



Article

# Preventing violent radicalization of youth through dialogic evidence-based policies

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## Abstract

Radicalization of youth leading to violent extremism in the form of terrorism is an urgent problem considering the rise of young people joining extremist groups of different ideologies. Previous research on the impact of counter-terrorism policies has highlighted negative outcomes such as stigmatizing minority groups. Drawing on qualitative research conducted under the PROTON project (2016–2019) by CREA-UB on the social and ethical impact of counter-terrorism policies in six EU countries, the present article presents and discusses the ways in which actions characterized by creating spaces for dialogue at the grassroots level are contributing to prevent youth violent radicalization. The results highlight four core elements underlying these spaces for dialogue: providing guidance to be safe in the exploration of extremist messages and violent radicalization; the rejection of violence; that dialogue is egalitarian; and that relationships are built on trust so that adolescents and young adults feel confident to raise their doubts. If taken into account, these elements can serve to elaborate *dialogic evidence-based policies*. The policies which include a dialogue between the scientific evidence and the people affected by them once implemented, achieve positive social impact.

## Keywords

Extremism, policies, prevention, terrorism, youth radicalization

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## Introduction

Over the last decades, Europe has experienced a variety of attacks against civil society emerging from the violent radicalization of specific extremist groups (EC, 2016; Horgan, 2009). Though countries beyond Europe are more affected by violent extremism and terrorism, the concern about this threat in Europe is growing. There are several examples of religious inspired terrorist attacks, such as the London underground bombings in 2005, or more recently, the attacks carried out in Barcelona and the nearby town of Cambrils in summer 2017. In both cases, the offenders were young men, aged 18, 19, 22 and 30 in the London attacks and between 17 and 25 years old in Spain. However, the far right has also been responsible for violent incidents, such as the terrorist attack by Breivik in Norway 2011, or attacks specifically targeted at Muslims, migrants and refugees, such as setting refugee camps on fire (Höffler and Sommerer, 2017). Religious inspired terror is widely reported in the media and easily labelled as 'Islamist fundamentalism' or 'Jihadism', terms that wrongly associate Islam and the religious concept of 'Jihad' with violence. Contrarily, rightwing extremism is far less present in the public discourse and more resistance is encountered to its labelling as 'racist' and 'terrorism' (Köhler, 2017). In Germany, the shooting in Munich in July 2016, where nine people were killed by an 18-year-old, is still under debate for its classification as rightwing terror, though police and external evaluators agree on the racist background of the youngster. While much information can be found on any religious inspired attack, there is very little information given on, for instance, the attack on a mosque in Enschede in the Netherlands in 2016. The picture of extremism is further enhanced by a historical peak in support of extreme right parties in the national governments embedded in discriminatory European societies (André and Dronkers, 2016), such as the Front Nationale in France or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany (Fekete, 2009; Mieriña and Koroļeva, 2015). Also, leftwing and anarchist extremism as well as nationalist and separatist extremism is on the rise, though to less of an extent; so too are young people being increasingly recruited into violent radicalization (RAN, 2017).

Considering the severe consequences of violent radicalization, both in the direction of rightwing extremism and religious inspired extremism, it is urgent to find potential mechanisms and strategies for prevention. Efforts to prevent terrorism in the form of policies and specific actions have been developed over the last decades. Thus, specific counter-terrorism (hereinafter, CT) policies have been implemented across Europe on an EU level and on a national level. The rise of violent radicalization poses the question of how effective these policies and the resulting prevention measures are and requires insight into those efforts that are being effective in tackling violent radicalization.

The present study is embedded in the Horizon 2020 project PROTON, 'Modelling the PRocesses leading to Organised crime and TerrOrist Networks' (Savona, 2016–2019), aimed at providing new insight into recruitment to organized crime and terrorist networks. As members of the consortium, the Community of Research on Excellence for All at the University of Barcelona (CREA-UB) explored the social and ethical impact of policies addressing organized crime and terrorism in the EU, specifically in six EU countries (Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom).

In this article, we focus on one specific aspect of the overall study, related to the potential of European CT policies when deployed by stakeholders working on prevention at the grassroots level (NGOs, civil associations, either public or private) to achieve social and ethical impact. Accordingly, the article presents and discusses the ways in which actions characterized by creating spaces for dialogue at the grassroots level are contributing to prevent youth violent radicalization.

The article is structured in four parts. First, the literature on the evaluation of CT policies, prevention of radicalization among youth and dialogic evidence-based policies is briefly introduced. Then, the communicative methodology used for the research and the data collection techniques are explained. Third, the results are discussed highlighting the need for more spaces for dialogue with youth to prevent violent radicalization. The article finishes with some concluding remarks on CT policies targeting especially youth.

## Literature review

### *Some insights from the literature on the evaluation of counter-terrorism policies*

In Europe and its member states, specific legislation and policies have been implemented to counter terrorism and violent extremism, following common standards and definitions provided by the EU. The European Commission (EC) highlights adolescents and young adults as particularly vulnerable to recruitment into terrorist and violent extremist groups (EC, 2014: 9). For this reason, the EC emphasizes the need to broaden prevention efforts involving especially community agents working with adolescents and young adults to foster their critical thinking about extremist messages.

