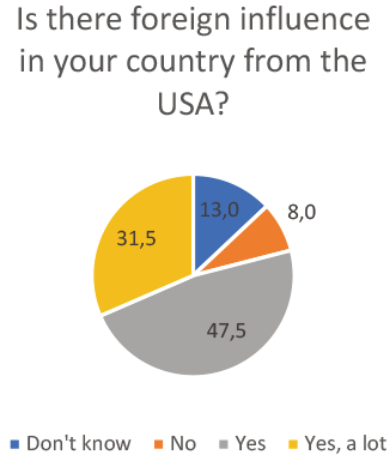
Bosnians	41.5%
Chinese	33.3%
Croats	27.3%
French	21.8%
Germans	20.0%
Macedonians	41.8%
Roma	49.5%
Russians	20.5%
Saudi Arabians	62.3%
Serbs	26.8%
Spaniards	19.5%
Turks	20.8%

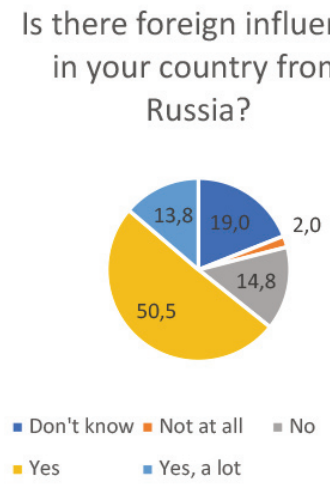
The proportions are particularly high for Saudi Arabians, Arabs, Roma, Albanians, Bosnians and Chinese. This intolerance for different cultures, both foreign and domestic (as Roma are), in one's own community is a potential breeding ground for far-right radicalisation processes. Indeed, at macro level non-governmental actors expressed strong opinions about the overlooking of far-right extremism and hate speech in Bulgaria.

Transnational dynamics

Transnational dynamics is an important driver in CONNEKT's approach to analyse processes of radicalisation and VE among youth in the Balkans and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Particularly in relation to Bulgaria, phenomena such as foreign influence, migration flows, emigration and diaspora ppulation have their impact on the thinking of young people. Micro-level research demonstrated various perceptions they have regarding the above. In terms of the role of foreign countries/entities, the EU is perceived to have the highest foreign influence, with 84.1% of respondents indicating influence, followed by the US (79.0%), and Russia (64.3%). On the other hand, China is viewed as having less influence, with 35.8% of respondents reporting influence, while Israel is perceived to have the least foreign influence (18.3%).

