BRaVE

Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation

The Role of Cultural and Historical Factors in Polarisation and Violent Extremism

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This discussion paper looks at the role that Cultural and Historical factors play in making individuals more likely to engage in actions associated with polarisation and violent extremism, as well as considering resilience-building responses built around developing alternative narratives. Historical and Cultural factors focus on issues concerned with individual identity, community heritage and interaction, as well as national democratic and legal practice. Based on the BRaVE Concept Paper and project research, several such factors were identified as making societies particularly prone to polarisation and enabling violent extremism (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). In response, resilience building efforts were identified that offered alternative narratives to polarisation and violent extremism. These can be utilised against Far Right and Islamist forms of extremism by engaging different resilience factors, dependent on the organisation and context.

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The BRaVE Project

BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) is a European research project bringing together researchers and stakeholders with a view to understanding which factors drive polarisation and violent extremism in European societies, as well as identify strategies in response that build resilient communities. It aims to systematise existing knowledge and assess the impact of policies and practices in preventing extreme ideologies and polarisation in European societies.

The project surveys relevant policies, programmes and research projects on the national, European and international level aiming at counteracting polarisation and violent extremism. Using this review of current approaches, it designs and builds a set of Polarisation Indicators, which will be discussed and refined through stakeholder workshops. It will particularly focus on the role of three sets of factors in providing fertile ground for extremism and polarisation to grow, or conversely in helping to build resilient and cohesive communities: historical and cultural factors; real and perceived socio-economic inequalities; and media discourses, particularly social media communication 'bubbles'.

The project will create an analytical framework that helps us understand processes of violent extremism and polarisation both towards the Far Right and religiously justified radicalisation. It will create relevant policy indicators on polarisation to assess trends on national and European-wide levels. It will also produce key insights and policy recommendations on the use of interfaith and intercultural education, arts and sports, with a special focus on youth, to build resilient communities and prevent polarisation.

BRaVE is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI), Italy. The lead researcher for the project is Dr Richard McNeil-Willson, also based at the lead partner organisation, European University Institute, Italy. Other consortium members include: Professor Maura Conway from Dublin City University; Professor Paul Taylor from the Lancaster University; Professor Andrea Kizsan, Dr Zsuzsanna Vidra and Michael Zeller from the Central European University, Hungary and Austria; Professor Harald Weilnböck and Oliver Kossack from Cultures Interactive, Germany; Robin Sclafani, director of a Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI), Belgium; and Oskar Baksalary of ITTI, Poland. The BRaVE Project is scheduled for completion in 2021.

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www.brave-h2020.eu

BRaVE – Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation

Discussion Paper Text

1. An Overview of Historical and Cultural Factors

1.1 Historical Factors

Historical factors account for national historical and political trends, particularly how minority communities and political groups have been framed and treated by majority and governing groups (McNeil-Willson et al. 2019). Politically disenfranchised individuals and groups often feel powerless and resentful of their lack of agency in remediating social disadvantage (Grossman et al. 2017). In such situations, group violence become a more attractive means of redressing perceived inequalities. The laws protecting minority groups also impact on polarisation, as states with limited or less consistently enforced hate crime and minority rights legislation are more likely to legitimise racism and community division. Individual voting behaviours are also deemed relevant, as the likelihood of significant voting for populist parties or policies can stoke community division and trigger polarisation processes.

1.2 Cultural Factors

Whereas historical factors look at the relationship between the state and the individual/community, cultural factors focus on how the individual citizens conceptualise their identity within communities and the state. Articulations of identity that failed to transcend narrow, national or regional conceptualisations were understood as conducive to polarisation, with such identities exclusionary by design, hostile to alternative cultural or faith communities, and framed as in direct competition with, and threatened by, coexistence with other identities. Feelings of hostility towards outgroups were also bound up with feelings of victimhood and humiliation – powerful narratives of polarisation and means of maintaining attachment to extremist groups (Klandermans and Mayer 2005; Khosrokhavar 2017).

