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# Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Europe. Security Communication, Cultural Tools, Limits and Future Prospects

**Abstract:** *After a health pandemic and an ongoing war, the research context on violent extremism and radicalization in Europe becomes an extremely complex arena.*

*For years, researchers have been working across different academic disciplines (political science, international relations, sociology, criminology, religious studies, etc.) on specific violent extremism issues using various qualitative and quantitative methods. Despite the high volume of research material, many, both within and outside the academic community, recognize the need to synthesize the scientific literature and take stock of evidence-based research. Much of the academic work on countering violent extremism is based on theories and anecdotes rather than hard data demonstrated through rigorous scientific methods.*

*As Rohlwing (2016) notes, there is currently a chronic lack of good quality empirical studies and qualitative and quantitative evidence to support - or challenge - common assumptions about countering violent extremism practices and policies. As well observed and described at the RAN Research Seminar, despite compelling academic contributions, there is an urgent need to focus on better quality and interdisciplinary engagement, as well as identifying research on priority issues to prevent and counter violent extremism.*

*The purpose of this paper presented here is to take stock of research, which is characterized by fragmentation, to identify and fill knowledge gaps, especially in the area of European security policies and inter-state communications from before the new global health and war shocks, which are still ongoing.*

**Introduction**

Practitioners and policymakers dealing with issues related to preventing and countering violent extremism also stress that there is a need for a stronger evidence base to develop and implement effective initiatives. More research and more risk assessment and judgement tools are needed to better guide policy design and programming.

The academic community and the practitioner and policy communities have faced several challenges during their collaboration. Firstly, academics are calling for greater clarity on definitions, concepts, and problem statement in research on violent extremism. Secondly, academics often communicate in language that is hermetic and overly complicated for the uninitiated and neglect the practical realities and lived experiences of practitioners. Thirdly, academics find it difficult to access concrete primary data due to limitations in accessing and sharing classified information and data protection and privacy legislation. This, on the other hand, has a serious impact on the academic community's ability to substantiate basic assumptions about terrorism and violent extremism and related prevention and counteraction measures. Fourthly, academics and practitioners operate under different time constraints: practitioners need to get results quickly, whereas academics are subject to scientific rigour and have the advantage of working with a long-term perspective. The disadvantage is that when academics publish their views, the nature of the problem may have shifted and/or become less relevant. In summary, therefore, there are considerable differences between academics and practitioners in terms of the objectives they seek to influence, the social systems in which they operate, the variables involved and the acceptable timeframe for addressing problems. However, while cooperation between the research community and practitioners or policy-makers in the field of research on preventing and countering violent extremism poses challenges, it also presents many shareable opportunities.

First, academics can apply scientific rigour and quality control to practitioners' methods and programmes, as providing scientific evidence is crucial for programme design, implementation and evaluation. Second, practitioners can improve their critical thinking to better distinguish between useful and incorrect data, while academics can help make sense of scientific data, which

often have inaccessible detail and contextualisation. Third, academics and practitioners can pool their efforts in project design and implementation and evaluation of measures to prevent and counter violent extremism. Fourth, the participation of practitioners and policy-makers in discussions, objectives and research design ensures the political and practical relevance of research. Fifthly, closer collaboration ensures that everyone's work is properly focused and that a considered inventory of knowledge or stocktaking of that knowledge from the overall research is available to note what is known and record gaps and missing elements that hinder progress in both theory and practice (Rohlwing 2016; RAN 2018).

## 1. European projects and actions against extremism

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, the European Commission, which has funded more than 400,000 studies, emphasised that research on preventing and countering violent extremism should be further consolidated into a broader process through a trialogue: academia, policymakers and practitioners, in order to develop cooperative creation processes. By asking policymakers and practitioners what will be needed in 5-10 years' time, researchers can anticipate circumstances and needs and identify knowledge and gaps through increased dialogue and sharing of homeland security-related information.