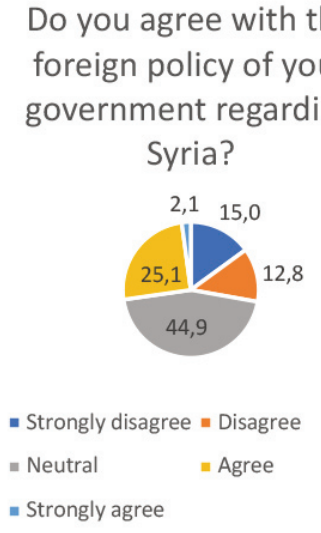


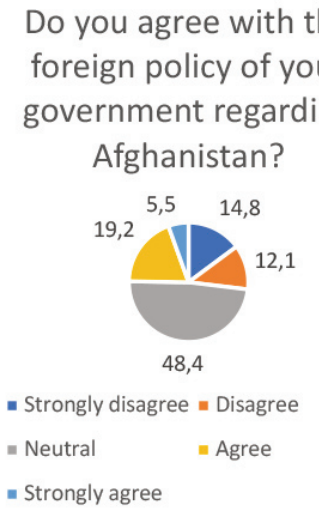


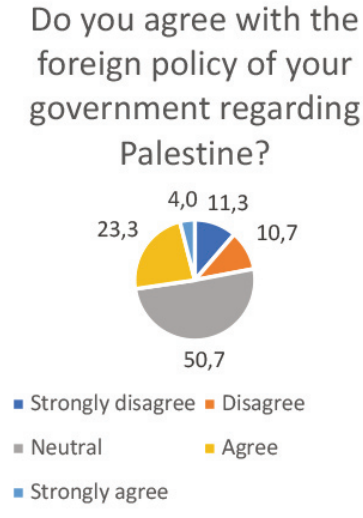


The results can be interpreted as corresponding to general attitudes in Bulgaria. Membership of the EU and the strong partnership with the US is reflected in young people's perceptions of influence of these actors, too. Russia is perceived in Bulgarian society as a historically friendly nation (which also helped "liberate" Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in the 19th century, as taught in schools), and this is visible in youths' perceptions of its influence. One caveat of this set of questions is that there is no qualifier as to what influence is meant – "good" or "bad". To compare with CONNEKT's other levels of research, perceptions at institutional level were similar to those above. However, when looking at the specific communities at meso level (football supporters and ultraconservatives online), certain contrasts appear. While conservative groups have displayed somewhat negative sentiments towards Western actors and positive towards Russia, some football supporters appraised Russian influence as harmful.

Another set of questions in the survey asked for respondents' opinions on the Bulgarian government's foreign policy regarding different countries. When it comes to Palestine, only a small percentage (1.5%) strongly agrees with the government's policy, while 8.8% agrees. The situation is similar for Syria, with 1% strongly agreeing and 11.8% agreeing with the government's policy. For Afghanistan, 2.5% strongly agrees, and 8.8% agrees with the government's policy. Ukraine stands out as a more divisive issue, with 4% strongly agreeing, and 18.5% agreeing with the government's policy, while nearly a third of respondents (29.8%) combined reported to disagree and strongly disagree with the government's foreign policy.

