



Radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe - trends, challenges and opportunities to counteract

A Collection of Policy Briefs

September 2020



Foreword

A few years ago, it was almost common to believe that the Central, and especially the Eastern, part of Europe was completely free from the threat of terrorism. Violent extremism leading to acts of terror was most often associated and was inextricably linked with Islamic extremism. Therefore, whenever there was discussion raised about the need to pay attention to the problem of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, this necessity was questioned in many circles of decision makers and practitioners. Meanwhile, both statistical data and the observation of events taking place in social life more and more often began to confirm the thesis that the process of radicalisation may be initiated by various risk factors related to various views, ideologies, religions, or specific political events. As a consequence, it can also lead to far-left, far-right or other types of extremism.

Even if gradually the awareness of the necessity to act in this part of Europe increased and resulted in an increasing number of activities undertaken in the area of preventing radicalisation, today there is still a great need to improve competences in this area. Therefore, in the Polish Platform for Homeland Security, the idea was born to organize an event meeting policy makers, researchers and practitioners who could professionally and on the basis of evidence characterize the current reality in this part of Europe and share their expertise with recipients involved in activities preventing broadly understood security threats. The possibility of organizing such a meeting was then created through cooperation between three European projects MINDb4ACT, CHAMPIONs and BRAVE, funded under the H2020 and ISF-P European Commission Programmes.

As one of the key countries that needs to develop effective activities dedicated to counteracting radicalisation, Poland has become the host of the RADPol2020 conference on 'Radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe – trends, challenges and opportunities to counteract'. This event aimed at continuation of a dialogue on trends in various forms of radicalisation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the challenges they bring, exchanging of experiences and good practices in counteracting this phenomenon as well as presenting the latest research results and the essence of multi-agency cooperation in this field.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak the conference has been held as online formula, namely one research day and two policy events dedicated to the three live webinars and four experts' panels. All activities were addressed to a wide range of practitioners involved in monitoring, preventing, and counteracting radicalisation at various levels throughout Europe. So among the participants there were law enforcement agencies, local and central administration, policymakers, public institutions (e.g. social welfare, courts, probation office), researchers, the non-governmental sector and other entities interested in this topic, such as partners of international projects in this field.

All the webinars, presentations and discussions between experts and participants made it possible to formulate policy briefs, presented in this document, concerning: the current trends on radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe; context, challenges, latest research results and best practices on right-wing extremism; success stories and good practices on multi-agency approach and joint-action initiatives to tackling radicalisation/violent extremism; as well as the issue of gender beyond not religiously motivated extremism.

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Policy Brief N° 1

Current radicalisation trends in Central and Eastern Europe¹

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Identifying trends in radicalisation, which should be the starting point and the basis for the proper design of new as well as reorientation of already undertaken actions in preventing radicalisation. Without current knowledge and a proper understanding of the current trends in the development of the threat of radicalisation, its most common forms appearing at the national or regional level and in individual local environments, the risk factors reinforcing this threat, it is impossible to plan, design and implement effective preventive measures (Kordaczuk-Was, 2018: 61-66).

The term 'radicalisation' is most often associated with radical behavior leading to acts of extremism and terrorism. Meanwhile, radicalism is not only about Islamic fundamentalism, but also regards problems that can be particularly notices in Central and Eastern Europe, such as hate speech, xenophobia or nationalism. It is, therefore, crucial to be able to react at an early stage of symptoms of an individual's radicalisation. This, in turn, entails the need to properly identify the problem and understand the mechanism of a specific form of radicalisation.

The creation of a comprehensive and complete picture of the current situation prevailing in Central and Eastern Europe has been possible, by an invitation to a joint discussion representatives of: 1) the strategic European body (European Commission) responsible for shaping policies in the area of preventing radicalisation; 2) key networks gathering policymakers and practitioners translating European policy language into national practical solutions (RAN and EFUS), as well as 3) non-governmental organization supporting the adaptation of practical activities undertaken to prevent radicalisation to the reality of Central and Eastern Europe (Institute of Social Safety, Poland).

Key debates on current trends on radicalisation

Dividing the discussion conducted as part of the above-mentioned expert panel into two main areas allows for the identification of key observations regarding the trends in radicalisation currently occurring in Central and Eastern Europe, and at the same time for the formulation of recommendations for creating

further policy in preventing and combating radicalisation.

