

POLICY BRIEF

Preventing Violent Extremism: A Delicate Balance

Introduction

Violent extremism poses a serious challenge for many countries. **In Europe, two types of violent extremism dominate policy discussions: right-wing and jihadist.** A variety of strategies are employed to prevent these kinds of extremists from engaging in violent acts. At the same time different methods are used to make communities more resilient to extremism. This brief explores such CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) and PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) policy approaches in ten European countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. We flag ones that have proved problematic and highlight those regarded as most promising. We identify options for making interventions against violent extremism more effective and efficient while avoiding common pitfalls. Our recommendations are aimed at helping governments, civil society actors and other stakeholders to design and implement more successful CVE and PVE programmes.

The ten countries we investigated offer many examples of **promising practices** in the field. The main features of such practices can be summarised as:

- focusing on all dimensions of social exclusion when attempting to target extremism through social integration
- promoting cooperation among governmental bodies and different policy fields
- establishing partnerships between all stakeholders

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- giving priority to personalised approaches
- promoting democratic values while avoiding assimilationist tones
- recognising that fighting far-right extremism is best targeted through education focusing on democratic values, human rights, and critical thinking

At the same time all countries studied face similar **problematic practices** when it comes to CVE and PVE policies. These include:

- the “securitisation¹ trap” that stigmatises communities, especially Muslim ones
- a tendency to pay disproportionate attention to jihadist extremism over far-right extremism
- lack of state intervention in policies dealing with far-right extremists
- lack of impact assessment and evaluation of policies and programmes

The following analysis looks separately at policies for tackling jihadist and right-wing violent extremism. For each, it enumerates both promising and problematic approaches to treatment and prevention.

Analysis

Outlined below are key findings from our assessment of nearly 700 policies, programmes and institutions dealing with violent extremism, polarisation, and resilience. Each of these entities was active between 2014 and 2019 in one or more of the ten EU Member States studied. Drawing on existing evaluations - including secondary studies, reports, and interviews - we produced a qualitative meta-synthesis which allowed us to identify promising and problematic anti-jihadist and anti-far-right practices.

Treatment and prevention

Tackling violent extremism requires a double-thrust policy approach: while one thrust targets current manifestations of violent extremism, the other is aimed at reducing the potential for cases to emerge in the future. We refer to these two policy thrusts as **treatment** and **prevention** respectively.

Treatment interventions address people who are already involved in violent extremism or are active in violent extremist milieus. Programmes aimed at

turning such people away from violent extremism must take into account factors believed to drive such behaviour. Confirming previous research, our study found the following factors to be key:

- A conducive environment (‘push’ factors), such as community segregation, relative deprivation or racism, and discrimination
- ‘Pull’ factors such as opportunities to actively redress perceived political injustice, the prospect of a positive reward
- Discourse involving exclusionary identities, mainstream disengagement, and psychological stress
- Mobilising networks presenting charismatic recruiters, online radicalisation activities, and an antagonistic environment

Prevention policies address individuals and groups with latent potential for involvement in violent extremism and associated milieus. Such policies and programmes aim to build *resilient* communities and imbue individuals with skills that make them resilient. These policies promote cohesion and healthy engagement at two levels:

- community level (macro and meso):
 - » community cohesion and support, collective identity, social inclusion
 - » positive political engagement
- individual level (micro):
 - » complex/positive social identity, sense of belonging, pro-social messaging
 - » encouraging online resilience/education

¹ Securitisation refers to the disproportionate emphasis put on the security aspect of migration and minority-related issues and the oversimplification and framing of all social and political problems as a security problem.

Jihadist violent extremism

Promising policies for tackling violent extremism of a jihadist nature

Treatment

In reaching out to individuals already caught up in jihadist violent extremism, effective policies typically address issues surrounding segregation and discrimination. This involves **complex social integration measures** in EXIT-type programmes. De-securitisation is a key condition for success: these programmes can be effective only if they operate independently from national security services.

Disrupting recruiters, facilitators and distributors of jihadist propaganda is essential. This involves **an integral, comprehensive approach** that brings together different governmental bodies and supports partnership at different levels (local, national, and international).

Effective treatment programmes reduce exposure to jihadist discourse which typically propagates exclusionary identities, encourages mainstream disengagement, and produces psychological stress. Such programmes also reduce contact with mobilising networks that offer an antagonistic environment featuring charismatic recruiters and online radicalisation platforms. Helpful policies **build trust** between community members and state authorities through mentoring programmes, building support networks, and involving minority ethnic communities.