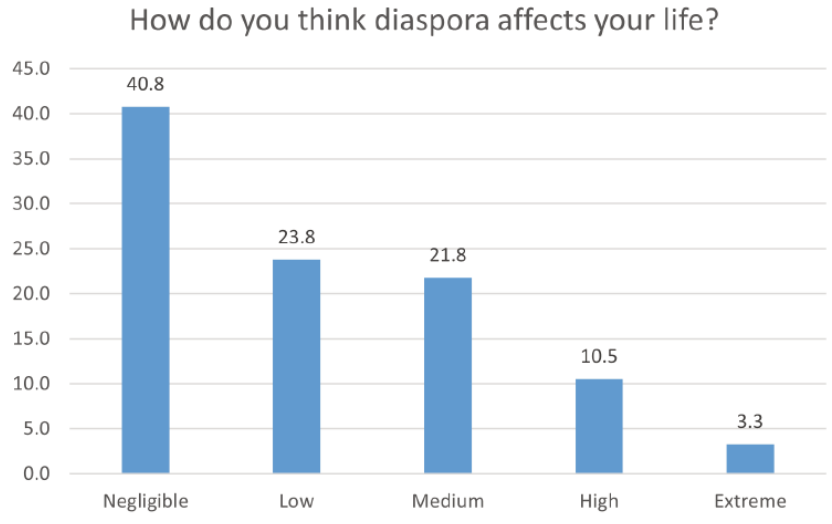




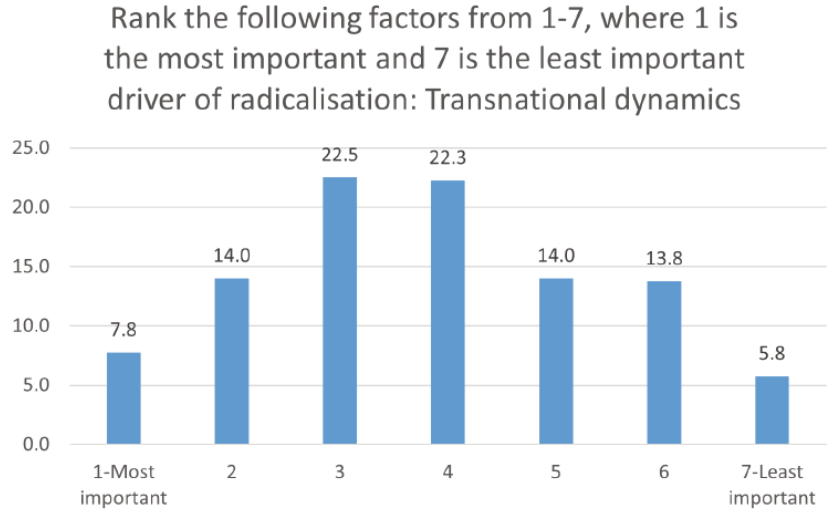


The prevalence of neutral attitudes towards Syria, Afghanistan and Palestine can be explained with the absence of these countries and processes there from the daily public discourse in Bulgaria. As for Ukraine, the results may be a reflection of divisions on societal level – on the one hand, the official Bulgarian position as Western partner of support for Ukraine, also seen in the mainstream media and, on the other, the palpable pro-Russian sentiments based on "historical ties" and the existing Russian disinformation campaigns. In both cases, however, it can be concluded that the potential of the transnational driver to affect behaviour is low.

In CONNEKT's approach, it is essential to consider the impact of diasporas, not just as an inherent connection that binds developments in Europe, the MENA region, and the Balkans, allowing individual or group processes, perceptions, and framings to go beyond state boundaries; diasporas also play a crucial role in shaping fresh transnational solidarities, identities, and motivations. According to the micro-level research in Bulgaria on the impact of the diaspora on various aspects of society, approximately one in two respondents (50.6%) considers its influence to be negligible or low, while around one in three (33.0%) perceives it as medium, with a lower share of respondents (16.5%) believing it to be high or extreme. The majority of respondents (64.6%) view the impact on their lives as negligible or low. When it comes to the connection between the diaspora and the resident population, a relevant proportion of respondents (44.5%) perceive it as negligible or low, although a notable percentage (26.8%) considers its impact as high or extreme. Regarding the socioeconomic situation, the majority of respondents (42.3%) view the impact as negligible or low, while almost one in three respondents (30.5%) considers it as high or extreme. Lastly, in terms of religious life, most respondents (83.3%) perceive the impact of diaspora as negligible or low, with only 5.1% seeing it as high or extreme. It can be thus inferred that the relevance of the diaspora as a transnational driver for radicalisation vis-à-vis Bulgarian youths is low.



Responses to the question about how the international dynamics driver relates to radicalisation showed that youths assign mostly medium importance to it:



THE INFLUENCE OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE ON THE DRIVER'S PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The micro-level research included direct survey questions on the exposure to violence on the driver's perceptions of VE. The responses demonstrate that the prevailing majority of young people (84.3% to 96.5%) have not engaged in violent conflict in the different contexts they were asked about: neighbourhood, clubs/cafés, sports facilities, school/university, with other people over politics/religion, the police, with a partner. In other words, fewer than one in 10 respondents reported engaging in physically violent conflicts within the various settings considered. Among the settings, the highest participation was observed in conflicts within school/university (15.80%) and the neighbourhood/quarter where they reside (13%), followed by conflicts with other young people in a club or café (8.8%).

	No	Yes
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict with other young people in the neighbourhood/quarter where you reside?	87.0%	13.0%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict with other young people in a club or in a café?	91.3%	8.8%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict in a sports hall, on a football pitch, etc.?	92.8%	7.3%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict in school/ at university?	84.3%	15.8%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict with young people of other political or religious convictions?	96.5%	3.5%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict with the police (e.g., on protests)?	96.3%	3.8%
Have you ever participated in physically violent conflict with a partner?	95.8%	4.3%

Despite the vast majority of people attesting to no participation in conflicts, the results may be interpreted as a warning that schools and neighbourhoods hold the potential as social contexts conducive to violence among Bulgarian youth.