In addition, mechanisms and indicators to measure the impact of counter-extremism policies have been designed. In particular, the SECILE project (Hayes and Jones, 2013) had as a main goal to analyse the assessment mechanisms designed and implemented to evaluate CT policies. According to the Statewatch report (n.d.: 4), the mechanisms for assessment and evaluation of the impact of CT policies are underutilized and can be at odds with basic aspects of civil liberties and fundamental human rights. However, the impact assessment of these policies regarding the improvement of society is scarce. The only clear conclusion that the literature reveals is a rather negative effect, due to the stigmatization of the Muslim community (Ahmed, 2015; Alam and Husband, 2013; Fischbacher-Smith, 2016; Guru, 2012; International Commission of Jurists, 2009). This negative effect can be observed, for instance, in increased 'stop and search' measures or discriminatory profiling targeting the Muslim or migrant communities (Eijkman et al., 2012; FRA, 2010; Lennon, 2013; Sentas, 2015). Lennon (2013) highlights that arbitrary policing can undermine the effectiveness of CT policies, as people are less likely to assist police. Hickman et al. (2011) emphasize the emergence of the Muslim community as a suspect community. This is highly detrimental in a context of increasing migration flows, especially, due to recent waves of refugees coming to Europe and increasing racism and presence of rightwing political parties across European national and regional governments. In a report focusing on community policing to prevent violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in

Europe (OSCE, 2014) states that previous CT strategies have targeted communities rather than being community oriented to work with the people against extremism. In addition, a historical bad relationship between police and youth resulting from unprofessional behaviour of individual police officers or a more systemic bias in the police body is reported. According to the OSCE, to prevent violent radicalization stop and search and similar measures are usually necessary but need to be embedded and carried out in a framework based on respect for human rights. Thus, they emphasize the need to work together with the community: instead of targeting specific groups, engaging them and building alliances with them on diverse levels. Especially, youth outreach programmes by police are suggested. While the report does not provide any data on the assessment of the social impact of community policing, it concludes that this kind of policies can reduce and limit stigmatizing of certain communities. Moreover, depending on the levels of trust between police and the community, it can be beneficial to preventing violent radicalization.

### *Prevention of violent radicalization of youth*

Specific prevention efforts of violent radicalization have been developed in Europe and beyond. While these efforts are tackling multiple spheres, one of the crucial aspects is to focus on youth (EC, 2016; RAN, 2017). Established by the EC, the Radicalization Awareness Network<sup>1</sup> (RAN) is a network of networks and collaborations among diverse stakeholders across Europe working on the prevention of radicalization leading to violent extremism. They pool knowledge, exchange experiences, develop new initiatives and especially highlight best practices to prevent radicalization. The RAN suggests the following working fields: training support for practitioners who are dealing with people at risk for radicalization; exit strategies for those who have already radicalized and even committed violent acts; community work; education for youth; family support; alternative narratives to counter recruitment strategies; multi-agency approaches involving a great variety of social actors; and prison and probation measures. Several of these fields include practices targeted at youth as a vulnerable group to radicalization. For instance, young people should be educated 'on citizenship, political, religious and ethnic tolerance, non-prejudiced thinking, extremism, democratic values, cultural diversity, and the historical consequences of ethnically and politically motivated violence' (RAN, 2017: 14). Conceived as an evolving tool for the prevention of violent radicalization, the RAN gathers a great variety of practices developed across Europe in the diverse fields to provide stakeholders with useful information on prevention efforts.

In a similar vein, the Terrorism and Radicalization project, TerRa,<sup>2</sup> supported by the European Commission DG Home Affairs, specifically focuses on victims of violent acts by radicalized people and on former radicalized people as they can provide valuable insight into targeting specific groups. TerRa builds on the work of the Network of Associations of Victims of Terrorism (NAVt),<sup>3</sup> which is complementary to the RAN. The efforts of the TerRa project include specific guidelines oriented to preventing radicalization among youth and they provide toolkits for people working with youth from diverse domains, such as teachers and youth workers, religious leaders, prison and police officers. All these efforts emphasize the need for working in multiple fields to prevent

violent radicalization, especially when it comes to prevention efforts targeted at youth, as these people are already in direct contact with the youth.

### *Dialogic evidence-based policies*

European civil society agrees on the need for effective policies to counter violent extremism (EU, 2015). But this cannot be done at the cost of the fundamental human rights of specific social groups. The *dialogic turn* occurring at many levels in societies has increased opportunities for individuals to decide upon their lives independently from traditional institutions that prescribed the life course to take. The increasing reflexivity and need for providing arguments in order to justify actions and opinions have led to more and more claims for transparency, dialogue and democracy (Soler-Gallart, 2017). In line with this dialogic turn in society, the social sciences have increasingly incorporated these claims in their practice and theory, initiating emancipatory social sciences that build on more democratic forms of knowledge construction and respond to real social needs. Thus, increasingly, social agents ask for the opening up of science, in the sense of having access to scientific knowledge and contributing with their voices to the knowledge creation processes. The same is true for policy-making. Accordingly, CT policies need to adjust to the dialogic turn especially because of the benefits of including the voices of end-users to prevent negative outcomes of the policies or their implementation.

