International findings of Countering Violent Extremism

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Since the attacks in 2015, radicalization and (especially Islamist) extremism are playing a more crucial role in Europe and it seems to be a great challenge, any longer. As a consequence, a lot of prevention measures and programs have been developed and implemented as well as there are any terms and approaches which have been reconsidered. Thus, it is not surprising that the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism in common ranks high on the international political and social agenda.

If one take a short look at crime prevention in common, it encompasses the notion of an active approach and great variety, i.e. to enhance an adequate community awareness, to develop, to implement and offer measures and programs or to call for a (national) prevention strategy etc. Further on various actors in the field of crime prevention have to handle with a lot of causes and circumstances to avoid attacks, criminal / terrorist acts or other kinds of negative effects and activities. There are also suitable approaches and ideas in other countries which could be transferred or implemented into a national context and help tackling this state of affairs.

Against this backdrop, the international conference "Countering Violent Extremism: Building an evidence-base for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism" took place on June 16-17, 2017 in Hanover. The main aim was to discuss the challenges of evidence-based approaches and measures in this field of work.
There are three central ideas, which led to the implementation of the conference. Firstly, there are national and international actions, findings, scientific knowledge etc. which are worthy to be shared and discussed. Secondly, there are a lot of insufficient covered or shared indicators, benchmarks and possible metrics to improve or transfer successful and effective ideas. Thirdly, practitioners, researchers and policy makers, which are engaged in the field of crime prevention, need space to discuss regional, national and international solutions and challenges concerning countering radicalization and violent extremism to adapt processes and actions for the conditions they encounter.

The Conference

During the conference, a lot of international and national experts have contributed to six panels and facilitated their knowledge and time to foster the prevention and intervention in the field ofradicalization and violent extremism. (For some impressions, go to our website at www. pve-conference.org.)

Each panel started with a short introductory statement of four participants followed by a moderated discussion initially between the four contributors and then opened for full board.

The six panels directed their spotlight onto different requirements and initial findings in the field of countering violence and extremism.

Panel I (How to become a jihadi and how to prevent it?) and II (What to prevent? Extremist behavior, extremist ideas or both?) focused on fundamental and progressive topics: the influence, interdependences and quality of ideological, individual, political and social impacts. These panels should also give an answer about the question '(How) Is it possible to identify and influence (highly) vulnerable persons?'

The aims of panel I were the discussion of the value of ideology and of different approaches (for instance empirical models, theories, continuity of content etc.) of 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' in common. Firstly, it could be enable an identification of possible commonalities, distinctions between different types of extremism or patterns to present the characteristic properties of 'radicalization' and extremism. Secondly, the panel wanted to examine the state of the art, possible content, importance and aims of extremist ideas and ideology.

The second panel should bring to light pivotal social, psychological, cultural, individual, ideological or religious determinants of the process of radicalization. It should weight the importance of ideological or individual factors for prevention approaches.

This even raises the question of a viable foundation of measures and projects. Therefore, panel III (What works? The virtue of evidence-based practices) and IV (Where do we stand? Strengths and weaknesses of existing evaluation metrics) embedded this topic into a scientific context.

Further, defending radicalization and violent extremism has to be underpinned and legitimated by scientific findings or 'Best Practices' in certain ways. The interdependence between scientific approaches, theoretical aspects, solid literature and professional action are essential aspects for evidence-based work. Therefore, the statements and the discussions should extract commonly shared criteria for good practice

and the meaning of evidence-based practice, because the understanding about the impact of preventive programs and measures is still limited.

The aims of Panel III were therefore to explore what distinguishes 'evidence' in this context and why this kind of strategy is needed? Further on, it was important to determine which sustainable value and potential offers evidence-based prevention as well as which basic conditions have to be created for an evidence-based work.

The panel IV focused on the one hand on opportunities and limitations of the effectiveness of prevention or intervention programs and on the other hand on possible metrics, benchmarks and indicators. Examined in this context are approaches of evidence-based prevention or empirical methods, which are a suitable basis for further evidence-based prevention as well as positive and negative impacts.

At least, panel V (What characterizes "best practices"? The design and criteria of (successful) programs of CVE) and Panel VI (How to prevent violent extremism online? Digital possibilities and specificities of CVE) referred to practical experiences and measures.

It is already known, that during the last years the projects and measures of de-radicalization, distancing and especially of the reduction of ideological ideas have thrived and become more heterogeneous. For understanding and defending radicalization Panel V sketches the experiences, knowledge and key levers of social workers, pedagogues, scientists etc. are a very important resource.

Panel VI rendered the theoretical foundation and the scientific background of measures or projects. The participants presented and debated several approaches with roots in scientific research, psychological concepts, countering several kinds of extremism, findings of social work or media-related ideas.

