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RADEX
MOBILISING AGAINST EXTREMISM THROUGH COUNTERING AND DIVERTING RADICALISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON YOUTH RADICALISATION IN THE UK, CYPRUS, FRANCE, BELGIUM AND GREECE

WWW.RADEXPROJECT.ORG

Erasmus+

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Mobilising Against Extremism through Countering and Diverting Radicalisation of Young People (RADEX), is a 24-month project co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (EU). The aim of RADEX is to make an impact on countering, preventing and diverting violent radicalisation of young people, by equipping young people, youth workers, social workers, and youth organisations with tools to identify patterns, methods, and different processes of violent radicalisation.

This research constitutes one of the two main outputs of the project: a comprehensive report analysing the methodological framework and the findings of the research phase from the partner countries.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the comprehensive report is to serve as a basis for the online course, which will be used to empower young people, youth workers, social workers, front-line practitioners and trainers by equipping them with the knowledge and tools to identify early signs, techniques, patterns, methods, and different processes of violent radicalisation, but most importantly, to equip them with positive skills to deter and combat radicalisation.

In the framework of our research, we have studied radicalisation signs and patterns physically, but also on different online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, apps like Telegram and chatrooms like Reddit.

The methodological framework provides us with real data on how, when, and where young people are targeted and/or approached, and analyses how the radicalisation is done, mainly online, giving us patterns of radicalisation, but also establishing radicalisation indicators and vulnerability indicators. The methodological approach used is with a combination of different methodologies, including literature review, qualitative interviews, and analysis of content, discourse analysis, and social network analysis.

The literature review was carried out through a combination of sources and methods, including books, studies, research papers, scholarly articles, published reports and statistics, and fieldwork. It examines the current state of knowledge on the topic of radicalisation.

Accordingly, the researchers used different sets of methods in their research, including Facebook posts, Twitter posts (Tweets), YouTube videos, blog posts, messaging, and gaming Apps, as a data source.

The value in using qualitative research approaches (in-depth interview and qualitative content analysis) lies in discovering why, when, and how young people engage in radicalisation. Considerable attention was given to social networks and news sites (including social media, messaging and gaming Apps, blogs, etc.), which was carried out to explore the current flow, and examine various aspects of youth radicalisation.
Therefore, the report contributes as a summary of general trends of research studies, but also as an in-depth analysis of social network research.

Thus, the comprehensive report provides us with real data on how, when and where young people become objects of radicalisation, and establishes both radicalisation indicators and vulnerability indicators. At the same time, it forms strengths that young people will use in their benefit, to build a stronger fence against radicalisation.

The target group includes young adults, youth, youth workers, youth organisations, social workers, front-line practitioners, trainers, educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The report uses findings that emerged from primary and secondary research. Additionally, online research via social media platforms conducted to collect social media data, of radical and extremist content from a users' profiles from different social media networks. In particular, we collected data, which is being posted online, including likes, shares, comments, reactions, clicks, and more extremist content by users. The keywords used included the following: radicalisation, radicalisation, far-right, far-left, anarchist, online behaviour, youth radicalisation, extremism, terrorism, right-wing etc. To analyse the data, the study used the method of Graphical Media Analysis, Volume Analysis and Thematic Analysis.

Methods
- Primary research (qualitative in-depth interviews)
- Secondary research (desk research)
- Social networks research
- Online research
- Analysis (content, discourse, social media)

Objectives
- Identification of primary and secondary resources
- Identification of online platforms that support radicalisation
- Identification of radicalisation behavioural patterns
- Analysis of the resources

ORGANISASIONAL PARTNERS & AUTHORS

1. RJ4All

RJ4All (UK) is an International Institute, bringing its world-class restorative justice expertise and the user-led experience in project development, design, and evaluation. RJ4All is the coordinator of RADEX, and contributor to the comprehensive report.

2. SYNTHESIS Centre for Research and Education

SYNTHESIS (Cyprus) is a research centre which initiates and implements projects of positive social impact, with a focus on social inclusion in the fields of youth. SYNTHESIS is the leading partner in this comprehensive report.

3. ALDA

ALDA (France) is dedicated to the promotion of good governance and citizen participation and encourages cooperation between citizens, local authorities and CSOs. It is the umbrella organisation of the LDAs that are self-sustainable and locally registered NGOs, acting as promoters of good governance. ALDA is a contributor to the comprehensive report.