France is establishing closer collaboration between research, policy, and practice. Since 2016, thanks to this collaboration, the dialogue between researchers and policymakers on issues related to preventing and countering violent extremism has intensified. The Centre national de la recherche scientifique – CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) has established an understanding with security and intelligence agencies and initiated close collaboration between policymakers and the academic community on issues related to violent extremism. Over the years, French governments have created several scientific committees: for example, in 2017, the prime minister established CosPRAD - Conseil scientifique sur les processus de radicalisation (Scientific Council on Radicalisation Processes). CosPRAD carries out the mapping of research on radicalisation processes and facilitates the dissemination among policymakers of the results

obtained by researchers. Benchmarking and thematic seminars reinforce this cooperation. Several platforms exist to facilitate exchange and dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. The French commitment, which takes place at various levels, is funded, and coordinated by the Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation - CIPDR (Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalisation). In Finland the national network of researchers on violent extremism issues is established. There is structured cooperation with a good mutual understanding of the differences in roles and boundaries between the research and policy-making communities. Researchers provide evidence-based knowledge, but do not make policy suggestions. Academics provide the policy community with up-to-date results of their research at regularly held seminars. Policymakers then integrate these findings into the national strategy to counter violent extremism.

As far as cooperation between researchers, policymakers and practitioners is concerned, some EU Member States have a long tradition in this field, while others have created specific structures e.g. scientific committees, think tanks or national networks on issues related to violent extremism. This type of cooperation is a win-win situation: interaction is fostered, policy-makers can learn from and support research, evaluation becomes more effective through increased dialogue and government-supported research becomes accessible to a wider audience.

Mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders and a willingness to invest time and resources provide a solid basis for cooperation. It is essential that the dialogue between researchers and policymakers is constructive, respectful and without hostility.

## 2 . Radicalisation: signs, risk assessment tools

According to Borum (2015), there are eight categories of risk in violent extremism and terrorism: affect/emotions, behaviour, cognitive style, beliefs/ideology, attitudes, social factors, identity and capabilities. Significant research has been carried out on how best to carry out specialised terrorism risk assessments.

Existing risk assessment tools focus on assessing how individuals think and reason and the risk of violence being committed by them. Important examples to mention here are the Extremism Risk Guidance (ERG 22+), the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF), the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment, version 2 (VERA-2), the Structured Assessment of Violent Extremism (SAVE) and the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18). Many of these risk assessment tools have three components: commitment, intent and capability. These tools are further broken down into specific risk indicators that predict and assess psychological indicators, affinities and attitudes towards terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. All risk assessment tools include lists of indicators for factors such as (a) beliefs and attitudes, (b) context and intentions, (c) history and capabilities, (d) commitment and motivation, and (e) protective circumstances.

From an application perspective, for example, the UK government employs ERG 22+ in the screening process of people referred to the Channel programme. Similarly, VERA-2 is widely used in several countries by prison and probation services. The IR46 (Islamitisch Radicaliserings-model) is a Dutch risk assessment model used by the Haaglanden Regional Safety House (Veiligheidshuis) in a multi-agency setting. These risk assessment instruments have in common 'risk dimensions, such as intent and capability, and risk factors, such as injustice or wrongdoing, indoctrination, dehumanisation.

There are several differences between the various risk assessment tools. ERG 22+ was developed for persons convicted of terrorist offences. VERA-2 is a specialised risk assessment tool for individuals with a history of extremist violence and/or actively involved in violent extremism (breaking the law). TRAP-18 is used as an investigative framework and employs 8 proximal behavioural alert indicators and 10 longer-term distal characteristics; it is a 'risk investigation model' designed to guide intelligence analysts in assessing targeted threats of violence.

Moving on, of great interest is the tool defined as Structured Assessment of Violent Extremism (SAVE), which aims to assess extremist thinking and the influence this has on mindsets, in terms of violence. SAVE includes a 'checklist' of 30 'cognitive' risk indicators (i.e. perceptions and beliefs) and software that functions as a visualisation application. Mark Cunningham (2018) developed a structured professional judgement (SPJ) tool, the Model of Analysis for Differentiating Delusional Disorder from the Radicalization of Extreme Beliefs-17 Factor

(MADDD-or-Rad-17) to determine whether an offence is the product of delusional disorder or is due to the radicalization of extremist beliefs.

From a general point of view, there are three basic risk assessment models, as explained below:

- professional judgement with risk predictions, based solely on the practitioner's experience and knowledge of the person to be assessed.

- actuarial tools based on checklists of risk indicators, using a formula that results in a prediction of overall risk (e.g. high, medium or low risk);

- structured professional judgement (SPJ) that combines both approaches (professional and actuarial) to systematically carry out the process, identifying risks and assessing the person in his/her context.

These models guide the multi-agency process, create a shared perception of the phenomenon among public authorities and provide risk indicators that can be used in case of future violent events. They are also useful from the point of view of rehabilitation or treatment, as some risk assessments include protective factors.