Central findings and discussions

To a certain extent, it may seem to be ambitious to promote and bring out the mentioned aspects of the last chapter, but it is a visionary idea, which provides greater clarity, evolution, insights into specific areas and multiple perspectives in CVE/PVE themes.

Panel I brought to light, that the changeability of islamist radicalization is a very important aspect, because people become radicalized within a shorter period or the scene by itself became increasingly fragmented. Actors have to handle with these developments and need therefore proved concepts and inspiration to tackle these challenges effectively.

On an individual perspective, there are no consensuses about single factors which mainly support a specific kind of radicalization. It is an interaction between various social, individual and environmental circumstances. For instance, a lot of radicalized persons have only a hazy knowledge of ideological aspects. The reasons could be manifold like insufficient or consciously incorrect transfer of knowledge etc. as a response to curiosity and youthful enthusiasm.

Moreover, we are not able to give reliable statements about the impact of the social environment and movements which promote islamist ideas, because we do not have an adequate empirical foundation which shows that the affiliation to a specific milieu, group, religion, etc. determinate vulnerability for extremist ideas.

In accordance with the first panel, panel II especially directs the attention to the question on the subject matter of prevention, the individual. There are coherent aspects which support approaches aimed at extremist ideas and approaches aimed at extremist behaviour.

In the first instance, one mentioned aspect is the absence of an exact definition of the terms "extremist behaviour" or "extremist idea" in contrast to ordinary behaviour or ordinary ideas or in other word: At which degree one can speak of an extremist expression? Further on, there are no empirical data of causal relations between ideas and behaviour.

Secondly, if we take a gander at the roots and factors of radicalization on the European or international agenda, there are different social levels or important local factors noticeable. It is essential to look at structural conditions which promote the process. It is not possible to have an impact on social modification by itself, but the social environment and political conditions have to be considered by all actors.

Thirdly, extremist narratives and networks are foundations which lead to a deviant development of a person in modern societies and these aspects can be addressed directly. These are starting points, because radicalisation processes are characterized by compensating personal desires and provides only a small period of time to intervene with rational arguments or social interventions. Therefore, it is important to analyse the local and social settings (unemployment rate, crime rate, social capital and relationships, etc.).

The third panel addressed mainly the scientific aspects of prevention. Prevention measures or projects need scientific references which allow implementing age and client based appropriated intervention. Risk and protective factors, ideology etc. or to deduce deviant deve-

lopments in the youth from aspects in the early childhood. These are only some approaches which have been discussed and have been taken into consideration.

To transfer scientific findings into practice is also a mission to promote evidence-based ventures and to translate practical, scientific findings or political ideas from one area of activity to another.

The strengths and weaknesses of evidence-based evaluation metrics were discussed in panel IV. It was a common sense, there are no really comprehensive evaluated programs and that a lot of projects and measures do not have enough financial resources to implement an appropriate evaluation. Therefore, policy has to take into consideration the needs of practices, their proximity to the society and the economic conditions to forestall divergence.

A further aspect, which was repeatedly addressed, is the role and the perspective of the policy. Firstly, evaluation are difficult in connection to financial funding and implementation of CVE measures, but policy provides the conditions for evaluation efforts. Secondly, political decisions and activities have often an indirect impact on practice. For example decisions regarding refugee arrangements or the access to safety-related information can promote or destroy support aspirations. The most important difficulty which impedes the evaluation of the impact or effectiveness of prevention measures is not the existence of relevant data foundations, it is the access. All actors have to handle with most sensitive data, the not existence of the continuous record of working processes and the slight endowment with financial, personnel and material resources impede the building of an scientific standard appropriated data foundation. In addition, there are no long-term evaluation of measures and programs and appropriate metrics, which allows the deduction of consolidated risk and protective factors.

Practical experiences are an important source for the implementation and development of programs and measures and it is worthy to take a gander at measures and key factors in this field of work. Panel V focuses these thoughts.

Firstly, the use of Counter Narratives is a crucial element of prevention work. It was expressed that these Narratives are a natural way to face extremist ideas. One reason is that norms and values are important for everyday life, because they are structuring aids to understand and organize reality. During the panel the statement was also expressed that most conclusive strategies are made by former extremist people. But it has to take into consideration that there are no scientifically

validated knowledge about the efficiency of Counter Narratives in short or long-term.

Besides Narratives, prevention and intervention measures have to take into account the importance of the definition of precise objectives, more precisely the existence of operationalizable items and aims, an extensive knowledge of social and political circumstances, continuity of mentoring and cooperation with other actors.