2. Resilience Building

2.1 Cultural Resilience Factors

In terms of responding to cultural factors through the developing of resilience, complex and flexible cultural identity (bridging capital), as well as family support, collective identity and community purpose has been found to be important steps (Grossman and Tahiri 2013). Support for parental and family involvement in education are other important protective resources (Weine 2017). Without extra-local connections or 'bridging capital', 'a community runs the risk of missing out on the knowledge, resources and skills available in other networks.' This may lead to feelings of isolation (Grossman et al. 2017).

Mere exposure to cultural difference or otherness is not sufficient to constitute 'bridging capital' – there must be an inter-cultural exchange of resources that are seen to benefit both or all groups before bridging capital can be established (Grossman et al. 2017). Interaction of complex and flexible cultural identities is thus vital to building resilience to the vulnerabilities caused by polarisation. Securitisation of 'suspect communities' (Choudhury and Fenwick 2011; Qureshi 2014) can shut down complexity by reducing genuine interaction and reproducing negative perceptions of minorities. Resilience building initiatives should therefore promote the conviviality of different cultural groups.

For all people, at a micro level, sense of belonging is a vital protective resource. Indeed, scholars have identified the need to be part of something as a key factor in motivating people to join violent extremist organisations (Barelle 2014). Building resilience to vulnerabilities that result from polarisation will likely require greater educational resources that address what it means to belong in the 21st Century where diversity/pluralisms and intersectional belongings are the norm.

2.2 Historical Resilience Factors

Historical factors play a role in shaping perceptions of national and cultural identity, or who belongs in a particular community. The ways in which history is narrated in schools, and represented in public discourse, can shape understandings of nationhood and determine the extent to which nations accommodate different cultural groups and faiths.

Weine and Ahmed's (Weine and Ahmed 2012) research with Somali communities in the United States identified a series of protective resources that can shape historical factors. These included interfaith dialogue, religious education, youth civic engagement, youth political dialogue, opportunities for peacebuilding and messaging to challenge the legitimacy of violent extremism. In addition, rational and argumentative approaches to convince youth to reject extreme ideologies are less effective than engaging young people in an inclusive dialogue about national issues which includes a discussion of their desire for national pride and related emotions (Miller-Idriss 2012). RAN practitioners point to the importance of addressing the 'middle ground' which is vanishing to the advantage of the extremes and enhancing the commonalities and shared histories and identities in preventing and mitigating polarisation (Lenos et al. 2017).

Sense of purpose is also important to developing resilience, and can be found through adaptive as well as maladaptive means, depending on the resources available. Inter-culturally sensitive democratic organisations that provide people with dignity and purpose are thus critical to the project of building resilience to vulnerabilities caused by polarisation, and have been shown to create relevant community and social support in mitigating vulnerabilities associated with isolation, psychological stress and poor mental health.

3. Building Cultural and Historical Resilience

Responding to violence and polarisation caused by Islamist-inspired and far-right ideologies, whilst involving similar processes in some respect, involves the actioning of different factors and mechanisms. This can be seen in the identification of certain macro- and meso-level factors (for instance, far-right political influence, laws protecting minorities, lack of representation or ignorance of minority communities) that are more likely to negatively impact on minority groups whilst enabling violence from majority groups. As such, it is important to consider responses to the Islamist and far-right violence that account for the different way in which the BRaVE factors operate with regards to different groups and in differing contexts.

3.1 The Far Right

Constructing responses to the far-right require recognition that mechanisms used by far-right groups to stoke polarisation and violent extremism are more likely to be linked to majority articulations of power. Certainly, in Europe and the West, far-right groups stress the primacy of majority (White) communities against minority groups and may attempt to encourage mainstream political actors to support elements of their discourse and policy. This may be picked up by populist right-wing parties, potentially creating processes of legitimisation by more

mainstream politicians. Such patterns of discourses could lead to: the creation of hardened national/majority identities; the delegitimisation of minority groups in society; and the securitisation of migration and minorities.