Starting from today's most commonly observed forms of radicalisation, including changes in trends and perceptions of this threat in Europe, few interesting elements comes out. First of all, there a need to recognize the proper weight (significance) of the problem and strive to achieve a common understanding of the definition of radicalisation, with particular emphasis on far-right extremism. The most common risk factors and feeding ground for radicalisation of individuals' attitudes are listed: hate crimes, fake news, conspiracy theories related to the pandemic situation as well as 5G technology. It is also emphasized the need to pay more attention to the problem of individual radicalisation and the particular risk group created by lone actors.

An important observation concerns the inspiration of radicals by politicians. Therefore, properly identifying and understanding the mechanisms leading to radicalisation means depoliticizing and building a systemic approach to preventing and combating radicalisation.

In addition, there are currently general anti-democratic trends and sentiments in many countries in Europe and the world. Practitioners note that trends in Europe are coming from the East, therefore special attention should be paid to the need to intensify activities in Central and Eastern Europe in the area of preventing and combating radicalisation. The aforementioned anti-democratic sentiments are conducive to the development of both far right and left-wing extremism.

Furthermore, it was discussed the importance of reaching an effective approach to a systemic prevention of radicalisation. Building a systemic approach requires establishing bridges between policy makers, researchers and practitioners so that it is possible to use each other's competences. The voices of practitioners regarding the need to improve practical operation in local environments are particularly important. However, the potential of researchers should not be ignored, but the language of science should be translated into the language of policies and strategic documents and then into practice. The private sector should also be included in this overall picture.

Additionally, it is very important to build a system based on an individual-oriented approach, paying attention to the individual causes of radicalisation. It means placing at the center of the undertaken actions a diagnosis setting the directions for building individual aid plans based on the real radicalisation causes (roots, pathways into), and at the same time enabling the involvement and use of specific competences of individual entities operating in the local community.

Finally, harnessing the potential of evidence-based programmes, practices and policies is also of key importance in this area. This means the use of actions proven by reliable scientific research confirming their effectiveness and impact. In addition, attention should be paid to the preparation and implementation of comprehensive and tailored prevention programmes.

Policy Recommendations

It should be emphasized that all the areas discussed and described above already contain important conclusions, which should be reflected in the policies and strategies that build the ground for the design and implementation of actions in the area of preventing and combating radicalisation. Additionally, during the discussion, it was possible to indicate specific

direct recommendations for policymakers supporting practitioners in their actions are collected below:

- It is necessary to ensure that the police (and other LEA) operating in various EU Member States can collect comparable statistical data on extreme-right extremism. This will facilitate taking consistent actions both at the strategic and executive levels.
- It is strongly recommended to 'start action from people', that means looking at the problem from the so-called 'street level'. Additionally, the 'prevention is the key' slogan is still valid. In order to effectively prevent radicalisation, actions should be initiated in the non-violent phase.
- The issue of local management and strategies to bring local, regional, national and European authorities together is also extremely important. It is recommended to strengthen local democracy and civic involvement in social life. Moreover, it is crucial to ensure the social inclusion and care for the well-being of the population. This can in turn be achieved through building the professional culture, active collaboration, innovation and the use of the new technologies.

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¹ This Policy Brief extracts information from the Expert Panel "Current trends on radicalization in Central and Eastern Europe" of the virtual Policy Event "[Sharing the insights on Central and Eastern Europe approaches in radicalization and violent extremism](#)", organised on June 25, 2020.

² The author is solely responsible for its content, it does not represent the opinion of the European Commission, who is not responsible for any use that might be made of data appearing therein .

Policy Brief N° 2

Right-wing extremism in Central and Eastern Europe: Context, challenges, latest research results and best practices¹

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This policy brief offers an overview of how Far Right violent extremism in Central and Eastern Europe has developed in recent years, including specific regional trends, tactics used and their place within global Far Right patterns. Drawing on existing research and practice, the paper develops recommendations for responding to the Far Right on local, national and European-wide levels. It concludes that there is a need for a more proactive and coordinated EU response, including stronger European policy and better regional monitoring infrastructure.