Research activities assess the reliability of these instruments and the subjectivity of professional judgment. Researchers point to methodological issues such as low data rates and problems of validation and reliability in capturing different personality types and risk behaviours. Some raised the question of whether the rating scales used in VERA-2 were actually reviewed and demonstrated.

In a systematic review of risk assessment instruments, Scarcella et al. (2016) observed that only half of the reviewed studies and instruments actually contained a transparent description and that the assessment of psychometric properties was of poor quality overall. The current goal is therefore, as already partly mentioned, to try to develop a reference standard for the validity and reliability of risk assessment guidelines and checklists, as well as instruments that are to be tested, and studies that are to be criticised. Otherwise, there is a rather high risk that models will be used without the scientific results being made known, thus causing serious ethical problems.

Another issue worth mentioning is the level of competence and training of assessors: this is important, as risk assessments are often carried out by a single assessor. The question of who should carry out the risk assessments is also relevant. For example, van de Weert and Eijkman

raise the issue of subjectivity in detecting radicalisation and violent extremism: they observe that youth workers are not sufficiently equipped to detect (violent) extremism at the local level.

## 3. Limitations and results of current research in the field of extremism

Several EU projects have focused on studying the risk assessment of violent extremism. Research indicates a positive correlation between mental disorders and violent extremism (but not causality) - a fact that policymakers sometimes struggle to recognise. There are a number of EU-funded instruments, but it is clear that they complement each other rather than competing or duplicating third-party projects.

The European project "Database and Assessment of Risks of violent Extremists" (DARE) has developed a database of convicted terrorists and violent extremists and their crimes. The accompanying DARE code identifies the most critical risk factors and will be used to systematically mark court files. The DARE code uses demographic data, analyses of charges and acts committed, subject analysis, criminal and personal history, developmental history, psychopathology, radicalisation and elements of the VERA-2R violent extremism risk assessment tool.

DARE and other similar projects must consider and comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) [Regulation (EU) No 679 of 2016]. To this end, one option is the use of encrypted personal data.

MINDb4ACT is a collaborative project between 7 law enforcement authorities, think tanks, research centres, universities, industry associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in 10 Member States (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Poland, Finland and the UK). Through 21 pilot projects, experiences and interventions will be carried out in 5 key areas: a) prisons and judiciary, b) schools and training centres, c) crisis points and refugee centres, d) cities, e) Internet and media. The aim is to prevent rather than predict violent extremism.

Policy recommendation and improved communication tools for law enforcement and security agencies preventing violent radicalisation - Pericles- is a project dedicated to 'transition processes towards radicalisation' (Germany). The activity involved the observation of 15 offenders and, following a professional diagnosis, it was found that 6 out of these 15 persons suffered from mental disorders. Among the results that emerged, it is particularly interesting to note that extreme right-wing attitudes are on the increase among young people, as early as the age of 15. They are more likely to be supported by family rather than friends.

## 4. Resilience factors and the role of local police

In general, resilience is the ability of an individual to adapt to and overcome adversity in the face of difficult circumstances and trauma. The issue of resilience is complex and multifaceted as the level of resilience needs to be considered: resilience at the individual level (to overcome a terrorist attack or to reject extremist messages) or resilience at the community level (development of strong social bonds essential to prevent violence and polarisation).

Within the framework of violence prevention, there are many protective factors applicable to violent extremism.

Sieckelinck and Gielen (2017) highlighted those that promote individual resilience: improved skills in coping with difficult social situations through anger management and conflict resolution; democratic citizenship; religious knowledge, narratives opposite to the dominant ones and protective measures on the Internet; trauma participation and therapy; a loving and supportive family environment; autonomy, self-esteem and a sense of self-control (agenticity) that includes social and emotional well-being and life skills.In a systematic review of research on protective factors against extremism and violent radicalisation, Lösel et al. (2018) identify 30 different protective factors : - self-control, respect for the law, acceptance of police legitimacy, illness, positive parental behaviour, non-violent significant others, good school performance, non-violent peers, contact with foreigners and a basic attachment to society.

In a different study on violent extremism in higher education, Van Brunt, Murphy and Zedginidze (2017) identify several protective factors: social connectedness, pluralistic inclusiveness, non-violent outlets, social safety, emotional stability, professional/academic engagement, global competence, empathy, resilience and consequences of actions.

