

Researching on radicalisation and violent extremism in times of COVID-19

Friday, 27th November 2020

BACKGROUND NOTE

INTRODUCTION, SEMINAR METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

In times when uncertainty is the norm and social distance is more a rule for survival than for etiquette, inter-disciplinary, cross-regional and collaborative research projects are more at a stake than ever. Adaptation to such complex times is an essential measure to mitigate the risk of setting a research isolated from the scholar, practitioner and policy-maker circles not directly involved in CONNEKT. Therefore, what was initially conceived as an Academic Seminar to discuss CONNEKT's theoretical and conceptual framework has evolved into a unique opportunity to share with external actors, experts, community-led practitioners and policy-makers our main concerns regarding the gaps in researching radicalisation and violent extremism.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic at its initial phase, CONNEKT needs to adapt to current restriction measures on mobility and social interactions that might alter the envisaged research methodologies. How empirical research is going to depend on COVID-19 evolution, both globally and locally, and how to adapt methodologies to the new settings? Bridging the gap left by the absence of personal physical interactions among researchers, among researchers and participants and among participants themselves, will require methodological elasticity and creative approaches in order to find spaces for discussion, interaction and exchange, both in formal and informal settings. This Seminar is precisely an attempt to create a first informal discussion setting where researchers, stakeholders and policy-makers can connect and interact in a fluid environment.

Therefore, no initial presentations are expected from participants, beyond some personal reflections on the project and the challenges exposed. The parallel sessions will provide a space for discussion within the frame of each level of analysis (macro, meso and micro) and the short time allocated is meant to provide a vivid and concise brainstorming of ideas, questions and concerns that will serve to prepare the ground for the next research stages.



However, and more importantly, COVID-19 has an impact on the daily lives of all participants involved, adding new variables to the equation that the project intends to understand: What drives young people to radicalisation and violent extremism in the MENA and Balkan regions? Is the pandemic a new emerging driver or does it intensify or interact with other socio-economic, religious or technological drivers?

There is growing literature on how violent groups are seizing the pandemic to enhance their capabilities, both in recruiting and operating. At the same time, restrictions and exceptional laws lead to a legitimate concern on the potential harmful effects they have on the freedoms and liberties of citizens, which become much more acute in fragile or authoritarian settings. Polarisation of the political spectrum, instrumentalisation of the pandemic and the increase of intolerance and socio-economic divides as a result of the crisis are signals that the equation to understand the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism might become far more complicated in the near future.

This is why CONNEKT wants to turn this practical and intellectual challenge into an opportunity to enrich the process and the results of the research by adapting to the context and reaching out to a diversity of voices from experts, researchers, stakeholders and policy-makers.

After four parallel sessions, devoted to discussing the seven pre-determined drivers of radicalisation and VE from the macro (national and transnational), meso (community) and micro (individual) levels and a fourth one dealing with prevention, a joint debate will address the fundamental question of the repercussions for the European Union. Involving particularly policy-makers and other institutional representatives that constitute potential targets of CONNEKT's research results, the final session will express expectations, needs and potential applications of CONNEKT's research engaging them into providing a particular EU perspective.

The objective of this seminar is not finding answers and solutions, but raising the proper questions that need to conduct CONNEKT's research all along the next phases, taking into account what we already know, what is new or unexpected, what is already being analysed and what are the main gaps, concerns and needs that should be addressed within the study of the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in MENA and the Balkans.

CONNEKT AT A GLIMPSE

What is CONNEKT?

CONNEKT (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies) is a Horizon 2020 EU-funded research project that explores the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism among young people aged from 12 to 30 to improve prevention.



CONNEKT will allow youths to be a strong voice not only as a subject of study but also as stakeholders in the response. The fieldwork research and dynamics explored will shed light on the specific challenges affecting them. By engaging young people in the discussion, design and implementation processes, their views and knowledge will contribute to the quality and appropriation of results.

Who is involved?

The project is carried out by an interdisciplinary team comprising 14 partners from 12 countries, including universities, think tanks, civil society actors and local authorities.

[European Institute of the Mediterranean](#)

A think tank on Euro-Mediterranean relations.

[The American University Cairo](#)

Benchmark university in the Arab world.

[Generations For Peace](#)

NGO dedicated to the field of peace-building based in Amman (Jordan).

[Jasmine Foundation](#)

A think and do tank that uses the social sciences to analyse challenges facing society and create innovative solutions. Based in Tunis.

[University Moulay Ismail](#)

Created in 1982 in Meknes, today it is one of the most outstanding universities in Morocco.

[University of Sarajevo](#)

Through its Faculty of Social Sciences, it is outstanding in the field of political science, international relations, security and peace studies, and has direct knowledge of the reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans.

[Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development](#)

Founded in 2002, it was the first think tank established in Kosovo after the war. It focuses its research on public policies in good governance, security, political participation processes, and the construction of reliable public institutions.

[The Macedonian Academy of Sciences](#)

The most important academic institution in the Republic of North Macedonia.

[Islamic Youth Forum](#)

An NGO created in 2000 in Skopje, Macedonia, which works to promote universal human values among young people.



[The Center for the Study of Democracy](#)

Independent organisation, a leader in social research and policy analysis in Europe and the Balkans based in Bulgaria.

[Université Libre de Bruxelles](#)

Through GERME (Groupe de recherche sur les Relations Ethniques, les Migrations et l'Egalité), the university research group that studies inclusion and exclusion processes in contexts of social diversity and economic inequalities.

[University of Graz](#)

One of the largest and oldest universities in Austria with proven experience in networking with Balkan research centres and civil society.

[Universitat Rovira i Virgili](#)

A public and modern university, based in Tarragona, committed to providing solutions to the challenges of today's societies through knowledge generation.

[Euromed Cities Network](#)

A network of 150 EU and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean cities, committed to cross-border cooperation.

When will it take place?

During three years and a half, until mid- 2023.

Where is research targeting?

Fieldwork will be conducted in eight countries from the MENA region and the Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, Jordan, Kosovo, Morocco, North Macedonia, and Tunisia.

Why CONNEKT?

Because notwithstanding the innovative approaches and the growing interest on civil society approaches to radicalisation, there has been no attempt to address all different levels of drivers – transnational, territorial, community-based or individual – in a combined manner so that the balance and weight of each of these drivers in the radicalisation equation are identified. Conversely, the interplay between different drivers analysed from different axis of analysis – supra-state, state, community and individual levels- would be able to provide very valuable information on conducive environments in which radicalisation processes might take place and thus be prevented. The goal is designing better-targeted solutions in the field of prevention.

And how?

CONNEKT is an interdisciplinary collaborative project that combines research and action through a building-blocks methodology which allows the findings from one phase to inform research and data analysis for the following phases at key milestones.



Research Working Packages have been organized to allow each step of the project to build on previous ones.

Research relies on qualitative, quantitative and empirical methodologies to build a consistent and comprehensive picture of the studied reality.

Gender, youth and social perceptions and expectations will be cross-cutting axis of analysis throughout the whole research and intervention stages.

Work Plan

Phase 1 - Conceptualisation

A critical review of the literature will be done to establish the conceptual approach to radicalisation and Violent Extremism as well as map past and current policies and strategies tackling Violent Extremism in EU, MENA and Balkans.

In depth semi-structured interviews complemented with direct, face-to-face or phone interviews to relevant stakeholders as well as consultations to collect qualitative information will be done.

Phase 2 - Empirical Research

Seven variables (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, digitalization, political grievances, cultural and leisure opportunities and transnational dynamics) will be studied at three levels: macro, meso and micro to establish a cartography of contexts of radicalisation and VE.

- Macro level: a qualitative methodology will analyse VE drivers at the macro level, combined with interviews and consultations to relevant institutional stakeholders. Following a Stakeholders Workshop, 3 case-studies per country will be selected.
- Meso level: 3 focus groups per country targeting youth from 12 to 30 will be organised by local Consortium members to obtain insights on youth understanding of VE. In-depth interviews will complement the results.
- Micro level: A close-ended questionnaire developed at the Methodological Lab, will gather 400 answers per country, providing quantitative and thus regionally comparable data on the drivers of radicalisation and perceptions and expectations of such process. A Cross-Regional Youth Forum will be held to engage youth to the exploration of PVE measures.

Phase 3 - Fieldwork on PVE

This phase will do field research on PVE from a social and community perspective using a social innovation methodology. Recommendations at a local and community level will be designed to transfer knowledge into action and a pilot implementation of such recommendations and strategies will be done.



PVE measures will be studied in 2 meso contexts per country (selected from previous case-studies) in which 2 focus groups with youth 12-30 and 2 in-depth interviews will be carried out. A Cross-regional Women's Forum will be done to explore the role of women as activists and policy shapers in PVE matters.

Finally one meso context per country, selected from the previous two, will be chosen for the pilot intervention on the identified PVE measures.

PARALLEL SESSIONS

S1 - Macro research on radicalisation and violent extremism drivers

Coordinator

Damir Kapidzic, University of Sarajevo (WP4 leader)

Within the framework of CONNEKT, macro-level analysis of drivers refers to those push/pull factors that can be identified within the domain of historical trends and at state and supra-state level, sometimes considered structural factors. At a policy-making level, radicalisation has been assumed in a reactive manner due to the strong impact of terrorist attacks. Religion and identity have been at the core of the approach, and although other driving factors such as poverty, education, and social marginalisation have been added to the radicalisation equation, socio-political grievances, transnational dynamics, social perceptions and expectations, among others, have been neglected or not sufficiently explored in-depth. In the last decade, an increased access and sophistication of communication channels have driven research to the study of narratives and counter-narratives, religious leaderships and religious education.