Central and Eastern Europe offers a specific set of challenges: in a region still grappling with historical legacies of fascism, recent years have seen a surge in right-wing populist parties, as well as various irregular groups with links both East and West. Some legislation has looked to tackle Far Right militia, but such groups have still gained substantial regional legitimacy and footholds. Whilst COVID-19 may have dampened the ascension of the Far Right, new coalitions have formed in response to restrictions, whilst the exacerbation of existing patterns of inequality may spur the Far Right in future.

Regional Far Right trends

Much of the drive behind contemporary Far Right groups in Central and Eastern Europe comes from the development of a highly exclusive formation of Social Conservatism, weaponised against minority groups. In very recent years, this has included the targeting of both ethnic and non-racialised minority communities, with attacks against LGBTQ+ rights, marriage and parenting (Bustikova, 2019). This is largely framed as a pushback against the accommodation of cultural and political minorities – the advance of minority education, language rights and revisionist readings of WWII. This weaponisation is relatively recent, with prior waves of immigration, such as that from the Bosnian Genocide, not resulting in such politics.

A key tactic utilised by regional Far Right is that of the public demonstration. Studies show that, despite a growing online presence by Right-wing Extremists (RWX), demonstrations continue to play an important role both in cementing the

support of existing members, recruiting new members, networking between groups and claiming a space in the public sphere (Zeller, 2019; Zeller 2020). Several existing marches have been claimed by the Far Right, including: the Day of Honour (HU); the Lukov March (BG); Independence Day (PL); and the Bleiberg Commemorations (HR and AU). Regional marches have also provided fertile ground for international cooperation, with activists participating from Western and Central Europe, as well as North America.

One significant concern is the role of state support or sponsorship in Far Right activism. State support is locally and internationally, with some MEPs engaging positively with governments of similar views, such as those of Modi, Bolsonaro, Netanyahu or Trump. These engagements are often linked together through anti-Muslim discourse, couched in the language of the 'War on Terror' and demographic concerns over the growth of Muslim minority communities (Leidig, 2019).

The mainstreaming of the Far Right has been advanced by the framing of Eastern Europe as the 'Christian frontier' against Muslim immigration. Research by the EU Commission-funded project *YouthRightOn: Resilient YOUTH against far-RIGHT messages ONline*, by the *Centre for the Study of Democracy* (CSD), found several Far Right sentiments had been mainstreamed in Bulgaria, including: anti-Roma (found to be held by 70% of those surveyed), anti-migrant (63%), anti-Islam (46%) and anti-EU or anti-systemic narratives (30%). This problem is exacerbated by EU counter-extremism approaches which over-emphasise the threat of so-called 'Islamist' extremism, neglecting Far Right groups and tacitly securitising Muslim minorities. However, such attitudes were also shown not to be embedded, with young people quick to respond to alternative information or critical discussion.

Policy Recommendations

- **A common, joined-up European approach to the Far Right:** More coordination in implementing European responses. For instance, Far Right groups have circumvented national bans by

operating just beyond a country's legal jurisdiction. A single policy response or common European framework would create a consistent and impactful response.

- **Challenging the legitimisation of Far Right politics:** The growth of the Far Right has been legitimised by some state governments and actors. The EU needs a stronger stance on member states that encourage Far Right support.
- **Better monitoring to understand the scale of the problem:** Under-reporting plagues efforts to understand the Far Right, leading to difficulties in assessing, and an underplaying of, the problem. Better monitoring, through EU research projects, support of non-governmental organisations and clearer legislation, is required.
- Measures to **restrict the public platform of Far Right organisations.** This can be done through European-wide proscription, the

banning of certain symbols or coordinated online responses. Greater engagement between the EU and researchers and activists is necessary, with states currently only acting in response to consistent external pressure.

- Responses should **combine online and offline activities.** Online workshops are crucial to support critical thinking, digital literacy and develop means for combating Far Right narratives. Combined online and offline efforts is particularly valuable against RWX networks. Giving youth the space and means to critically explore Far Right narratives enables wider community resilience-building.
- **More research is needed on the impact of COVID-19** in the region, particularly as to how RWX interacts with pre-existing regional inequalities.

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¹ This Policy Brief extracts information from the Experts Panel on "Right-wing extremism in Central and Easter Europe – context, challenges, latest research results and best practices", of the virtual Policy Event "[Sharing the insights on Central and Easter Europe approaches in radicalisaion and violent extremism](#)", organised on June 25, 2020.