Burawoy (2005) advocates for public sociology that can contribute to improve society through science. Also, the approach of democratic sociology for democratic societies (Soler-Gallart, 2017) that builds on theoretical foundations such as Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987) and the importance of including all voices in an egalitarian way, proposes to extend this dialogue to ever more spheres of social life, thus putting researchers, people affected by the research results and policy-makers into dialogue in order to enable research and policies to achieve social impact.

In this way, and based on the IMPACT-EV approach (Flecha et al., 2015), *dialogic evidence-based policies* can be designed: that is, policies that take into account the dialogue of the scientific evidence and the people who will be affected by the policies elaborated on this evidence. As Cabré-Olivé and colleagues emphasize, if researchers advance in this sense, citizens can be better informed and participate to a greater extent in stating priorities, which in turn should be the departure point for researchers and policy-makers (Cabré-Olivé et al., 2017).

## **Methods**

The study employed communicative methodology (CM), aiming at the social transformation of the reality under analysis (Gomez et al., 2011). This methodology was especially highlighted for its benefits in research involving vulnerable groups (Mertens and Sordé, 2014), and it builds on the premise that research is conducted *with* rather than *on* vulnerable groups. Considering that the stigmatization of vulnerable groups makes them reluctant to participate in research *on their community* in terms of a potential threat rather than a crucial actor and ally in preventing violent radicalization, CM has been crucial in

accessing key informants who often suffer this stigmatization not only in the media and other social levels but also in research (Serradell, 2015; Tellado, 2017). Thus, for the purpose of the present study CM allowed us to gain greater insight into the analysis of the social and ethical impacts of the implementation of CT policies in European countries.

Some of the guiding principles of CM are egalitarian dialogue and the intersubjective construction of knowledge based on the premises of Habermas (1987). In this dialogue, the participant and the researcher discuss the issues relevant to the research topic on equal terms; they both contribute their knowledge on the issue from their lifeworld, and in the case of the researcher they bring in the scientific knowledge to jointly interpret the reality analysed and create new knowledge.

Whereas the PROTON project analyses the processes of recruitment into organized crime and terrorist networks, the general aim of the CREA-UB consortium was to investigate the social and ethical impact of policies to counter organized crime and terrorist networks. In order to do so and set a definition of these impacts, the authors relied on the European Commission's *Better Regulation: Guidelines and Toolbox* (EC, 2017), and specifically on Tool #19. This regulation sets out the principles that the EC follows when preparing new initiatives and proposals and when managing and evaluating existing legislation. Hence, for the ethical impacts we included the 'Fundamental rights impacts', capturing the different dimensions such as the dignity of a person. Under social impacts we included the 'Social impacts' identified by Tool #19, which are elements linked to advancing economic, social and cultural rights. Moreover, previous experience of the analysis of the social impact of research derived from the authors' participation in the FP7 IMPACT-EV project (2014–2017) served to better orient the work carried out by CREA-UB under PROTON.

For the purpose of the present article, we focused on the potential of CT policies when deployed by stakeholders working on prevention of youth violent radicalization at the grassroots level (NGOs, civil associations, either public or private) to achieve social and ethical impact in the six countries analysed. These stakeholders are acting at ground level, and who through their multiple type actions (educational programmes, training, awareness raising campaigns, etc.) are deploying the policy frameworks and guidelines provided at the EU and national level related to CT.

For the overall study carried out under the PROTON project by the CREA-UB team, in the data collection phase different techniques were used. First, we conducted desk research on the policies implemented in the EU and specifically in the countries of the fieldwork, and a review of scientific and grey literature about the impact of CT policies. Second, qualitative fieldwork including interviews, daily life stories and focus groups with experts, stakeholders and end-users was carried out. Table 1 summarizes the techniques employed across the countries for the overall study.

For the selection of participants we first contacted experts with sound evidence of their expertise and stakeholders active in the public sphere in one or more of six relevant domains for prevention work, namely: media, prison, migration, religion, education and neighbourhoods. In this way, a snowball strategy was used, contacting first experts and stakeholders and later on, end-users. The stakeholders selected were developing actions at the grassroots level and in collaboration with local agents. End-users were contacted

**Table 1.** Data collection techniques.

Total	Germany	Italy	Netherlands	Romania	Spain	United Kingdom	
Interviews with experts	34	7	5	6	3	7	6
Interviews with stakeholders	28	5	3	7	7	1	5
Daily life stories with end-users	8	1	0	1	0	6	0
Focus groups with stakeholders and end-users	7	2	0	0	0	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>13</b>

either through recommendation by the stakeholders or as individuals recognized in social media networks or among the networks of the research team for being active at the grass-roots level in prevention of violent radicalization among youth.

Data analysis was also oriented by CM, which implies that two dimensions are identified: an *exclusionary* and a *transformative dimension*. The exclusionary dimension focuses on those aspects that the informants mention regarding the negative impacts of CT policies. In contrast, the transformative dimension highlights those elements that contribute to achieving social and ethical impact of these policies. For the purpose of the present article, we only focus on results categorized under the transformative dimension, highlighting the potential of policies and the actions to implement these policies to prevent violent radicalization of youth.