One of the central issues surrounding the rise of the far-right is the rise of an exclusionary identity. These present national identity as bound up with race or racial characteristics, as well as exceptionalising certain traits or beliefs as being particularly or exclusively linked to certain nationalities (and not to others). This may delegitimise the existence of opposing opinions and minority communities, creating an inherent hostility against those seen as challenging national or majority supremacy. Responses therefore need to stress inclusive aspects of national identity and aim to diminish racialised or essentialist readings of national identity. Stressing international links can help to build international bonds, as well as engagement across different communities and nationalities – however, it is important that such internationalism is not seen as diminishing or acting in competition with national identities.

Minorities face attack by far-right groups, who attempt to draw fractious ingroup/outgroup divisions. Stressing the long history of cultural exchange and community interaction and integration may help to respond to the delegitimisation of minority communities, such as the long history of faiths such as Judaism and Islam in Europe, and how they have contributed to European development and national history. This can be done through historical articulations of interfaith and interculturalism. Stressing the dangers that have resulted from exclusionary identities in 20th Century history may also act as a powerful alternative narrative to the securitisation of minorities and the framing of minority communities and migration as threatening.

Engagement with the validation of national identity as disconnected from grievance is important for building resilience against the far-right, as extremist groups will often attempt to frame majority communities as operating in a zero-sum balance with minority groups or other national communities. This constructed threat helps to maintain a narrative of being constantly under attack, which is used to act as a motivator for individuals to engage in violent forms of activism. Open, inclusive national identities, awareness of the rich interplay of different communities, faiths and ideas in history, the traditional fluidity of borders and the recent construction of the nation state may be helpful in removing some far-right credibility and support. By stressing the inclusive nature of the state, its history and the advantages of cultural exchange, credible responses to the far-right can be developed.

Programmes exploring the importance of political diversity may also be powerful strategies in supporting a flexible identity and an international outlook. Discussions over the role that different elements of governance, the judiciary and the legislature may show both the complexity of political systems and give young people means of better understanding how to access levels of change at a local and national level, empowering them and preventing disillusionment with the democratic practice. This also breaks down and prevents the further development of monolithic political beliefs, making room for diversity of opinion and belief.

3.2 Violent Islamism

Whereas responses to the far right need to tackle exclusionary national identity and critically respond to discourses and policies that potentially delegitimise minority communities, responses to violent formations of Islamism need to focus more on issues of structural inequality, racism and discrimination. Many violent formations of Islamism aim to frame the West and Islam as containing fundamentally incompatible ideologies, as operating in a constant historical clash.

Alternative narratives involve the recognition of structural formations of racism and supporting democratic, intercultural and non-violent responses to them.

Similar practices can be used as with responding to the far-right, in terms of encouraging recognition of the long and positive history of cultural exchange and the continued roles that minorities and intercultural interaction plays in contemporary societies. Interfaith and interculturalism may be particularly useful in this context in not just bringing together minority and majority communities but also supporting interaction across different minority communities or communities that share the same beliefs. However, other resilience-building mechanisms can be employed which discuss national and international events and aim to provide solutions to minority inequality through positive forms of activism. Recognising the role of structures in inequality may also help to shift focus away from individuals and towards engagement with democratic practices.

4. Discussion Questions

4.1 Culture: The role of Interfaith and Interculturalism

- What is the current role of interfaith in responding to violent extremism and polarisation?
- What role does faith play in the modern world and how can we ensure interfaith and interculturalism appeals to all young people?
- How can we better encourage flexible conceptualisations of cultural identities using interaction and practice?

History: Engaging with Historical Events

- How do we address difficult historical events that may cause conflict?
- What can we learn from past atrocities and how can these be best used to tackle drivers of polarisation and violent extremism?
- What is the role of historical projects, such as interviews or engaging with archives?

Politics: Addressing Political Inequalities

- How can we best encourage young people to learn more about accessing politics as a means of responding to frustrations?
- How can political programmes be used to break down divisive and polarising narratives?
- What are the existing political inequalities that we need to be aware of when doing this and how to do we avoid acting to inadvertently enable polarisation.

Education: Developing educational approaches

- What is the role of educational institutions and programmes in creating alternative narratives?
- How can we best support educators to recognise and respond to polarisation and violent extremism?
- How can we best support students to recognise and respond to polarisation and violent extremism and how do student-focussed/led and educator-focussed/led approaches differ?

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