With respect to online radicalisation, **multi-faceted action** is needed to address the manifold causes of violent jihadist extremism. Measures promoting principles of equality and citizenship are vital. An integral approach should be taken that includes: public and policy-facing research, a ban on terrorist materials online, rigorous prosecution for those using online terrorist materials with malicious intent, national blocking filters, and adequate mechanisms for the removal of violent online materials.

Prevention

Preventing violent jihadist extremism requires **social, cultural, and political dimensions** being sufficiently aligned to foster **community cohesion** and a sense of collective identity. Social inclusion is key. Steps that can help overcome social exclusion include: gaining knowledge of local cultures of first and second generation migrants; providing new housing opportunities; and building a network of neighbourhood representatives. Community

support is achieved through **partnership between Muslim community members and authorities**, ensuring law enforcement is not regarded as a hostile entity and that Muslim and minority communities have mechanisms of redress against disproportionate actions by authorities. It is important to insure that children can develop a positive identity as active citizens. This helps reduce susceptibility to extremist messages.

Protecting vulnerable citizens against radicalising influences in their environment is very important. Radicalisation awareness programmes can help by creating **networks of stakeholders** (parents, mentors, teachers, and social workers) to spot the signs of violent behaviour and messaging. Programmes strengthening community resilience against hate preaching are generally useful.

Policies preventing violent extremism are supported by inclusive programmes **advocating national values of freedom and democracy**. Where tackling extremism on a wider, cultural level is the main objective, promoting intercultural and interfaith activities can be an important field of intervention.

Encouraging dialogue between Muslim communities and authorities (such as security services) has proven useful. This helps foster a sense of belonging and builds trust in institutions working to prevent violent extremism while steering clear of securitisation traps.

Encouraging dialogue

The 'Dialogue Forum Against Violent Extremism' in Denmark is a good example. Providing a regular forum between Muslim communities and the authorities, it promotes a better understanding among Muslim communities of the role of the intelligence service in countering radicalisation and preventing terrorism. It draws on participants' knowledge of their communities to strengthen preventative approaches and challenge extremist narratives and politics. Authorities encourage voices that are considered extremist to be involved in the 'Dialogue Forum', thereby creating opportunities for positive learning. <http://brave-h2020.eu/database/5d19e096ed4322002828376f>

Fostering political debates and **encouraging counter-narratives** is another effective intervention type. Such measures can embed public acceptance and inclusiveness within the national counterterrorism strategy, engaging civil society in their continued formation and development.

Encouraging counter-narratives

An example is the 'CICERO project' in Italy and Belgium which included investigations into the root causes of terrorism through national consultations and development of an online information portal on issues of radicalisation and jihadist extremism. Another approach emphasises narratives from 'the victim's gaze', using victim testimonies and stories of terrorism to raise awareness and create counter-narratives of positive values ('Counter-Narration for Counter-terrorism', Italy). Counter-narratives promote dialogue, tolerance, peace, non-violence, respect for diversity, and democratic values.

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Facilitating political engagement of youth organisations has also proven helpful. Offering them participation in deliberative bodies or social clubs provides alternatives to common lures toward radicalisation. For individuals at risk of violent radicalisation, it can be valuable to provide anti-radicalisation hotlines, one-to-one mentoring, workshops, discussion groups, and counselling.

Programmes aimed at **boosting self-esteem and self-confidence** among minors and young adults can also be fruitful.

Online resilience policies can have a significant impact as well. This involves **cooperation with educational institutions and parents**: Some of the most effective programmes give targeted support in education and promote greater interaction between municipalities and educational institutions. Other useful programmes seek to strengthen online resilience beyond the youth demographic, broadening the fight against isolation and internet illiteracy by educating mothers about online harms.

Boosting self-esteem and self-confidence

The 'DIAMANT', and 'Brug Over' project in the Netherlands is one example. The importance of boosting self-esteem and confidence is particularly great for those with dual identity conflicts who may be more vulnerable to radicalisation. Such an approach can help young people make a positive choice, boost their self-confidence, and increase capacity for empathy. Negative emotions (such as anger, frustration) can be reduced by cultivating social skills (through training, internship, or work) which in turn can help strengthen family ties. One element of this approach is to provide a safe space in which to discuss difficult or taboo topics such as radicalisation, religion, or homosexuality.