## Results: Spaces for dialogue on violent radicalization

The review of policies and literature on the evaluation of policies as well as the fieldwork conducted provided us with valuable insight into how the policies are being implemented in different EU member states and what kind of aspects are being valued by stakeholders, end-users and experts for their positive contribution to the prevention of violent radicalization of youth. In general terms, nearly all six countries analysed are following the recommendations of the EU provided in the EU-Counter Terrorism Strategy (2005) and its revisions as well as the European Union's Global Strategy (2016), with some exceptions; for example, Italy is in the process of developing a complete package of prevention measures. They incorporate definitions of acts of terrorism in the national penal codes and develop a specific strategic plan regarding the prevention of terrorism following the indications of the EU. The current CT policies place greater emphasis on the disruption of terrorist networks rather than on the mechanisms of recruitment. Yet, the EC (2016) emphasizes that prevention efforts have to be targeted at society as a whole to be aware of the mechanisms of recruitment and able to resist recruitment or provide people at risk of falling prey to terrorist networks with the necessary support to choose otherwise. Evidence analysed for this article sheds light on some crucial aspects regarding the implementation of these actions and strategies for preventing violent radicalization of youth.

In the qualitative fieldwork, experts, stakeholders and end-users emphasize the importance of creating spaces for dialogue where youth can feel safe to discuss their concerns, regardless of how insignificant or challenging these concerns might be considered and, especially, if they revolve around extremist groups. From the analysis of the different actions oriented to prevent youth radicalization, we have identified four core elements of these spaces for dialogue, which contribute to their social and ethical impact, thus making them more effective. These elements are the following: providing guidance to being safe in the exploration of extremist messages and violent radicalization; the rejection of violence; that dialogue is egalitarian; and that relationships in these spaces for dialogue are built on trust so that adolescents and young adults feel confident to raise their doubts. In the following subsection, these core elements will be presented and discussed.

### *Providing guidance*

All stakeholders – experts, stakeholders from social organizations and end-users – emphasize the importance of creating spaces in which dialogue about extremist messages and violent radicalization can take place, without being judged or ridiculed for their opinions and standpoints, but in which arguments are provided to critically reflect on these ideas. They explain that thought processes leading to a one-sided conception need to be challenged without challenging the person having these ideas. One of the end-users from the Netherlands, a deradicalized young man, emphasizes the need for fostering critical thinking to challenge manipulation by extremist groups:

We have to allocate huge, much more effort to this [prevention of extremism/violent-extremism], to be critical thinkers, you have to understand what is manipulation, how these groups work. ... We have to prevent, and not do everything when things are done. ... I'm doing this with a group of youth with which I'm working, they are not radicalized. We are trying to spread the idea that ... the basic concept of radicalization, so if they are caught in the situation they can identify it. (Daily life story)

Hayat,<sup>4</sup> an organization in Germany, uses long-arm intervention to support family members, especially parents, in talking to their children about their radicalization, challenging these thought processes. Through their intervention they have prevented youth from joining extremist groups or have helped them to exit these groups, contributing to greater public safety.

There are cases that are easy, relatives call in an early stage when they notice changes in their daughter or son, then we can give some advice on how to deal with them and they manage it on their own. There are cases in which parents do not manage it on their own and who at some point give up. Then we have cases which we have followed over a long period of time in which we could stop radicalization that was going on or even reverse and deradicalize. (Interview, Hayat)

In the UK, due to the implementation of the overall CT strategy CONTEST (HM Government, 2011a), composed of a variety of strategies, such as Prevent (HM Government, 2011b) and Channel Duty Guide (HM Government, 2015), teachers receive



and participate in training sessions, and also sessions with youth are provided. Prevent has been highly criticized among different publics, including academics and human rights NGOs, who consider that the programme involves the limitation of fundamental rights, such as the right of freedom of expression (Mythen et al., 2017; Qu-rashi, 2018; Rights Watch UK, 2016). However, one of the participants in a focus group in the UK working at the Home Office, explained that the Prevent strategy, rather than limiting the freedom of thought and expression, tries to reinforce dialogue. This stakeholder, who works for the Safeguarding Team and was the lead trainer for Prevent in schools, emphasized that this task of 'speaking up' is especially done with mentors from the Home Office who are experts in different fields, such as rightwing extremism or religious questions, and who are able to hold these discussions with greater background on the issue and able to provide the adequate arguments and set the necessary boundaries.

There was something about the Prevent agenda closing down freedom of speech, because one of the things that this talks about is about how to build resilience to radicalization, and what that talks about is actually opening up discussions, rather than closing them down, and I think that's what we were trying to say. This isn't about saying you are not allowed to talk about it. But it's about saying 'Let young people explore it', but in a safe way so that it's very clear that it is ok to explore it, it's ok to express an opinion, but it's not ok to be offensive or insulting, so you need to set out those parameters. (Focus group, Prevent Safeguarding Team)

In a similar vein, in Germany, Violence Prevention Network (VPN) provides training for schools and teachers, as well as in other fields and for any other collective, about violence prevention and especially prevention of radicalization and deradicalization.<sup>5</sup> Youth and young adults need to feel that they are taken seriously and that they are listened to. A stakeholder from VPN explained how youth oftentimes tell them that they are the only person they can seriously discuss radicalization with:

We often have this experience when working with these [rightwing extremist] people, that they say afterwards 'Hey you, you're the first adult who seriously discusses these issues, which I am interested in and that worry me, who seriously discusses them with me.' And if I pass this reflection on to teachers, for instance, and tell them to not only get into a fight about these issues, but to listen and ask 'What do you mean by that? Why is this so important to you?' I think even here we can improve something about the situation of human rights of this social group. (Interview, Violence Prevention Network)

These examples evidence the potential of the actions to enhance the ethical and social impact of CT policies, by fostering freedom of expression and letting these young people develop critical thinking to be active citizens in democratic societies.