As regards the direct question related to the drivers analysed by CONNEKT, the responses analysed in the sections are summarised below. They show that most young people perceive as the most important factor for radicalisation (those assigning value 1) to be economics (24.5%), followed by religion (21.8%) and politics (18%). On the other hand, the majority assigning a value of 7 (the least important factor) link that to culture (24.8%), again politics (15.8%) and the digital space (15%). One conclusion is that economic wellbeing is important for young people and perceptions of the political life in Bulgaria and its implications for radicalisation are controversial.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Politics	18.0%	15.8%	12.0%	11.3%	13.3%	14.0%	15.8%
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Economics	24.5%	14.3%	13.5%	13.3%	11.5%	12.5%	10.5%
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Religion	21.8%	15.8%	7.5%	5.5%	14.0%	14.5%	21.0%

Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Territorial inequalities	8.8%	19.5%	19.5%	14.8%	17.3%	13.0%	7.3%
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Transnational dynamics	7.8%	14.0%	22.5%	22.3%	14.0%	13.8%	5.8%
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Culture and leisure	10.5%	9.3%	10.8%	12.0%	14.0%	18.8%	24.8%
Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important driver of radicalisation: Digital space	8.8%	11.5%	14.3%	21.0%	16.0%	13.5%	15.0%

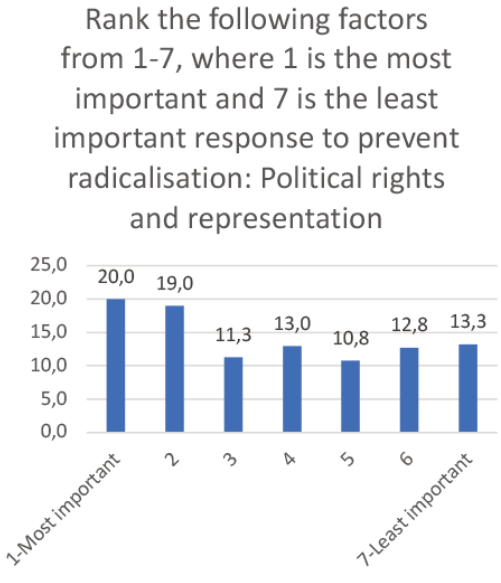
THE OPINION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON PUBLIC POLICIES REGARDING THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

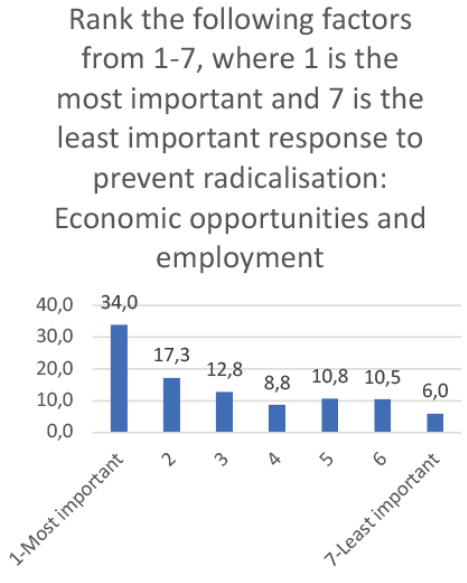
Perceptions of young people of how to prevent radicalisation and VE were also investigated at the micro level in Bulgaria. The table below reflects respondents' views on various statements related to the containment and limitation of the risk of VE. A considerable proportion of respondents either strongly disagree or disagree with the effectiveness of religious education in countering this risk (16.8%), while a notable share remains neutral (24.5%). Similarly, respondents express diverse opinions regarding the efficacy of state policies and measures offering equal rights and resources for all citizens, although the majority of respondents (50%) agree or strongly agree. Regarding monitoring the social media as a means of containment of the risk of VE, approximately one in five respondents expresses scepticism (19.5% strongly disagree or disagree), while 42.6% express agreement.