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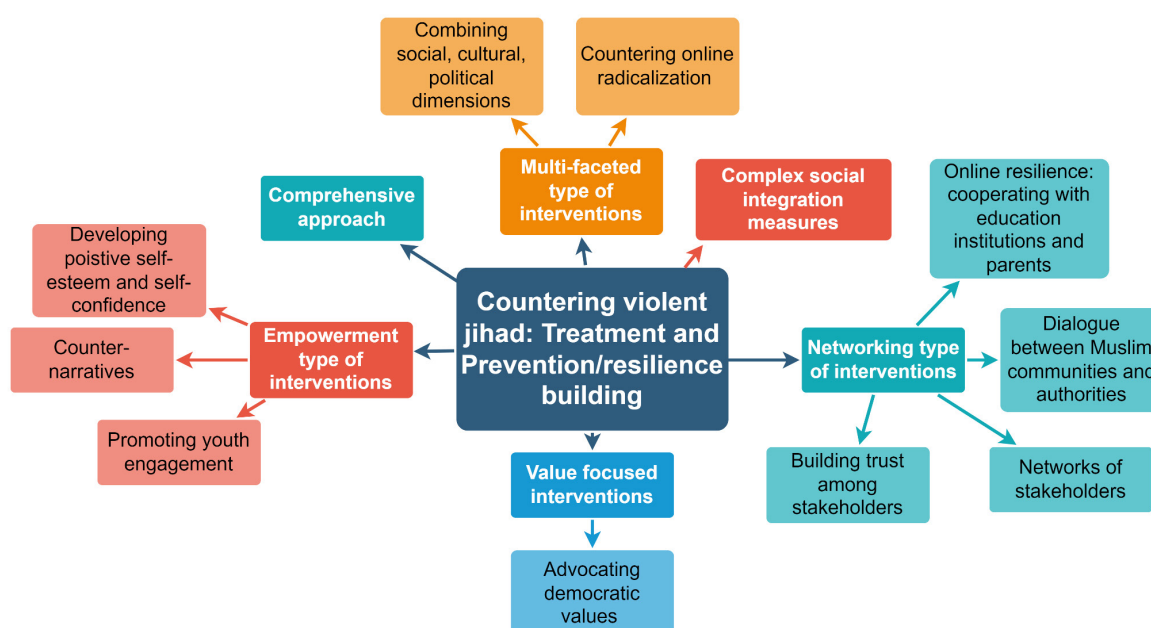


Diagram 1. Countering violent jihad: promising practices (Source: compiled by authors)

Problematic practices in anti-jihadist policies and programmes

If not carefully conceived and executed, efforts to tackle extremist violence of a jihadist nature can be counterproductive. This is particularly true of **security and integration policies**. They **have the potential to further stigmatise Muslims and minority ethnicities**, exacerbating their marginalisation and enhancing susceptibility to radicalisation.

Protocols used to detect jihadists in the immigration process, for instance, risk stigmatising certain groups, thereby compounding stimuli to radicalise. This is relevant for immigration services, reception agencies and repatriation services. A concrete example is found in the 'reporting structure' protocol used to detect signs of links to jihadism in the Netherlands.

Some community support programmes (e.g., *'Fighting for Peace and Resilient Kurdish Communities'*, both in the Netherlands) sporadically fall into securitisation traps. CVE approaches that single out members of minority ethnic communities can have a polarising influence on society, lending credence to right-wing extremists by reinforcing 'immigration-crime-terrorism' tropes.

In some countries problems have resulted from importing inappropriate security frameworks. The Act on Anti-Terrorist Actions in Poland is an example of this. Driven by considerations of EU-wide policy alignment, wholesale adoption of security frameworks from other countries overlook issues that are particular to individual states and local contexts.

Integration policies themselves can inadvertently have a stigmatising effect. The *'Fighting for Peace and Resilient Kurdish Communities'* policies in the Netherlands or the *'One Denmark without Parallel Societies: No Ghettos in 2030'* policy are cases in point. The programmes were found to have fostered stigmatisation, having a negative mental health impact on children. Furthermore, the labelling of a location as a 'ghetto area' has diminished job seeking opportunities for those individuals residing there.

In some instances, immigration staff and frontline professionals have been given ambiguous guidelines for detecting jihadists, which has spawned **racial profiling** practices by state agents. This does little to deter jihadists and much to further a sense among Muslims and minority ethnicities that they are members of a suspect class.

In some cases, revocation of citizenship and **deportation practices** (e.g., Article 14 of the 2018 Decree Law, in Italy) have proven problematic. Such practices have been condemned as human rights violations, rendering some people stateless.