4. Inclusive Europe

Inclusive Europe (Belgium) works to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism in Europe, combat xenophobia and hate speech, and raise awareness and improv knowledge of social, political, and economic inclusion. Inclusive Europe is a contributor to the comprehensive report.

5. Club for UNESCO

CLUB FOR UNESCO (Greece) has experience in projects that focus on supporting vulnerable groups, combating poverty, supporting human rights, encouraging the identification, protection, and preservation of cultural and natural heritage. Club for UNESCO is a contributor to the comprehensive report.

Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the framework of the report, we focused on radicalisation processes on different platforms and emphasised the influence they can have in today's world, especially in the post-COVID-19 era. As the phenomena of violent radicalisation occur within young age groups, this research aimed to collect data on how, when, and where young people become objects of radicalisation. It establishes both radicalisation indicators and vulnerability indicators, while at the same time, it forms strengths that young people will use in their benefit, to build a stronger fence against radicalisation.

The report is used as the ground to build the educational resources for the online training, which will provide for a positive approach to address youth radicalisation.

The conclusions, according to the national reports, are the following:

THE UK

Through the literature review, it was established that the process of radicalisation can take many different shapes and stages. It is not a phenomenon that happens overnight as young individuals need to be exposed continuously. Although the process of radicalisation offline can occur in various and identifiable places – schools, religious institutions, universities, incarceration settings – social media emphasised it. As primary research shows, social media act like an accelerator of radicalisation, notably because for the young generation there are daily tools of communication. There is a place where information and entertainment are intertwined, and it creates a space where vulnerable young people are easily influenceable. Consequently, there is a need to promote critical debates on the topic of radicalisation in schools, raising awareness about its various manifestations, of the role played by cultural stereotyping and marginalisation and of social media. Because the radicalisation process takes time, potential members are identified and engaged at a very young age, which is why to effectively backtracking the process of radicalisation, guidance and intervention must happen in the early stage.

Although it is a complicated process where it is difficult to create a checklist of radicalisation factors, the report identified a set of violent radicalisation indicators and vulnerability indicators. Isolation, loneliness, and the need for a sense of belonging are some of the common factors that a young person open to extremism have in common. By designing practical guidance tailored to individuals and environments that equip young people with the ability to identify personal goals, personal qualities, skills, passions, and that provide adequate guidance and support on how to achieve those, it is possible to counterbalance the radicalisation and vulnerability indicators.

It is essential to note the importance of the interaction between young individuals and social structures where one's growth in preventing and backtracking the process of radicalisation. In interaction with family, the educational system, peer groups and the local community, young people build their cognitive abilities and tools and their moral and social compass. In this report, a more positive approach is supported which increases resilience and enhance the positive identity formation of young people. The positive approach also advocates considering young people as a key to the problem. By enhancing a positive identity formation and resilience, young people are empowered and actors of the radicalisation prevention's process. There is a need to encourage the use of peer-to-peer youth-led debates that bring together young people from different backgrounds. In so, they will share their experiences, coping mechanisms, critical thoughts and learn from each other. This may increase engagement, sense of ownership, have a positive impact on young people's sense of worth and build one's identity on positive strength. Following this approach and to counter the vision that young people are objects of interventions or problems to be solved, there is a need – on national, EU and international level - to broaden the scope and reach of interventions that reinforce the idea of young people as partners and problem-solvers with the capabilities and duties to play an active role in combating marginalisation and radicalisation.

Lastly, the strengthening of the resilience of young people and a positive identity formation can be shaped in these same specific social structures identified as playing a role in violent radicalisation of young people: the family, the educational environment, and the community. In positive identity formation as well as in empowering the skill of resilience good role models are essential. Good role models can motivate and shape one's goals and values. A positive role model influences people's actions and motivation and deeper their morals, which lead to good behaviour and increase their feeling of self-worth. The Good Lives Model approach has been used in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc., and it was initially used for the offender's rehabilitation based on the idea that in order to reduce reoffending it is essential to build capabilities and strengths in people. In all cases, the Good Lives Model utilises a strength-based approach that aims to help people understand and realise their desires, interests and goals and achieve them through legal and honest ways.

CYPRUS

From the literature review it was proved that there is no uniform definition of radicalisation. Radicalisation is not absolute, but relative and dependent on the context in which it takes place, while it can occur to individuals or groups.