### *Rejecting violence*

In the Netherlands, Foundation Peace Education Projects<sup>6</sup> addresses peace education for youth in the 'Democracy Fortress' and 'Democracy Factory', permanent and mobile exhibitions in which visitors are required to interact reflecting on their

worldviews, opinions and prejudices. The exhibitions are open to the wider public but especially host vocational education and training schools as part of their school activity. The interviewee from this organization points out that the prevention policies focusing on democracy education are crucial for opening up spaces for dialogue and to teach youth to reject violence to make our societies more democratic and more diverse:

In our programmes young people can learn how to deal with conflicts in a peaceful way. ... We have a stair of radicalization, starting with 'I have ideals' and the second is 'I'm getting a member of a group that is thinking the same as me' and a third stage is 'I try to convince other people of my opinions' and a fourth step is 'I don't doubt anymore, I am very sure about my convictions' and then it becomes stronger and that is ok, everything is ok in society, everything is ok in democracy except for violence. We don't force, we don't discriminate, and we don't do violent acts, that's the only thing. (Interview, Foundation Peace Education Projects)

Both the spaces where dialogue should be held and the actors involved can be diverse. In the UK, the St. Giles Trust Foundation is working with former offenders in prisons and developing specific programmes for youth offenders and also young people vulnerable to radicalization. One of the aims of the Foundation is to 'deglamourise the lifestyle and expose the realities of negative lifestyle choices such as carrying a weapon'.<sup>7</sup> The stakeholder interviewed mentions that former prisoners and former radicals can provide very different and valuable insight into the extremist groups, because they know how they work, they know what attracted them to these groups, what other vulnerable people might feel about these groups, and especially they know how to get out of it. Thus, they can provide these inputs into the dialogues held with young people. Under the BRAVE: Building Resistance Against Violence and Extremism project, the St. Giles Trust Foundation joins forces with ConnectFutures,<sup>8</sup> who involve former radicals in their programmes, to go to schools and talk with youth about how gangs and extremist groups attract their members and to contest their potential and make youth more aware of how to counter recruitment strategies and to prevent them from getting involved.

In Spain, the project Schools as Learning Communities<sup>9</sup> is opening up the entire school to the participation of family and the broader community to join their efforts in educating our future generations in instrumental knowledge as well as in human values. One of the programmes they have developed is the Dialogic Model of Conflict Resolution, which specifically addresses violence prevention. Departing from research on preventive socialization that evidences an imposed mainstream socialization with regard to attraction towards violence (Puigvert, 2015–2016), they open up spaces for dialogue focused on rejecting violence and avoiding attractive violent role models. This is a type of dialogic-based action, which fosters critical thinking that includes unveiling attraction to violence (Soler-Gallart, 2017).

### *Talking with not talking at*

Another of the underlying elements identified is that these spaces for dialogue cannot be targeted *at* specific people but should be set up as *dialogue with* specific groups. In

this regard, being Muslim themselves and very much engaged in the Muslim community and in prevention of radicalization and deradicalization, Mustafa Cimsit and Misbah Arshad<sup>10</sup> developed the Kompass project.<sup>11</sup> Kompass aims at providing a space for dialogue among different social actors and Muslim youth from very diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, where relevant issues to youth can be discussed. As one of the end-users explained, often seminars held by or for the Muslim community are in the native language of the community, Kompass instead offers these seminars in German. This allows bringing together people from very diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, Muslims and non-Muslims who speak German. Hence, they work with Muslim youth to empower them to use their voice and to be active in blurring the lines between diverse social groups. They provide these youth with instruments to navigate the society they live in and to take a stance in the face of social injustice and violence by rejecting violence. This project thus addresses the dimensions of dignity, freedom of conscience and participation.

Our aim was to break with this idea that we are only Muslims. For us it was important that the youth. ... We both have experienced this, we grew up here, we have always been torn between two worlds, ... We wanted to show them that they can be both, or they can be many things, you have many identities not just one identity to which you have to stick no matter what, but you can work on your identity, you can generate something ... because it is so tough and frustrating to experience and endure anti-Muslim racism. (Focus group, Kompass)