One field of practical work, which came into view, is the prevention of radicalization in the World Wide Web. The most relevant aspect of panel VI was that the WWW provides several possibilities to spread extremist ideas, for instance the influence of individuals by people in social networks. The design and language of ideological ideas in the web are aligned with the interests of the youth. Emotionalizing elements like children and pain, visual effect-intensive films, youth appealing or everyday life topics are only some examples. Approaches range from the personal addressing in social networks, in compliance with the strategies which are used by the opponents till the examination of contents of websites or prohibition. Like panel V, the personal devotion was favoured by all discussing people.

Conclusions and further considerations

Central challenges of the coming years will be to deal with the changing phenomenon or new developments as well as the decimation of the impact of extremist groups in the long term. There are still a lot of unexplained questions and several starting points, but the panels of the international conference PV&E´17 "Countering Violent Extremism: Building an evidence-base for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism" showed that addressing the individual level and the social and local environment are crucial aspects for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism and all aspects are linked with each other. An analysis of the immediate social proximity is further a key element of successful prevention or intervention aspirations and enables "tailor-made solutions" for different conditions like economically disadvantaged regions, urban/rural regions, regions with a high unemployment rate, etc. It also contributes to the changeability and variety of the phenomenon as well as the demand of effective approaches.

If someone can refer to findings of similar conditions, which are made in foreign countries or other kinds of crime prevention areas like right and left wing extremism, amok etc., different developments and challenges can be tackled more effectively or faster. Good prevention needs

therefore collaboration between all actors, for example to transfer the knowledge of sciences into pedagogical, psychological, social units, to respect and integrate the needs of the other actors in the own work. Radicalization is a complex and continuously developing process, which needs the participation of different fields of work and a clear definition of the role and the responsibilities of each actor. Moreover, it is important to develop a trustful relationship and system of a permanent exchange between different actors like Muslim communities, social workers, local authorities etc.

Further on, there are different kinds of dependences and obligations between practice, policy and science. Practitioners, scientists and policy makers have special tasks which enable successful prevention and intervention, but it requires patience and perseverance to implement adequate relationships and structures as well as priority setting.

Therefore, it is also important to build a network with representatives of different actor in the field of prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. Policy makers, practitioners and scientist have to share, discuss and disclose their views, competences, finding and possibilities to build a solid foundation for prevention and intervention and have to think about the role and the integration in prevention enforces of the society.

Communication and exchange by itself do not make solid prevention work but enables possibilities to develop cooperation structures, which can be tapped, if required. There are also often interdependences and similarities between partly very heterogeneous kinds of extremism and crime prevention.

In this context, it raises questions of a suitable and organised communication structure for the conference and between the different actors in the field of the prevention of violence and extremism in common. How should communication be designed? Do we need a kind of translation service between the different players? Which communication platforms should be used (also in reference to the addressed target group)? How could a transfer of information and findings be enabled (documentation of the discussed issues, structure of the conference, development of database etc.)?

It also needs cultural and religious understanding as well as the willingness to accept and give appropriate critic. To reduce the threat of terrorism and (political) violence effectively and to develop a sustainable foundation for prevention, policy makers, researcher and practitioner need space to discuss, regional, national and international solutions and challenges as mentioned above.

Measures which influence individuals with the aim to forestall or avoid extremist behaviour operate with protective or risk factors, which are also relevant for other kinds of crime or violence. In contrast to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) applied at a juncture where violent or ideological factors are not manifested at all. It is a more positivist approach than CVE, which refers to a reactive concept and relates not or less to terrorism or national security policy. Therefore, the name of the conference is changed to "Prevention of Violence and Extremism".

Henceforth, the abbreviation "PV6E" invites to think about the ordinary meaning of "PVE" and to the 'smooth side' of tackling violence and extremism, but the addition "&" implicit the meaning "Preventing Violence & Extremism" and looks also to other actors and fields of violence. Existing structures of early support, social work, counselling etc. also promote the implementation, development and work of measures. Experiences in the field of violence against the elderly and children, gender based violence, violence in sport, radicalization etc. are valuable resources and closely linked with PVE/CVE and these approaches enables to address different perspectives like the local/regional/national/international, structural perspective etc.

Therefore, the conference wants to provide a framework to promote the exchange of international and interdisciplinary knowledge and facilitates participants to present and discuss innovative and promising approaches, methods and findings and to extend their networks and competences for countering violence and extremism.

To ensure the mentioned requirements, the conference has to continue and to broaden the content focus as mentioned above and has further to develop and provide different formats to get in contact with each other. Panels with enough time for topic related aspects of different contributors followed by a discussion which will also be opened for all participants. A poster exhibition which enables to display projects, approaches or ideas in a compact format, possibilities for being together in an informal setting as well as workshops should extent the previous concept.

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