There are different types of radicalisation/extremism including right-wing, left-wing, politico-religious, and single-issue extremism.

Radicalisation does not happen overnight. There are drivers that may lead to radicalisation and violent extremism, which may include politics at regional and/or international levels; discrimination and disparity/ inequality; injustice, mistreatment, corruption; rejection of the political system; rejection of diversity in the society; weak state and absence of security.

Although there is not one specific profile of a radicalised person, certain factors can be observed, the recurrence of which indicate signs of radicalisation and common characteristics on personal backgrounds, and online and offline environments.

Radicalisation is manifested differently in each person; and is often associated with both social and personal expectations: dissatisfaction or frustration with the society and the person's unrealistic expectations, discrimination, feeling of marginalisation etc. Also, it can serve the need to belong to a certain group, the need for adventure (know the unknown), recognition, etc. The lists of risk factors and warning signs are non-exhaustive.

As the primary research indicated, certain ideologies can play an important role in radicalisation, for example some that are motivated by religious beliefs or racism based on origin. Radicalisation can also happen within football teams or for national matters. Specific cases for violent radicalisation in Cyprus were not known.

The Cyprus government moderates and analyses, especially the online behaviour of certain people, mainly through social media but also physically.

Through the internet/social media/App research we discovered that incitement to violent and/or racist behaviour is frequent. Although companies try to eliminate such behaviour online, extremist content and content promoting racism, xenophobia, hatred towards others, is easily accessible on Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, and YouTube.

Accordingly, it was highlighted that online radicalisation peaks when social media platforms and other websites are open and accessible to effortlessly share a message. Social media, forums, messaging Apps and online game platforms are being misused by individuals and groups for spreading their beliefs, promoting radicalisation, recruiting, and sharing propaganda.

Finally, the crackdown of major social media platforms on extremism and radicalisation has deterred many from engaging in online radicalisation; however, a lot still needs to be done to combat this behaviour, which is why we need to identify the use of positive alternatives to address radicalisation. For us, one of the most important aspects of addressing youth radicalisation is promoting media literacy skills to young people, so as to address the risk of radicalisation, especially with regards to identifying, combating and diverting. By taking a more positive approach, we would build communication channels and raise awareness through existing initiatives about internet safety. This would support the dissemination of information about the threat, and tackle youth vulnerability towards a multitude of factors, such as exposure to social networks and exposure to extremist propaganda and fake news.

FRANCE

From the primary and secondary research carried out on youth violent radicalisation in France, the following takeaways were grasped:

- Radicalisation is a complex phenomenon which is difficult to outline with a universal and all-encompassing definition. Moreover, it should be drawn as a process that takes place gradually, whose roots can lie in the childhood/preadolescence period.

- Radicalisation does not necessarily imply the use of physical violence, and terrorism is rarely its intrinsic outcome. As professionals state, apology of violence alone is often enough to judge that we are facing a case of a radicalised person.

- The process of recruitment can happen both online and offline. As a result of the methodology employed for our social media analysis, we concluded that these online platforms are a successful means of communication, of conveying information to denounce, inform and gather young people who are already radicalised rather than a place where young people would (self)radicalise. It seems that online grooming activities happen on a more private level (target – recruiter relationship). It seems that only after radicalisation takes place, activities move to the public and collective sphere.

- From an external standing point, it was difficult to detect grooming activities online, but scientific literature argues that social media are widely used by recruiters to find new young targets. Recruiters usually start by liking or re-sharing some expressions published by the target on social media; they then grab the young's attention and build up complicity via private chat; next, they use conspiracy theories and simplistic discourses to create a rupture between the young person and the environment where s/he lives. The same strategy of manipulation is used in offline grooming attempts. According to this analysis, public (online and offline) groupings of radicalised young people can be interpreted as a way of legitimising their ideology and as an opportunity of internal exchange and constant mutual persuasion.

- Signs of radicalisation are very controversial to use since they lack any scientific basis. As shown by the interview with the P/CVE Coordinator, having an ideology or an attitude that is not wholly compatible with the Republic's principles is not a sufficient criterion to say that we are facing a radicalised person.

The "early-signs" of youth radicalisation that the French government issued in 2015 lack of any rational and scientific substantiation, and they focus solely on jihadist radicalisation. Indeed, this approach is highly detrimental for social cohesion because it does not address the root of the issue and it contributes to the chaos by creating a "society of suspicion".