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Policy Brief N° 3

Improving collaboration and multi-stakeholder approaches towards addressing P/CVE in Central and Eastern Europe¹

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Political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation can best be illustrated as falling on a broad spectrum of ‘group-focused enmity’ (Küpper & Zick, 2014), ranging from attitudes and everyday actions within the population — felt through laws and regulations in institutions — to electoral successes of parties of the extreme right, the actions of extremist groups, and incidences of hate crimes. In recent years there has been a rise in popularity of extreme right parties, accompanied by more tangible everyday racism among the population in many European countries, both on the street and online. Hate has been particularly focused on the topics of migration and refugees but has also been directed against those who advocate for equality of LGBTQIA+ individuals and women, and in many instances framed by anti-Semitic or other similar conspiracy myths (Jaecker, 2004).

In response to the rising tide, numerous initiatives have been launched in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Coming from the municipal, national, and European levels and launched by non-profit institutes, government agencies, intergovernmental and supranational agencies, and even private corporations — there is no shortage to the responses that attempt to curb the rise in polarisation and radicalisation through diverse means and frameworks. From addressing prejudice and discrimination through sport; to activities integrating third country nationals into the local communities; to work with youth susceptible to online radicalization, there is currently a breadth and depth of P/CVE activities never before seen.

A major challenge, however, lies in the fact that these initiatives are often ‘silo-ed’: only accessible to those directly involved and the respective funding agencies, without the possibility to share best practices or challenges with other similar initiatives. Furthermore, there is a lack of collaboration opportunities — and often a deep lack of trust — between public institutions and non-profit organisations, further limiting knowledge-sharing and cooperation even within the same cities or networks.

Key Challenges

The result of the research conducted within the CHAMPIONS project showed that the vast majority of first line practitioners in Hungary, Poland, Germany, and Romania believe that collaboration among practitioners and other stakeholders at the local level would be helpful in preventing and reacting to political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation in a community (CHAMPIONS, 2020).

Indeed, there is general acknowledgement of the benefits of collaboration, including a number of white papers on the benefits of local, regional and multilateral approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism (UNODC, 2018; Haanstra, 2018). However, it is clear that while the theoretical foundations are compelling, putting such collaborative engagements into practice requires high levels of trust and institutional adaptations.

Challenges to collaboration identified by first line practitioners include the lack of time to implement activities due to existing workload; the lack of follow-up, concrete actions, and practical solutions; the lack of agency for the collaboration; and the lack of opportunities and tools for collaboration. Other challenges, such as collaborations being designed only on a short-term basis and the failure to integrate people who could benefit most from such initiatives were also recounted. Issues such as transparency are also key factors as well as excessive bureaucracy and limited funding.

The bottom line remains however that radicalisation as complex social problem can only be addressed by a team of diverse experts and practitioners working together. All efforts towards supporting collaborative engagements should be put into place.

Policy Recommendations

In this context, the following aspects are recommended to be taken into account when developing and implementing P/CVE policies:

- **Collaborations between institutional actors and other key stakeholders must be formalised and made sustainable.** Ways to ensure this include promoting

shared ownership; appointing a team leader embedded in municipal structures; signing Memorandums of Agreement among institutions. Systemic solutions, for instance the creation of national agencies, are preferable.

- Policy makers must be cognisant of the fact that **different approaches and objectives** of multi-agency approaches exist **between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe**
- It must be ensured that the teams working on P/CVE have **decision-making powers** and that their roles are embedded in their respective institutional frameworks.
- There should be a **heavy emphasis on trust-building** through dialogue and meeting the needs of the teams and

institutions involved; **safe spaces** need to be created where practitioners can learn together with and from each other how best to address P/CVE issues

- **Framing is extremely important** and theoretical language is often unpalatable to first line practitioners who pivot towards action-oriented discussion on specific phenomena and problems
- It is necessary to progress from ad-hoc, project-based multi-stakeholder collaboration and **scale it up to standing, mandated systems** and bring together stakeholders including but not limited to first line practitioners, policy- and decision-makers, and academics in the field of P/CVE.

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¹ This Policy Brief extracts information from the Expert Panel on "Multi-agency approach and joint-action initiatives to tackling radicalization and violent extremism: success stories and good practices" of the virtual Policy Event "[Improving Policy and Practice tackling Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe](#)", organised on July 2, 2020.

