

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief

Transnational radicalisation dynamics and the role of diaspora communities for (de)radicalisation



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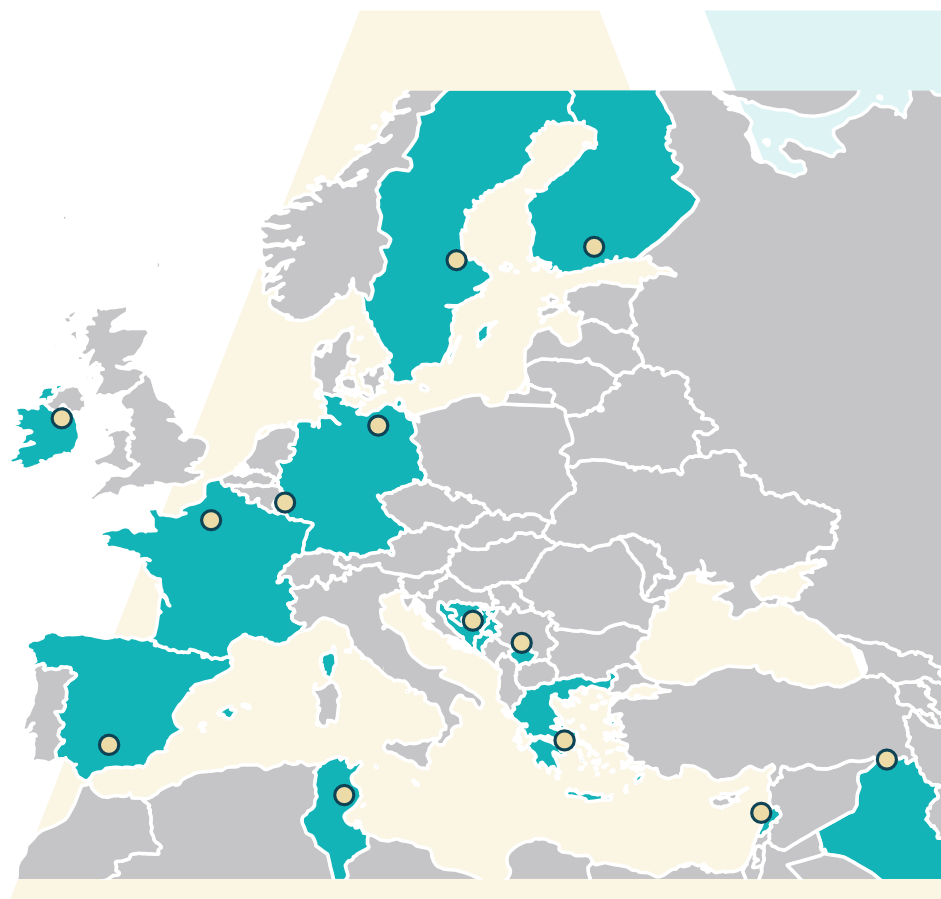


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on four thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation, and transnational radicalisation dynamics and the role of diaspora communities for (de)radicalisation.¹





Summary of key research findings

The field research for WP6 on transnational dynamics and impact on/from the EU in the Western Balkans and the MENA region was conducted with semi-structured interviews and focus groups with members of diaspora communities in EU countries, key informants, practitioners and researchers working with diaspora communities. The following countries and diaspora communities were selected: Greece (Pakistani and Afghan), Ireland (Pakistani, Iraqi, Sikh, Nigerian and Kosovar), Germany (Bosnian and Palestinian), Spain (Amazigh), Denmark (Palestinian) and France (Palestinian).

As stated in our comparative report on risk and resilience factors in diaspora communities (Karatrantos and Armakolas 2022), identity crisis has been identified as one of the most important risk factors that may lead to violent extremism (someone having difficulties in identifying him/herself in different spaces, e.g. the Amazigh diaspora community in Spain). In the case of youngsters, the sense of 'lack of belonging' is an important risk factor when there is a situation of dual identity (e.g. Muslim minorities in Ireland). Another risk factor is linked to the different characteristics of the new generation of immigrants, especially refugees. Many new people arrived from war-torn regions with deep sectarian divisions, which influenced their integration process and attitudes towards other communities (e.g. new refugees in Ireland). Religion is also an important identity marker for diaspora members. The absence of a legitimate and credible representative body for the Muslim community and the numerous unofficial mosques (e.g. in Greece) are conditions that lead to poor integration and risks of radicalisation. Instances of Islamophobia, linked with discrimination and stigmatisation, also contribute to diaspora members being vulnerable to radicalisation (e.g. in Germany and Ireland).