- Moreover, it is challenging to find a pattern of radicalised youth, because objectively people have different backgrounds and approaches, and it is very rare to find experiences with similar radicalisation paths.

However, some features can be highlighted thanks to the empirical support given by the academia. For instance, the use of conspiracy theories to argue their own point of views, the use of a Manichean and binary approach to reality, and the justification of violence might successfully display that someone has gone through a process of violent radicalisation.

- Finally, it is necessary to keep in mind some of the variables that make it possible for a young person to get radicalised. It is important to acknowledge that, to avoid anachronistic assumptions, vulnerability indicators should not be analysed separately, but that a combination of them and of the person's environment must be made. The recurring vulnerabilities are social, economic, political, and often psychological. Poverty, unemployment, and familial and social issues during childhood can favour radicalisation experiences, even if literature proves that this does not always hold up. In fact, we can find several cases of violent radicalisation of youth coming from bourgeois environments and with unproblematic childhoods.

Another relevant vulnerability is the fragility of youth's critical thinking, which, at that age, is not solidly developed and tends to absorb all the inputs received. This explains indeed the need for comprehensive formation of youth about how to get reliable information and about all the instruments of allowed manifestation that a democracy has to offer. This will prevent young people from getting tricked by fake news and by conspiracy discourses, and from embracing violence as a means of expression.

One last fragility, that in some cases facilitates the process of youth violent radicalisation, is the inability of feeling a sense of purpose in life. According to this thesis, radicalisation takes place because it seems the only way to give voice to its own claims; because it makes it possible to join a group of people and feeling heard; or because it finally gives to the young an objective and a purpose that society failed to offer.

For all these reasons, it could be useful for youth to have more opportunities to work on their positive involvement in politics. Since political subjects are rarely covered in school in a constructive manner, extra-curricular activities should give opportunities to gain knowledge and skills about the functioning of politics at the local, regional, national, and international level. Since political beliefs start to be formed in adolescence, it is important for youth to have a set of tools (such as critical thinking) to shape their own opinion, but also to be exposed to positive ways of being engaged in the civic space, and also constructive manners to express beliefs and dissent. This approach would help young people in channelling their thoughts and will to act in the public space in a positive rather than destructive way, which can sometimes result in violent radicalisation.

BELGIUM

Radicalisation is a process characterised by growing alienation and increasing willingness to accept and use violence. It is affected through a complex interplay of various individual and contextual factors. Which elements play a role is different for every young person and is partly determined by the resilience of the young person and protected factors in their environment. Signals of radical behaviour in young people should in the first place be situated against the background of the stage of development they are in and their search for their own identity. Formation of ideals is an important developmental task in adolescence. It is the task of educators to guide young people in their search for values, norms and meaning and to ensure that young people develop an identity that can deal with diversity.

The preventive approach to radicalisation should not focus solely on supporting individuals, but should also pay attention to the broader context, such as the living situation and societal mechanisms of exclusion or stereotyped reporting. Radicalisation can, in the first place, jeopardise a young person's personal development. Extensive radicalisation can in some cases lead to extremism and this should not be allowed to have a place in society.

"We will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of young people and others who feel disenfranchised. Young people, who constitute most of the population of an increasing number of countries today, must be viewed as an asset and must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations. They represent an untapped resource. We must offer them a positive vision of their future together with a genuine chance to realise their aspirations and potential." (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, 3-4)

As the above quotation states, an effective and sustainable response to violent radicalisation requires a stronger focus and utilisation of positive skills of the young individuals. This is where their creativity skills come in with their demonstrated capacity for innovation, leadership, courage, and desire for making an impact in the society they live in.

The characteristics that drive vulnerable young groups to extremist ideas and actions often involve low self-esteem, confusions over self-identity or sense of belonging, feeling isolated and coping with stress; and creativity offers effective solutions to these core causes. It is a process of self-expression; it builds confidence and self-esteem; it stimulates cognitive skills necessary for the healthy development of youngsters to become committed citizens; and it is a good way of engaging youth in the promotion of cultural diversity to foster pluralistic, inclusive and peaceful societies. Contemporary cultural creations can promote free and critical thinking and create narratives that counter the collective uncritical spirit of extremist ideologies, especially when disseminated with creative ways through online media.