The seminars were focused on issues such as human and civil rights, religion (including inviting Christian religious leaders), sessions about sexuality and sexual orientations inviting representatives from LGQBT collectives, as well as sessions on nutrition and eating habits, to mention only some. These seminars not only bridged the gap between diverse social actors and Muslim youth but they also helped empower these young people in their identity construction and enable them to actively participate in a democratic society. They provided an alternative to two opposite directions of radicalization: either renouncing their religious identity to 'become German', or to oppose a 'suppressive culture' in Germany by becoming 'radical Muslims'. In the discussion group, they explained how the youth started to identify discriminations and together tried to find ways of challenging discriminatory social structures to contribute to a greater change rather than complain about the situation. Participants in this programme felt empowered as Muslims in a diverse Germany, able to challenge racist discourse and behaviour in a positive way, on the one hand, and on the other to challenge their religious community by introducing new perspectives on society and their role in society. One of the end-users, a young Muslim woman, stated:

It gives you strength, we have discussed different topics. And the feeling that you ... I don't know why I am crying now. ... Well Kompass has given me a lot, all the topics we discussed, were topics we didn't discuss anywhere, in most spaces they were not discussed, topics such as homosexuality, this is almost never addressed anywhere, but we experience this in our everyday life, and in this regard Kompass gave me very much and a variety of things. To be open minded, it all starts with [the dialogue] being in German, in most communities, they use the native language, Bosnian, Arabic, Turkish, or whatever, and thus the relation to the society we are

living in is missing. ... well prevention of extremism or the fact that you are able to respond to someone who verbally attacks you. For instance, when someone says oh you are wearing a veil, that you can be above that and that you can better respond to certain questions. (Interview, Kompass)

In Spain, when discussing the implementation of specific protocols oriented to detect students under risk of radicalization such as the PRODERAI CE (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2016) in Catalonia, emphasis was placed on the idea that oftentimes these policy actions are done without the end-users. They are not involved in the design or implementation, which undermines the effectiveness of the action and even worse, can lead to the stigmatization of the community. The principal of a primary school located in a very deprived neighbourhood with a large Muslim population and committed to an educational project focused on engaging families in the school, argued that policy-makers need to include all the parts involved in preventing violent radicalization:

Although an attempt has been made to include them [minority groups], it has not been achieved. ... From the department of education and the Mossos [Catalan local police] teachers were called to be trained in the PRODERAI CE protocol, and also to explain the indicators that could be considered as risk of radicalization. At the end of the course, the schools' principals were called for a meeting, but just those from schools with higher diversity. ... This is inappropriate, because principals do not know the teachers' sensitivity once receiving such information. They may have prejudices/stereotypes and misapply those indicators creating more stigmatization. (Interview, School as Learning Community)

All in all, stakeholders working at the grassroots underline the vital importance of designing and implementing prevention actions *with* the community, asking about their concerns and taking a bottom-up approach. If the opposite occurs, especially when linked to a sensitive topic such as the prevention of radicalization, very negative consequences can ensue.

### *Trustworthiness*

All these interventions with youth and young adults establish spaces for dialogue in which the participants can feel safe to express their concerns and ideas. The participants in the research highlight the importance of connecting with youth, before criminal groups can reach them and involve them in their operations. Given that strategies for recruitment into terrorist networks are influenced by friendship or even romantic relationships (Picart, 2015), most of the participants in our research stress that in order to access youth they need to build a trustworthy relationship. Thus, any social actor working on the prevention of violent radicalization with youth and young adults needs to gain their trust before any kind of fruitful intervention can start.

A relevant example in this way is the work done by Gangway,<sup>12</sup> an organization that works with social workers, approaching youth on the streets of Berlin. Gangway attempts to make vulnerable youth aware of their rights and duties in a democratic society and to use channels other than violence to express their needs and standpoints. They particularly address youth that suffer certain stigmatization and are in a vulnerable situation and easy to reach by extremist groups. They work with many different social services to

respond to the specific socio-economic needs of the youth and to protect their fundamental rights. The participants emphasized that all their work relies on this trusting bond that they establish over months or years of work.

From a very different point of view, Mothers for Life,<sup>13</sup> an international network that came into being due to the lack of assistance to families who had suffered the loss of their child to Daesh, enters schools to talk with youth about these mothers' experiences and about the children they lost to extremist groups. A participant from this organization explained the importance of providing safe spaces in which youth can talk about their concerns and the trustworthy relationships in which this dialogue needs to be embedded to prevent youth from being vulnerable to radicalized groups. She also stated that several children had come forward explaining that they had been interested in similar extremist groups and thanks to their intervention in school they would not continue in this direction. Their intervention with youth and a dialogue free of any judgement enhance the promotion of the human rights of these youth, as they can freely express themselves:

Maybe they witness something that they thought was unjust, they don't see anything happen about it, whereas information on the internet would pick their interest that 'Oh wait a minute, there are ways that I can get back, that I can get control back', ... we're continuing an open dialogue to help them express whatever it is that's going on. ... It has to be on the community level, there needs to be more mentoring and support, empowering youth to find more positive methods to express their dissatisfactions, or have open and safe areas for open dialogue to be supported and not ridiculed or pushed away. (Interview, Mothers for Life)

In the UK, this idea of building bonds of trust with youth 'flirting with violence' as well as with the families has been strongly underlined by stakeholders from the St. Giles Trust Foundation, Safer London<sup>14</sup> and Active Change Foundation,<sup>15</sup> entities that work under a similar approach developing prevention of gang involvement and radicalization. The case about Somali youth shared by the stakeholder from the St. Giles Trust Foundation illustrates how when bonds of trust are built, it gets easier to prevent particularly vulnerable youth from being caught up in radicalization:

There was a brilliant scare story: a Christian organization was coming to take their children away, that was us, ... but because we had this guy who spoke the language ... we were able to get him out there, he was really good at talking to moms, particularly, and persuading moms that we were a good source of support. And once we had effectively supported quite a few lads ... these young lads were gang involved, they were considered to be at risk for radicalization, because they had been friends with the guys who had gone to Syria and they probably were into radicalization, we had managed to work with them, get them into courses, managed to get some of them into employment, get them out of trouble. When the moms kind of discovered that, they were really happy! (Interview, St. Giles Trust Foundation)

The St. Giles Trust Foundation and Mothers for Life also engage people who have directly experienced violent radicalization in different ways and can bring in their personal experiences as an additional asset to connect to youth, something that teachers or professionals might not have. Law enforcement in the Netherlands focused on prevention of extremism has implemented community policing strategies in line with the OSCE recommendations

to build alliances rather than targeting specific communities (OSCE, 2014). The chief of police of one of the major cities in the Netherlands explained that they have established alliances with the diverse social groups in the different neighbourhoods they are working in and use a strategy based on reporting signals. If any social actor perceives signs of radicalization, a meeting is set up involving diverse police forces as well as social actors to discuss the situation and evaluate the handling of the case. Instead of repressive measures, they attempt to provide services that can help the person to be less vulnerable to radicalization and chose a different path promoting the dignity of the person as well as advancing his or her social, economic and cultural rights. He reports on one case in which a young adult was engaging with religious inspired extremist groups:

About a year ago we got strong signals of radicalization of a young man 19 years old at that time, the signal was discussed in our case meeting, one of my police officers had a good relation with that boy, and invested in that relation with the pains [*sic*], and with the help of therapy, because he had a job and he was helped with his studies, and for his religious questions he was with an imam. And this intervention, the whole package led to disengagement of this boy [in] about a year and a half. We are still monitoring him. ... He is aware that he is monitored, we are always totally open. And when possible we go together with parents and with other people [in the subject's environment]. (Interview, City Chief of Police)

The interviews and the specific case of Somali youth in the UK and the young man in the Netherlands evidence the potential of these trustworthy relations to achieve social and ethical impact by supporting youth in diverse dimensions, such as in accessing the labour market, and show that the community is very willing to collaborate with law enforcement if they are taken into account on an egalitarian basis, but are not the target of the intervention. This further implies that the community represents an ally and their concerns and signals are taken into account but are thoroughly assessed so that no false accusations can be made, or that people can report someone as 'terrorist' based on a personal and biased opinion. Both cases make clear that collaboration on equal terms contributes to a common understanding of the reality and a common will to tackle and solve the problem at its roots.

## Conclusion

In this article examples of successful prevention actions concerning the violent radicalization of youth have been analysed, evidencing their social and ethical impacts. This can help to inform dialogic evidence-based counter-terrorist policies. The very diverse programmes studied here achieve the protection and promotion of the fundamental human rights of the people engaging in them and society at large. Moreover, they advance the economic, social and cultural rights of the people affected by them.

The qualitative analysis provides insight into common elements across the different projects that appear to be crucial in preventing violent extremism among youth and young adults. It is noteworthy that the activities undertaken are very diverse and deal with different collectives, social contexts, different types of violent extremism across six geographically different European countries, but they all coincide on some basic features. Thus,

they coincide with regard to the recommendations of international institutions such as the European Commission (2016), the RAN (2017) or the TerRa in the sense that they open up spaces for dialogue about the use of violence for extremist ideas or purposes and therefore include a great variety of actors in different social settings. The present research adds to the literature by looking in depth at the specific features of the dialogue to be opened up at the grassroots level to truly reach youth and make a difference in their understanding of violent radicalization to prevent them from engaging in any extremist group perpetrating violent acts.

While the literature emphasizes the need to reach out to youth, specific guidelines on how to actually reach them are rather scarce. Spaces for dialogue are crucial to enable youth to critically assess extremist messages especially when these messages turn violent. It becomes clear that a close collaboration between many diverse actors such as schools, museums, sports clubs, associations, NGOs, public administration, social workers can reach out to youth and set up this space for dialogue to prevent violent radicalization. However, the evidence analysed shows that in order to reach youth and contest extremist ideas, it is crucial to involve them not in a mere informative way, but in a decisive way, making them protagonists of the process through intersubjective dialogue (García-Carrión et al., 2017). As the experiences analysed reveal, this entails opening up debate in a respectful environment in which youth are certain that they will not be judged for their opinions. Thus, to talk about their concerns or ideas that might seem trivial or challenging, youth need to establish trustworthy relationships with the people in these spaces – peers, family or professionals. Evidence reveals that from this type of relationships youth can gain both positive and protective interactions which, being non-existent in other spaces in which they participate, become crucial to challenge their thought processes and can even prove a lifesaver. Moreover, the spaces for dialogue about violent radicalization can contribute to better prepare youth to navigate the societies of the current times, developing counter-radicalization narratives, using their voice to participate as active citizens, making them resilient to extremist messages, and rejecting the use of violent behaviour.