Another source of diaspora communities' radicalisation is Western foreign policy, especially Western interventions in predominantly Muslim countries. For the Palestinian diaspora communities in France and Denmark, the West's support for Israel is a very important factor that may contribute to their radicalisation. Furthermore, engagement by state and non-state organisations in the home country can play a role in influencing the position of diaspora groups. In some countries, political Islam has tended to operate through non-violent political channels and to veer away from intolerant extremism. The dissemination of jihadist propaganda via the Internet is also identified as an important risk factor, as is diaspora members' exposure to radicalised individuals who have military experience (e.g. war veterans and foreign fighter returnees).

Successful integration was highlighted as the primary condition for a resilient community. In turn, the role of education was found to greatly influence the integration of diaspora members in EU countries. Increased social cohesion builds relationships and reduces the marginalisation that can be a potential driver of violent extremism. Community cohesion programmes have been initiated by governments and civil society organisations in European countries, some of which are directly aimed at building collective community resilience against radicalisation. Examples are the National Youth Council of Ireland and activities that promote Amazigh culture and intercultural dialogue with the local community in Spain, mainly through culture and arts. Cooperation with other organisations and state institutions is an important resilience factor, including through inter-religious dialogue initiatives, such as the 'Safe Haven' programme run by Dublin City Interfaith Forum. Finally, counter-narratives promoted by the media have greatly challenged stereotypes and prejudice that people might have about different groups within society, particularly when there is ignorance or a lack of understanding. In Spain, the social media networks created by Amazighs in the diaspora allow them to access a source of knowledge about their own culture and identity through social media.



Policy recommendations

Our research in PAVE shows that enhancing positive factors is more effective than mitigating negative conditions in effective prevention of radicalisation. The strength-based approach highlights the importance of developing individual and societal resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism. Community outreach is thus a key component of many prevention, de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation initiatives, as it contributes to the successful integration of diaspora communities and their members in the host countries. The following recommendations are mainly aimed at state agencies that are responsible for drafting national strategies on preventing violent extremism (PVE), but they also concern European institutions because our research identified the common patterns between various diaspora communities in different European states. They are also relevant for local authorities, civil society actors and, last but not least, diaspora communities, whose active engagement in initiatives to enhance resilience is crucial.

1. Conduct a Community Risk Assessment (CRA)

CRA is a participatory process for assessing challenges, vulnerabilities, risks and ability to cope, preparing coping strategies and finally preparing a risk reduction options implementation plan for the local community.¹ CRA uses scientific information, predictions and participatory discourses to identify, analyse and evaluate the risk environment of a particular community, and to reach consensus among the community members on actions that are needed to manage the risk environment. The method recognises that the vulnerability, prevention or mitigation strategy and coping mechanisms vary from community to community and from group to group within one community. States should include CRA as part of their national strategies on PVE, and local authorities (i.e. municipalities) should conduct CRAs with the active engagement of the diaspora communities.

2. Engage with the diaspora communities to enhance resilience

National strategies on PVE should encourage representatives of diaspora communities and religious leaders to take steps to enhance resilience and prevent radicalisation processes within their communities. The role of these leaders is crucial in three respects: a) identify community members who are vulnerable to extremist preaching and radicalised individuals, especially among the youth, and enhance their resilience; b) deconstruct stereotypes about Islam and participate in prevention of Islamophobia and safeguarding of communities; and c) manage the return of foreign fighters and their family members in a way which leaves no room for possible (re-)radicalisation.

¹ For more details about CRA and how to conduct it, see Karatrantos and Armakolas (2022) and Van Aalst, Cannon and Burton (2008).

3. Increase social cohesion by strengthening social connections at all levels

As our research highlighted, integration and social cohesion are important resilience factors that can make a major contribution to the prevention of radicalisation. Social cohesion builds relationships and reduces marginalisation, which can be a potential driver of violent extremism. The participation of representatives from different social groups with diverse cultural and religious profiles in common projects will help to reframe perceptions of the 'other', dispel stereotypes and facilitate changes in culture and perceptions about the other (in this case Islam and its mirroring to the diaspora communities). Within this framework, social connections should be strengthened at three levels in order to mitigate risk factors associated with violent extremism: through *social bonding* within communities, i.e. between individuals who share similar social identities; *social bridging* between communities, i.e. between groups composed of individuals with diverse social identities but who share a common sense of community in some other way; and *social linking* between communities and institutions or governing bodies. Together, these strategies provide an opportunity for addressing social injustice and building structures for intervention with vulnerable youths (Ellis and Abdi 2017). The interaction between diaspora communities and local authorities is important in order to advance integration and social cohesion with the active participation of diaspora members.