GREECE

The report on the Greek context demonstrated that Greek youth are running quite high risks of being radicalised due to the economic and refugee crisis that are still undergoing in Greece. The high unemployment numbers, the history of political right and left extremist groups and actions, the low level of digital skills by the parents, and monitoring their children's online presence, also accelerates radical people's actions and recruitment efforts.

It is evident that prevention mechanisms should be put in order, to primarily prevent exposure to propaganda and hate speech, radical views, and extremist content, but also critical thinking should be promoted and taught, in order for young people to themselves be able to hinder their own exposure to such content. Prevention needs to happen on different levels.

At the central level, an increased criminal regulation related to spreading of such content would be a good option. Facebook has put algorithms in place which discourages such content to be distributed. Cooperation between authorities and ethnic groups should be encouraged, cooperation between public, local and central authorities and schools should be enhanced and encouraged. Training and knowledge are key for professionals working with youth to be able to identify early signs of radical indoctrination or radical behaviour.

Dedicated training programmes with practical, hands-on activities should be designed to foster and empower youth to understand and identify radicalism and extremism in messages and posts and report it to authorities. The concept of "Pre-bunking" (attitudinal inoculation) can be used by youth workers and educationalists to enhance critical thinking and raise awareness of fake news, misinformation or mal-information. Young people need to know that such content is not illegal, thus, they will be exposed to it by diverse means, but they need to know how to handle it (Baldét).

Thus, one of the most important aspects youths need to consider when reading a post, watching a video or hearing a person speak, is critical thinking. Critical thinking in determining what type of information they just received, critical thinking in evaluating whether this piece of information is worth sharing, but also knowledge on how to react. The idea of pre-bunking and concrete counter actions are imperative to build a strong defence wall in the minds of youth, especially the vulnerable ones. Moreover, the fight against online radicalisation starts offline as Gemmerli states.

There are several training options available, learning platforms promote critical thinking and digital skills that can prove to be share worthy for the RADEX project and its target groups. One which was identified is the Erasmus+ project CRITICAL with related training activities for educators: https://virtual-campus.eu/critical/el/home/.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the report examined the state of the art of research on radicalisation and focused on radicalisation processes on online platforms. Also, it established both radicalisation indicators and vulnerability indicators, while at the same time, it formed strengths that young people will use in their benefit, to build a stronger fence against radicalisation.

Accordingly, it was concluded that:

· There is no uniform definition of radicalisation, while the process of radicalisation can take many different shapes and stages, that take place gradually.

· Recruitment can take place both online and offline. Consequently, social media act as an accelerator, while certain ideologies can play an important role in radicalisation. For example, some that are motivated by religious beliefs or racism based on origin. Radicalisation can also happen within football teams or for national matters.

· There are no exhaustive checklists/risk factors and warning signs of vulnerability and/or radicalisation indicators, that someone can use to identify if radicalisation is taking place. Radicalisation is manifested differently in each person; and is often associated with both social and personal expectations such as dissatisfaction or frustration with the society and the person's unrealistic expectations, discrimination, feeling of marginalisation etc.

· However, there are some common factors which young people open to radicalisation and extremism have in common. The recurring vulnerabilities are social, economic, political and often psychological. Poverty, unemployment, and familial and social issues during childhood can favour radicalisation experiences, even if literature proves that this does not always hold up. The characteristics often involve low self-esteem, confusions over identity or sense of belonging, feeling isolated and coping with stress; and creativity offers effective solutions to these core causes.

Thus, the report created a framework for strengthening the resilience of young people through contributing with positive aspects and strengths that young people can use as individual motivations and influences to build fences against radicalisation:

· Form positive identities in these same specific social structures identified as playing a role in violent radicalisation of young people: the family, the educational environment, and the community. In positive identity formation as well as in empowering the skill of resilience good role models are essential. Good role models can motivate and shape one's goals and values.

Promote media literacy skills to young people, to address the risk of radicalisation, especially with regards to identifying, combating, and diverting radicalisation.

· Provide more opportunities for young people to work on their positive involvement in politics. Since political subjects are rarely covered in school in a constructive manner, extra-curricular activities should give opportunities to gain knowledge and skills about the functioning of politics at the local, regional, national, and international level.

· Focus and utilise positive skills of the young by enhancing their creativity skills which will improve their capacity for innovation, leadership, courage, and desire for making an impact in the society they live in.

· Develop critical thinking in determining what type of information young people received (for example during watching a video), critical thinking in evaluating whether a piece of information is worth sharing, but also knowledge on how to react.

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