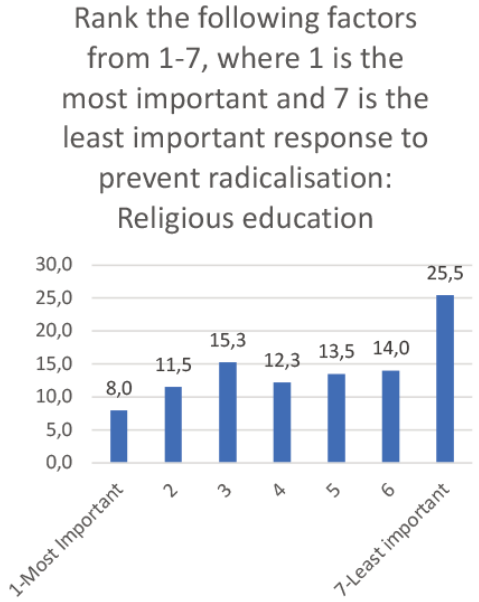
	Strongly disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**	**Don't know/No answer**
Do you agree with the following statements? Religious education can effectively contain and limit the risk of violent extremism.	6.3%	10.5%	24.5%	29.5%	10.3%	19.0%
Do you agree with the following statements? State policies and actual measures that offer equal rights and resources for all citizens can effectively contain and limit the risk of violent extremism.	3.3%	8.5%	22.8%	41.0%	9.0%	15.5%
Do you agree with the following statements? Monitoring social media can effectively contain and limit the risk of violent extremism.	8.0%	11.5%	25.3%	34.8%	7.8%	12.8%

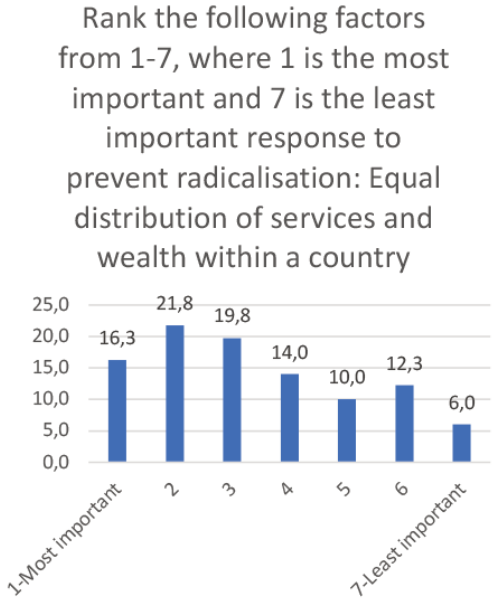
Additionally, Bulgarian youths were asked to rank the importance of responses to radicalisation. From their answers it can be concluded that they agree that economic opportunities and employment, political rights and representation and equal distribution of services and wealth within the country are the most relevant approaches to be endorsed. Conversely, religious education, cultural dialogue and recreational spaces and working on digital platforms are seen as less important.

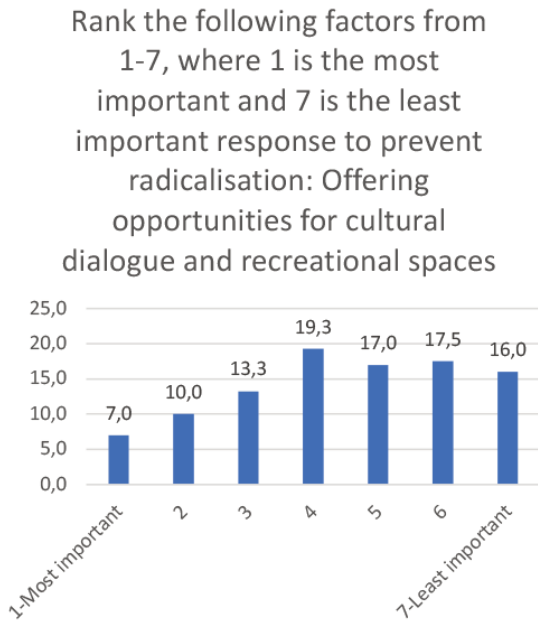
In contrast, target groups from CONNEKT's meso-level research on prevention in Bulgaria (football supporters and students) shared that sports, volunteering, charity and social network campaigns can contribute to prevention success. They, however, attributed the most importance to family environment in the early years of growing.