Bhui et al. (2014) tested some hypotheses regarding depression, psychosocial adversity and social assets as risk and resilience factors in the early stages of radicalisation. After interviewing 608 East London and Bradford residents of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, aged 18-45, of Muslim heritage, they found that people who were more supportive of violent protest and terrorism were more prone to depression and placed high importance on religion.

According to the researchers, there is a close interrelationship between individual resilience and community resilience. Some suggest that connections, groups and social capital are key to community resilience. Involving marginalised or underrepresented community members is an effective way to strengthen community resilience. Research shows that policies that lead to the creation of 'suspect communities' undermine resilience. While a strong sense of social identity within specific ethnic or religious groups can build resilience against extremism, social marginalisation can make one vulnerable to violent extremism. Developing strong partnerships between communities and the administration is a central component of strengthening the resilience of communities.

Ellis and Abdi (2017) argue that there are three types of social connections critical to a resilient community in relation to violent extremism: links, bridges and connections. It is essential that administrations work across these three dimensions to strengthen their connection and partnership with communities.

Grossman et al. (2017) developed a validated 5-factor, 14-item measure called Building Resilience to Violent Extremism (BRAVE-14), the aim of which is to identify and understand young people's resilience to violent extremism at the community level. There are five factors underlying young people's resilience to violent extremism: cultural identity and belonging to a network of relationships, intra-community relationships, relationships between different communities and with institutions, violence-related behaviours and violence-related beliefs.

Various models exist to increase resilience in communities. In particular, effective partnerships involve identifying issues of importance to community members rather than concern for violent

extremism. Fostering an atmosphere of trust, respect and cooperative creation are essential elements. Some researchers advance the idea that Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a useful model that has helped to address violence among ethnic minority youth.

Another important research topic is the role of local police in strengthening community resilience. There are very few studies that address or trace the difficult processes of relationship formation between the police and local communities. The exception is Staniforth's (2014) study outlining the principles of community policing. Further research is also needed on how to effectively reach and communicate with young people on the issue of violent extremism.

It is important to define resilience and it is essential to focus on protective factors rather than simply identifying potential risk factors. What protective factors are at play in cases where some individuals become radicalised and others do not? Further research is needed on protective factors, the dynamic interaction between these factors and the correlation between protective and risk factors.

Policy-makers need to adopt a holistic strengths-based approach focused on resilience, rather than a risk-only approach. A three-pronged approach is effective in promoting resilience, as it addresses emotional, relational, cognitive and ideological aspects. Youth resilience can be stimulated through participation, empowerment and greater social cohesion. In addition, resilience needs to be strengthened through education and social media literacy.

Multi-agency approaches need to be evaluated, as they are often limited to single interventions. Understanding the importance of multi-agency collaboration in evaluations of protective factors and, at the same time, going deeper is the best strategy to build resilience in young people who already express feelings of anger towards society.

## 5. Extremist ideas and their dissemination via the Internet and other media

On a theoretical level, there is a substantial literature on violent extremism and social media. The following section will focus on terrorism/extremism and social media and the implications for countering propaganda through opposing and alternative narratives.

Weimann (2006, 2015) provides an overview of the dynamic relationship between terrorism and violent extremism on social media, particularly in the various ways in which terrorists exploit the Internet. Fisher (2015) published an article on this topic entitled 'Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence'. Ingram (2016) provides a framework to analyse how Islamist militant propaganda and messaging provides its supporters with a signifying system that shapes their perception of the world, through a process in which it manipulates followers compelled to legitimise violence and perform violent acts. Berger's (2017) methodology classifies extremist propaganda using a nexus-based framework in relation to the themes exploited by extremist groups to mobilise potential proselytes.

Winter (2015) investigates ISIS propaganda and the various themes that characterise it on social media: clemency, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war and utopia; Glazzard (2017) explains why it is necessary to study violent extremism as a narrative in a literary sense, in order to understand the creative sources of inspiration for violent extremism. Halverson et al. (2011) provide a framework for understanding 'the predominant narrative' or 'story system' that animates jihadist propaganda (83). Schmid (2015) identifies a dozen ISIS narrative themes that expose vulnerabilities and point the way to the development of compelling opposing arguments.

Some research focuses on terrorist groups' use of different identity construction strategies. Rothenberger et al. (2018) analyse the discursive identity construction of five terrorist groups on social media, using five macro discursive strategies. The study observes that terrorist groups used strategies of demontage (dismantling) and destruction and strategies of justification and relativisation with a strong construction of boundaries (us and them construct): dehumanisation of enemies; moral justification, shifting of responsibility and minimisation of harmful effects.