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Policy Brief N° 4

Gender in P/CVE approaches: Pathways from theory to practice¹

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Violent extremist ideologies continue to challenge social cohesion and democratic values, and terrorist action is used to destabilise societies. The degree to which the global COVID-19 pandemic will fuel extremist ideologies has yet to be fully examined. Domestic and gender-based violence have been exacerbated by the lockdowns, leaving women and children locked in their homes with their abusers and without access to support services (United Nations, 2020). These spikes in violence are a grave threat not only for women, but for the security of our societies.

Extremist groups have historically undermined gender equality and human rights and continue to exploit rigid concepts of gender and adapt narratives to context-specific grievances of men and women. The last 30 years have seen major efforts in forming expertise on women and gender in war and violent conflict. With the landmark 1325 Resolution of the Security Council of Women, Peace and Security in 2000 this agenda has seen global recognition. Nevertheless, the role of women as agents of peace and gender as a cross-cutting attribute is still neglected in P/CVE and has only recently gained interest.

If P/CVE policies are to be practised sensibly and sustainably, approaches to increase gender equality need to be emphasised, in line with the notion that societies with higher gender equality are more resilient to violent extremism (General Assembly United Nations, 2015).

Key debates about gender in P/CVE

Three main foci of interest in gender and P/CVE have been dominant in recent years:

- 1) **Gendered pathways to radicalisation and the role of men and women in extremist groups.** Violent extremist groups exploit context-specific gender grievances to recruit both male and female members. An understanding of these mechanisms is crucial for the impact of P/CVE programming (Brown et al, 2019: 20f).
- 2) **Toxic masculinities and the role of power relations.** Questions on gender have focused on women's victimhood and their role in violent extremist groups.

Masculinities within such groups have been frequently referred to as toxic masculinities (Pearson, 2019: p.1256). Recent discussion warns that the notion of toxic masculinity as a singular set of problematic ideas, may lead to the ignorance of power relations and could prevent from understanding the complexities of masculinities in the light of local context and situation (Pearson, 2019:1270).

- 3) **The role of women in P/CVE.** The positive effects of women participating in security and processes remain unquestioned. Women at all levels are seen as uniquely placed to challenge extremist narratives. As decision makers, community leaders, professionals but also within families where they are best positioned to detect early warning signs of radicalisation (Schlaffer et al, 2019). At the same time women are often the first targets of violent extremists and therefore the first to notice negative trends in their surroundings (OSCE, 2019: 51), as in cases of domestic violence that has the potential to develop into violent extremism, if undetected and unreported (Anderlini, 2018: 34). Women in the police forces tend to have a more specific focus on human rights violations and can de-escalate tension more efficiently. This in turn allows them to establish trust within communities (Fink et al, 2016: p.45). Finally, women-led organisations are key actors in P/CVE. They are locally rooted and trusted in their communities. They are able to recognise and respond to changes within the local context quickly (Anderlini, 2018: 31).

Policy Recommendations

The following aspects are recommended to be taken into account when developing and implementing P/CVE policies:

- Gender, as a cross-cutting perspective within P/CVE efforts, should be an integral part in whole-of-community approaches. Gender identities and gender relations are sensitive issues. Tackling harmful gender

norms requires safe spaces and trust, which can best be created by civil society.

- Policies should support the empowerment and equality of women both in the public and the private spheres. Women can only exert their power in P/CVE when their voices are heard. One grassroots project targeting the empowerment of women is the MotherSchools Parenting for Peace Model.
- Policymakers and donors need to take into account that gender norms are manipulated and exploited by violent extremists and that they have developed over space and time. Deconstructing existing norms implies that a project lifecycle may not suffice to achieve sustainable impact.
- Gender in P/CVE programming needs to consider the perspectives of women, men, girls and boys alike as well as underlying dynamics, relations and hierarchies between them. These considerations should as well include other social attributes such as age, class, religion and ethnicity.
- Programmes should include both women and men as agents of change to support alliances and foster partnerships between men and women in promoting transformative masculinities and femininities.

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¹This Policy Brief extracts information from the Expert Panel on "Gender beyond not religiously motivated extremism" of the virtual [Policy Event "Improving Policy and Practice tackling Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Central and Easter Europe"](#), organised on July 2, 2020.

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