Targeting charismatic figures who seek to recruit people to jihadist violence can have unintended negative consequences as well. An example is found in Denmark's *'Radical Preacher' or 'Imam' Law* (i.e., Law 50: Amendment to the Aliens Act 2016). The legislation may have bolstered **the power of the authorities to deal with clerics seen as promoting hate or anti-national sentiments**. But it also restricted immigration laws, significantly affecting non-violent Islamic organisations.

In several countries, an over-emphasis on combatting jihadist extremism has led to a chronic **underestimation of threats from far-right violent extremism**. Islamist terrorism garners official attention even in countries where there is hardly any Muslim population and no apparent Islamic extremism. This sometimes creates excessive space for far-right mobilisation and terrorist action.

Furthermore, policies targeting segregation (e.g., *'One Denmark without Parallel Societies: No Ghettos in 2030'*) are criticised for their strong **assimilationist overtones**.

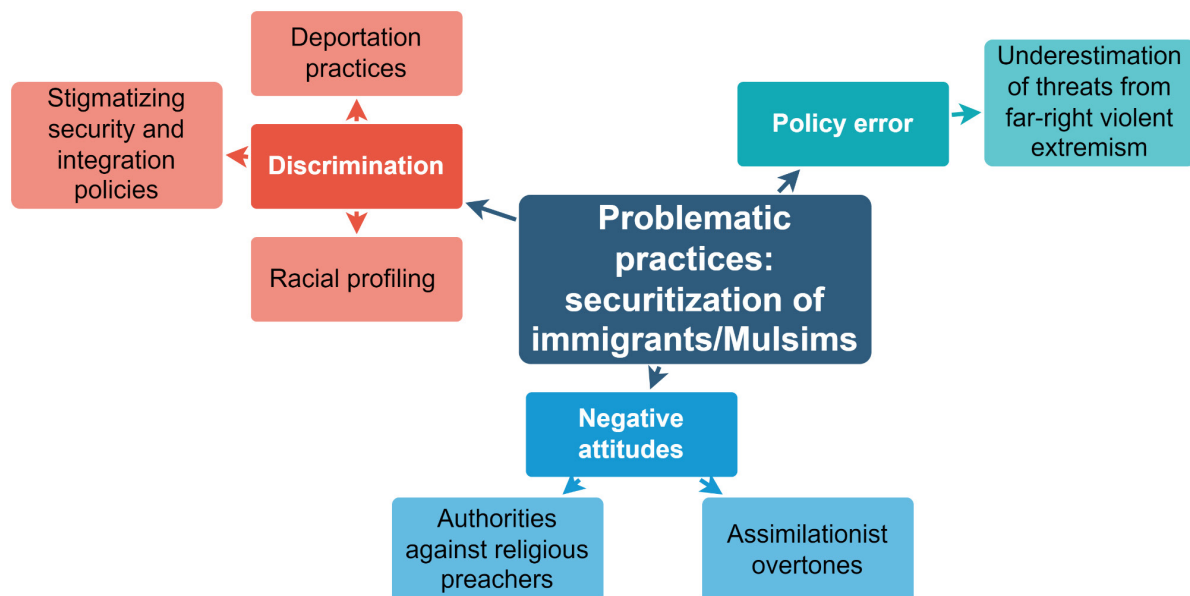


Diagram 2. Countering violent jihad: problematic practices (Source: compiled by authors)

Far-right extremist violence

Promising practices in addressing Right-wing Violent Extremism

Treatment

When it comes to turning individuals away from right-wing extremist violence, two practices stand out as most promising. One of these – known as the Group-focused Enmity (GFE) approach – centres on **anti-racism and anti-discrimination**. This approach involves disrupting the culture of racism and segregation, creating a conducive non-discriminatory environment. In certain sports, for example, holistic approaches in this vein have proven effective, also by leveraging the cultural capital of professional athletes.

The second effective treatment practice observed in this area targets **online hate speech**. Such speech typically advocates exclusionary identities and mainstream disengagement, and creates psychological stress. It operates in a network of antagonism that includes charismatic far-right recruiters pursuing online radicalisation. Effective anti-radicalisation programmes in this area encourage internet users to report illicit online content and behaviour via a dedicated online portal. They also feature national cybercrime investigation units that oversee these activities and are empowered to deal with content or activity deemed potentially illegal.