4. Strengthen cooperation with local government bodies and diaspora communities, with the aim of developing local prevention initiatives

Prevention is most effective at the local level; for this reason, local authorities (municipalities, local social services, education services, civil networks, etc.) can and should play an important role both in prevention and in disengagement, de-radicalisation and reintegration. With the active participation of diaspora communities, they should develop and implement collective actions to strengthen respect for diversity and combat xenophobia, intolerance and racism.

5. Promote counter-narratives against radicalisation and violent extremism with the use of social media

State institutions should develop an integrated strategic communication plan to deconstruct the ideology of violence and extremism, in which the participation of the media will be encouraged. The goal of this initiative is to communicatively counter extremist propaganda, deconstruct the ideology of violent groups and organisations and promote positive narratives to strengthen democratic participation. Specific communication actions should be planned to inform vulnerable groups and individuals about the dangers of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, but also about the possibilities of disengaging from violence. Particular emphasis should be placed on dealing with propaganda on the internet. An important part of these strategic communication plans is to combat propaganda, extremist preaching and hate and intolerant speech online and especially on social media, with active participation in European initiatives (European Union Internet Forum, Radicalisation Awareness Network, European Strategic Communication Network, etc.). In parallel, it is crucial that online and offline campaigns against the stigmatisation of Muslim communities and the presentation of Islam as prone to extremism are developed in order to reduce prejudices and promote tolerance of diversity.

6. Strengthen the capacities of first-line practitioners through their continuous training and further specialisation

States should design and implement special education and training programmes for first-line practitioners (police, social services, education, health etc.). Through these programmes, practitioners will be able to understand the processes of radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism and to recognise and identify signs of radicalisation at an early stage. At the same time, they will acquire skills to help people who are vulnerable to extremist propaganda. Among other things, these programmes will aim to increase cooperation at an inter-agency level and improve interaction with diaspora communities in the framework of strengthening prevention. Special emphasis should be placed on health professionals and social services staff who come into daily contact with vulnerable groups. It is important to build their capacities with specialist training, but also with methodologies for assessing vulnerability to radicalisation, so that they can recognise early signs and possible connections between radicalisation and other forms of violence (domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, bullying, etc.). Also, there must be special inter-agency management protocols for people who belong to vulnerable groups and show signs of radicalisation. Finally, health and social service professionals have the most important role in interventions to protect and support vulnerable groups but also the families of people who have been radicalised and joined extremist organisations.

7. Empower young people by strengthening their critical thinking and resilience against violent extremism

Schools, universities, research institutions and civil society organisations should raise awareness and provide information for young people on issues related to democratic values, human rights, respect for diversity, de-stigmatisation of Islam and the consequences of extremist and terrorist attacks; modern training techniques and technology should be utilised for this purpose.

8. Strengthen the services dealing with the reception and accommodation of immigrants and refugees for the implementation of actions to prevent radicalisation

The staff of reception, hospitality and asylum services come into contact with a significant number of immigrants and refugees every day. This population includes people who have left war zones or areas where extremist organisations were active. It may also include families with children who have been exposed to violence or propaganda of violent extremist organisations. For this reason, a number of these children show symptoms of trauma. At the same time, due to the difficulties created by the increased number of arrivals and challenging living conditions, tensions, violent behaviour and radicalisation can occur; this risk increases in the case of refugees and immigrants from countries with local conflicts. At the same time, inter-agency cooperation must be strengthened in order to manage tensions and de-radicalisation actions must be planned in collaboration with civil society organisations and diaspora communities.

9. Develop collective actions to strengthen respect for diversity and combat xenophobia, intolerance and racism

In order to curb the negative effects of misinterpretation of religious doctrine and cultural practices and prevent the targeting of religious and diaspora communities, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue initiatives are essential, especially in communities where there are diverse religious groups. At the same time, actions need to be strengthened to promote respect for difference, a better understanding of the 'other' and joint action against polarisation, hate speech, racist violence and racist crime. Unfortunately, xenophobia and Islamophobia are deeply-rooted phenomena not only within the general public in Western Europe but also among public servants and security services. The establishment of effective mechanisms for reporting of xenophobia and racism in government institutions is crucial.

References

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ⁱ This policy brief was submitted as part of the fourth thematic cluster of the PAVE project, as Deliverable 6.4.