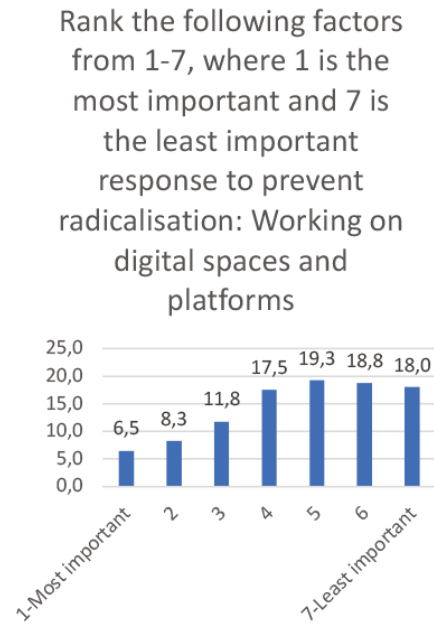









Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important response to prevent radicalisation: Offering opportunities for cultural dialogue and recreational spaces
25,0
20,0
15,0
10,0
5,0
0,0
7,0
10,0
13,3
19,3
17,0
17,5
16,0
1-Most important
2
3
4
5
6
7-Least important


Rank the following factors from 1-7, where 1 is the most important and 7 is the least important response to prevent radicalisation: Working on digital spaces and platforms
25,0
20,0
15,0
10,0
5,0
0,0
6,5
8,3
11,8
17,5
19,3
18,8
18,0
1-Most important
2
3
4
5
6
7-Least important

Conclusion

To sum up, according to micro-level research in Bulgaria, the main drivers of radicalisation among Bulgarian youth are economic deprivation (54.3%), politics (45.8%) and religion (45.1%), if we consider the combined percentage of respondents who assigned the top three values of importance to the respective driver. As regards violence, the responses demonstrate that the prevailing majority of young people (84.3% to 96.5%) have not engaged in violent conflict in the different contexts they were asked about: neighbourhood, clubs/cafés, sports facilities, school/university, with other people over politics/religion, the police, with a partner. In other words, fewer than one in 10 respondents reported engaging in physically violent conflicts within the various settings considered. Among the settings, the highest participation was observed in conflicts within school/university (15.80%) and the neighbourhood/quarter where they reside (13%), followed by conflicts with other young people in a club or café (8.8%).

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis at micro level. First, there are discrepancies between what youngsters feel about their surroundings and what they perceive can lead to radicalisation and violence in these surroundings. For example, although the majority think religion does not play a very important part in their life, they see it as a potential factor for radicalisation. Also, despite the feeling of comparative economic wellbeing in a family context, the plurality of young people sees the economic driver as the most important of the seven analysed by CONNEKT. Second, there are several areas where micro-level findings correspond to those at macro and/or meso level. Religion is seen as important driver by institutions and by young individuals, and digital socialisation at all three levels; youngsters see politics as potentially conducive to radicalisation tendencies, as on the meso level: both case studies (football supporters and ultraconservative communities online) showed high levels of disaffection with political actors due to perceived corruption and lack of care for the good of society. As regards prevention, however, some differences emerge between levels. Economic opportunities and employment, political rights and representation and equal distribution of services and wealth within the country are the most relevant approaches for individuals; at the meso level, respondents shared that family environment in the early years of growing plays the most important role and that sports, volunteering, charity and social network campaigns can also contribute to prevention success.

References

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CONNEKT

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.

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