Prevention

Programmes aimed at preventing right-wing extremist violence typically focus on teaching **democratic values and human rights**. Projects seeking to increase historical knowledge are noteworthy. These include the *Territories of Memory* (Belgium) initiative that teaches about the Nazi era, for example, in order to make links with modern-day human rights issues.

Projects encouraging positive **dialogue** can also have an impact. These generally proffer a human rights paradigm as a means of confronting extremism ideologically. Providing tools and training for engagement in dialogue, they support constructive and empathetic ways of approaching conversations online and offline. They also create safe spaces in which individuals can be heard and allowed to discuss their views frankly. Some of these projects are part of school-based resilience programmes. They provide students with training and a forum in which to address discrimination and violence in the school environment.

Fact-checking initiatives can also be useful in fighting disinformation propagated by right-wing extremists. These can be effective in fighting fake news, debunking erroneous news stories, and confirming the veracity of legitimate stories. Such initiatives are especially important in countries targeted by foreign manipulation such as Poland.

Programmes that **build capacity to recognise and resist right-wing extremist ideas** can be effective as well. This approach seeks to cultivate positive social identity, engender a sense of belonging, and increase familiarity with pro-social messaging. 'Dissociation strategies' are applied to give young people the skills to recognise right-wing extremist ideas within their subculture and social networks. They also initiate discourses and processes of dissociation from extremes. Important elements in such programmes include creating bonds and encouraging a critical mind-set when evaluating information.

Encouraging young people to develop greater critical faculties is the focal point of some useful educational programmes.

Capacity building to recognise and resist right-wing extremist ideas

'The Way We See', 'Brown Eyes Blue Eyes' (BEBE), and the Anne Frank Stichting projects in the Netherlands help young people to develop an openness to different opinions and to speak earnestly about those differences. The point is to inoculate them against extremist ideology by enabling them to identify its messaging.

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Other programmes achieve results by concentrating on **empowerment**. These often work with victims of discrimination, providing training to recognise oppression not only on the personal and cultural levels, but also on the institutional level. Skills are taught for combatting violence, discrimination, and oppression effectively.

Finally, practices that promote anti-racist education through the arts can help in fighting right-wing extremist violence. Music and other arts provide excellent media for opposing racism and emphasising the equality of all people. **Arts-based activities** are generally very useful in promoting intercultural communication.

Problematic practices in dealing with far-right extremism

While effective policies for fighting right-wing extremist violence are available, countries often make insufficient use of them. In Hungary, for example, there is no robust initiative to prevent radicalisation. A smattering of NGO projects address offline and online radicalisation, but these are isolated and uncoordinated. **Failure to establish and implement initiatives that combat right-wing extremism** is a significant problem.

Moreover, **coordination and protocols are often lacking in policies targeting far-right hate crime and hate speech**. This partly explains the inadequacy of measures in countries such as Greece and Hungary. Lack of coordination and clear protocols can result in laws being misinterpreted, leading police not to classify incidents as hate crime and leaving offences unprosecuted. This is an obstacle to efficient implementation of policy.

In some countries (such as Hungary and Poland) there is a pronounced **lack of online hate speech policies** targeting right-wing extremism. Political considerations are sometimes placed above national security interests in determining what content is considered extremist. In such circumstances it is difficult to target actual sources of right-wing extremism.

There are also cases where **far-right extremism is not systematically monitored**. The task of monitoring initiatives on far-right extremism is sometimes left to civil society actors (such as '*Brown Book*' in Poland, '*Golden Dawn Watch*' in Greece, and the *Action and Protection Foundation* in Hungary). The vital information they gather may not get integrated into agenda-setting and policy development processes. The impact of these activities therefore tends to be low.

Finally, efforts to counter far-right extremism in some countries are weakened by a **narrow definition of national identity** (Hungary) and **officially sanctioned historical narratives that exacerbate polarising tendencies** (e.g., the *Act on the Institute of National Remembrance* in Poland). Instead of promoting resilience, these conditions can foster xenophobia and intolerance toward minorities and arouse feelings of political injustice, thus increasing potential for radicalisation. This trend is often reinforced in such countries by a lack of education on democratic values and human rights. NGOs may seek to counteract these trends with some small-scale projects, but their impact is often limited.