Regarding the set of countermeasures used on social media, Greenberg (2016) provides a general description (e.g. disruption, diversion, alternative engagement, opposing messages) and concrete recommendations. Braddock and Horgan (2015) explore whether and how narratives persuade and trace the development of some precise themes of opposing narratives. Van Eerten et al. (2017) provide a comprehensive overview of opposite sign messages, alternative messages and strategic communication by national governments. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Tuck & Silverman, 2016) produced a very useful handbook on opposing narratives containing concrete advice.

Although the volume of academic contributions is considerable, there is still a pressing need to examine the effects of different types of opposing narratives.

There is a large body of research on the evolution of terrorism propaganda and violent extremism on social media. A major problem for law enforcement authorities in detecting extremist propaganda on open platforms and the dark web is the interpretation, extraction, and synthesis of content in multiple languages. (Semi-)automated detection is important for early detection activities. Further research is needed on why extremist groups move between different social media.

When considering the effectiveness of alternative messages and opposing narratives, biological algorithms, echo chambers and filter bubbles are useful.

From a neurological point of view, when an individual's core value and identity are threatened the reaction comes from the amygdala (which alerts people) and not from the prefrontal cortex. Changing people's mindset requires cognitive openness and it is preferable to highlight shared values rather than seeking confrontation. Further studies linking neuroscience and psychology to violent extremism are needed.

There is also a lack of research on the content and mechanisms of hate speech, particularly on the spectrum of propaganda ranging from right-wing populism to extremism. Social media are multidimensional: people not only consume propaganda, they produce it. It would be useful to have a conceptual analysis of this dynamic and what it means for radicalisation processes.

Work on the interaction between propaganda and new technologies and media platforms is therefore insufficient.

**Conclusions: Evaluation and interventions**

After this analysis full of insights, data and scientific literature we can draw the following conclusions.There are very few theoretical studies on evaluation methods in the field of preventing and combating violent extremism. One of the main criticisms is the lack of empirical

data that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures. Mastroe (2016) outlines some of the related challenges: identification of the outcome variable; availability of data for analysis; identification of the period of analysis and cross-comparison of evaluation results.

The Institute of Peace (Holmer et al., 2018) examines the range of conceptual and practical challenges posed by measuring the effects and value of programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism: causality; explaining the vast number of variables; managing contextual variation; developing valid indicators; collecting relevant and reliable data; and measuring social networks and relationships.

Gielen (2017a) examines in depth a range of evaluation methods: effects evaluation, pragmatic evaluation, theoretical evaluation, process evaluation and realistic evaluation. This study examines 73 different studies/programmes, including basic evaluation methods, found in the literature.

In another study, Gielen (2017b) proposes some recommendations on the development of countering violent extremism interventions:

- countering violent extremism programmes should respond to the wrongs, causes and risk factors that lead to violent extremism.

- a clear distinction should be made between countering violent extremism programmes and interventions.

- formulate objectives.

- identify the target audience accordingly.

- formulate a theory of change for each countering violent extremism (sub)programme and intervention.

- exploit existing theory and evaluations.

- formulate intelligent indicators on three levels.

- include researchers/evaluators before implementation.

- request a comprehensive project plan from external partners.

- carry out multi-method data collection.

Evaluation should be foreseen from the beginning of research projects and should involve practitioners immediately, so that they accept it. Impact assessment and the development of evidence-based approaches is a top priority in this field. Research tends to focus excessively on the problem (the causes of radicalisation) rather than on the solution (the effects of interventions to prevent and counter violent extremism).

Scientific study should focus not only on individual projects and interventions but also on assessing the impact of multi-agency approaches. Generic prevention tends to work best for those who do not need it, so research should better specify the goal of prevention and the reasons for this.

Researchers are best placed to help develop methods and indicators to measure effects and outcomes, rather than just evaluating implementation and results.

A further critical aspect is that countering violent extremism should not only focus on good practices, as often reported in the conclusions of many studies and research projects but should also focus on good and accountable people/researchers/institutions.

Research aims at improving our private and relational lives, our level of knowledge and consciousness, and should thus be present at different levels (schools, family and community and peers): only by applying good research daily to our family and community we could limit all forms of (violent) extremism in Europe.

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