All in all, in order to further enhance the social impact of extremism prevention policies and counter violent radicalization of youth, we need to take another step forward and include all people's voices on equal terms, providing evidence to policymakers about how policies can actually achieve their goals and limit the negative outcomes. As researchers committed to the major enterprise of unveiling actions and strategies that advance the improvement of our living conditions, we also need to look for research methodologies that enable the inclusion of the 'research subjects' into knowledge construction. Hence, with the resulting knowledge, dialogic evidence-based policies can be designed and implemented (Flecha, 2014–2017), maximizing their impact. The present study is an attempt in this regard, which, drawing on the narratives of end-users, stakeholders and experts, illuminates aspects that if taken into account for the design of CT policies and prevention measures of violent radicalization, can make a difference in such endeavours and therefore contribute to advance towards a more democratic Europe.


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## Notes

1. Radicalization Awareness Network, RAN: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en)
2. Terrorism and Radicalization TerRa: [www.terratoolkit.eu](http://www.terratoolkit.eu)
3. Network of Associations of Victims of Terrorism (NAVT): [www.europeanvictims.net](http://www.europeanvictims.net)
4. For more information, see: <http://hayat-deutschland.de/english/>
5. For more information, see: [www.violence-prevention-network.de/en/approach/deradicalisation](http://www.violence-prevention-network.de/en/approach/deradicalisation)
6. For more information, see: [www.vredeseducatie.nl/english/englishbrochure.pdf](http://www.vredeseducatie.nl/english/englishbrochure.pdf)
7. For more information, see: [www.stgilestrust.org.uk/page/sos-plus-programme](http://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/page/sos-plus-programme)
8. For more information, see: [www.connectfutures.org/](http://www.connectfutures.org/)
9. For more information, see: <http://utopiadream.info/ca/>
10. The participants explicitly asked to be mentioned by their names.
11. For more information, see: <http://muslimische-jugendbildung.de>
12. For more information, see: <http://gangway.de/>
13. For more information, see: <http://girds.org/mothersforlife/mothers-for-life-network>
14. For more information, see: <https://saferlondon.org.uk/>
15. For more information, see: [www.activechangefoundation.org/](http://www.activechangefoundation.org/)

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## Résumé

Étant donné le nombre croissant de jeunes qui rejoignent des groupes extrémistes aux différentes idéologies, la radicalisation des jeunes qui précède l'extrémisme violent sous la forme du terrorisme est une question urgente. Les recherches existantes sur l'impact des mesures de lutte contre le terrorisme ont fait apparaître des effets négatifs, tels que la stigmatisation de groupes minoritaires. Le présent article, qui s'inscrit dans une recherche qualitative menée par CREA-UB dans le cadre du projet PROTON (2016-2019) sur l'impact social et éthique des politiques de lutte contre le terrorisme dans six pays de l'Union européenne, expose et analyse la façon dont des actions caractérisées par la création d'espaces de dialogue sur le terrain contribuent à prévenir la radicalisation violente des jeunes. Les résultats obtenus font ressortir quatre éléments fondamentaux qui sous-tendent ces espaces de dialogue : la possibilité qui est donnée de pouvoir explorer en sécurité les messages extrémistes et la radicalisation violente ; le rejet de la violence ; le dialogue égalitaire ; et des rapports établis sur la base de la confiance de manière à ce que les adolescents et jeunes adultes se sentent en confiance pour exprimer leurs doutes. S'ils sont pris en compte, ces éléments peuvent servir à élaborer une *politique dialogique fondée sur les faits* qui, en intégrant un dialogue entre les données scientifiques et les personnes concernées par les politiques mises en œuvre, a un impact social.

## Mots-clés

Extrémisme, politiques publiques, prévention, radicalisation des jeunes, terrorisme

## Resumen

La radicalización juvenil que lleva al extremismo violento en forma de terrorismo es un problema urgente teniendo en cuenta el aumento de jóvenes que se unen a grupos extremistas de diferentes ideologías. Las investigaciones previas sobre el impacto de las políticas de lucha contra el terrorismo han subrayado sus efectos negativos, como la estigmatización de los grupos minoritarios. El presente artículo, que se enmarca dentro de la investigación cualitativa realizada por CREA-UB en el marco del proyecto PROTON (2016-2019) sobre el impacto social y ético de las políticas antiterroristas en seis países de la UE, presenta y analiza la forma en que las acciones de creación de espacios de diálogo a nivel de base están contribuyendo a prevenir la radicalización violenta de los jóvenes. Los resultados obtenidos destacan cuatro elementos centrales que subyacen a estos espacios de diálogo: la aportación de orientaciones para explorar con seguridad los mensajes extremistas y la radicalización violenta; el rechazo a la violencia; el diálogo igualitario; y el establecimiento de relaciones basadas en la confianza para que jóvenes y adolescentes se sientan seguros para expresar sus dudas. Si son tenidos en cuenta, estos elementos pueden servir para elaborar *políticas públicas dialógicas basadas en la evidencia* que, incluyendo el diálogo entre la evidencia científica y las personas afectadas por las políticas implementadas, logren un impacto social.

## Palabras clave

Extrémismo, políticas públicas, prevención, radicalización juvenil, terrorismo