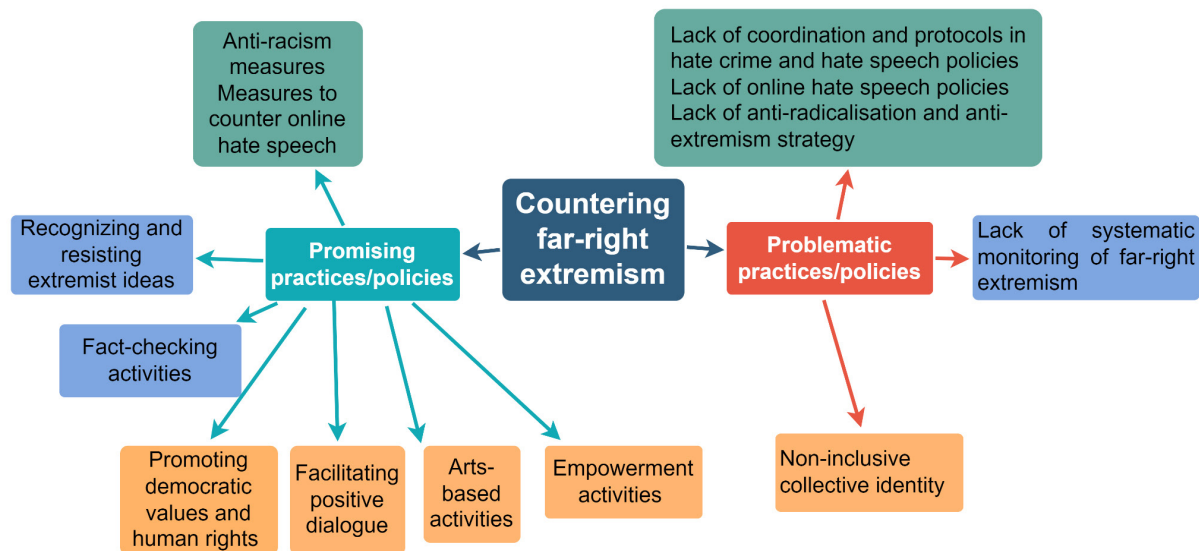


Diagram 3. Countering far-right extremism (Source: compiled by authors)

Recommendations

1. In combatting jihadist violent extremism, it is important to focus on social integration and employ measures that address the multiple dimensions of social exclusion (social, cultural, and political).
2. In general, take an integrated, comprehensive approach that enables governmental bodies to cooperate horizontally as well as vertically. Develop measures that span different policy fields and coordinate them.
3. In tackling jihadist extremism, take steps to build trust between community members and state authorities. This will help ensure that policies do not sow resentment among affected individuals and groups. Aim for a broad partnership between state authorities, civil society, educational institutions, municipalities, and community members.
4. In programmes targeting groups at risk of radicalisation, adopt personalised approaches and provide direct support.
5. Develop programmes that promote the principles of equality and citizenship and the values of freedom and democracy, while avoiding forceful assimilationist tones. Consider supporting intercultural and interfaith activities along these lines and facilitating mediated political debates that engage people from differing ideological camps.
6. Steer clear of securitisation traps that stigmatise minorities, disrespect the human rights of whole groups, and incur collateral damage (such as negatively impacting Islamic community organisations).
7. Avoid prioritising jihadist radicalisation disproportionately over far-right extremism. Securitisation typically reinforces immigration-crime-terrorism tropes and thereby fuels far-right extremism.
8. Counter far-right extremism with educational initiatives that focus on democratic values and human rights and teach critical thinking. Seek to educate non-radicalised (but potentially vulnerable) individuals and facilitate constructive dialogue with far-right extremists. Remember that in many cases the ability to recognise extremist ideas is a prerequisite for resisting their radicalising influence.
9. Assure that the state mobilises sufficient resources to fight far-right extremism actively and does not relegate the responsibility entirely to NGOs. Assure that positive national prevention programmes are in place.
10. Ensure that policies and programmes targeting extremism are sufficiently monitored and evaluated. Produce reliable data on effectiveness and use it for developing policies and programmes moving forward.

This policy paper was produced as part of the Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) project, funded by the European Commission Horizon2020 programme and active from 2019 to 2021. The BRaVE project brought together academics and stakeholders to understand factors that drive polarisation and violent extremism in Europe, as well as identify strategies in response that build resilient communities. It did this through mapping levels of polarisation, resilience and counterextremism practice in ten European countries, as well as exploring 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'. From this research, a series of articles, handbooks and policy papers were produced, to support stakeholders from across Europe and beyond, including this policy paper. BRaVE was coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI), Italy, with the support of seven European consortium partners.

For more information on BRaVE and to access resources produced as part of the project, visit the website: www.brave-h2020.eu

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