This session will discuss the seven identified drivers in regards to the macro-level perspective in the MENA and Balkans.

1. Is **religion** a key driving factor of violent extremism with greater relevance than other colliding factors? Can religious views and institutions that explicitly or implicitly endorse violence and that are active in the regions under study be identified? Are youth drawn to more extreme religious views than the rest of the population? Does the relation between religion and national belonging play a specific role?
2. **Economic deprivation:** Are poverty and socio-economic marginalisation key drivers of violent extremism in my country/region of study? To what extent institutions of the state do not address this driver in the context of radicalisation, especially in regards to youth unemployment?
3. **Territorial inequalities:** Do territorial inequalities intersect with other types of identity resulting in radicalisation or violent extremism?
4. **Digitalisation:** Is the digital context an overwhelming channel for violent extremism in MENA and Balkans? Is most messaging/information on radicalisation and violent extremism makes using digital channels and social media? Are there any national initiatives to raise digital literacy among youth?



5. **Transnational dynamics:** Radicalisation in recent years is an internationally linked phenomenon where borders are becoming less important. National authorities have problems dealing with transnational radicalised networks and cross-border movement of people and radical ideas. How globalisation and transnational movements impacted on politics and society?
 6. **Socio-political demands/ideas:** Are there are political ideas with strong following in the regions under study that are against the prevailing principles and values of society? Are the main target of such ideas government institutions? What is the impact of the political context in the process of radicalisation? To what extent democracy, good governance, rule of law and political inclusion have a role in shaping perceptions and expectations on drivers of radicalisation? How different actors of radicalisation are framed by the state in each targeted country?
 7. **Cultural factors:** To what extent the lack of cultural, educational and leisure opportunities have a more important role in driving radicalisation than norms and behaviours specific to a certain way of life?
- **COVID-19:** Will the economic and societal anxiety resulting from the pandemic increase the relevance of these seven drivers? Some are going to become more relevant than others. New drivers will emerge as a result of the pandemic.

S2 - Meso research on radicalisation and violent extremism drivers

Coordinator

Tasnim Chirchi, Director, Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication

Meso-level analysis of drivers refers to push/pull factors that are rooted in the heart of a specific community, be it a municipality, a neighbourhood or less territorially defined, a community bond by identity, language, religious or family bonds. Communities are argued to be able to play a unique role in protecting young people from radical influences and in tackling the grievances that may give rise to radicalization. There are two main ideas within the literature on the role of communities: “community engagement” and “community resilience.” Resilience, associated with strengths rather than with deficits, becomes an alternative to explicitly security-driven approaches. Nonetheless, while individual actions are more concrete – as, by definition, they are subject to social sanction, either positive or negative – group dynamics are more diffuse, more difficult to determine and to observe both along the way and afterwards.

This session will discuss the complexity of community/meso-level analysis of drivers of radicalisation and extremism, which is the first phase endeavour of this level of analysis, and attempt to identify elements for the second phase of meso analysis devoted to prevention.

1. **Religion:** What is the impact of social experience and practice of religion on communities? Would you say is an important space of secondary socialisation in the



regions targeted? Is it rather the individual attitude towards religion what drives young people to radical ideas and actions?

2. **Economic deprivation:** How can the growing socio-economic divide within societies impact on the communitarian abilities to create safety nets against directly impacting drivers?
 3. **Territorial inequalities:** Can some specific contexts, it is to say, communities or groups, be identified as more conducive to radicalisation? Can we escape geography, i.e. territoriality, when dealing with the meso level? Are social cohesion and community ties more important among certain groups in your country/region of study?
 4. **Digitalisation:** Is the digital powerful role as driver overestimated at the communitarian level? To what extent personal interactions are more determinant than digital access in radicalisation? And in prevention? Which position occupies youth in public spaces? Are there other private spaces of socialisation they would rather use alternatively?
 5. **Transnational dynamics:** Are perceptions on foreign policy a driver of violent extremism? What is the role of new family patterns and diffuse social relations in the field of the transnational nature of radical groups? How globalised communities link themselves to transnational movements? What is the role of family, ethnic, religious, political, criminal networks?
 6. **Socio-political demands/ideas:** What are the dominant narratives on community grievances based on political claims? What are the main narratives, claims or deficits identified that can potentially be addressed by local and civil society actors?
 7. **Cultural factors:** Are poorly educated communities more vulnerable to radicalisation and violent extremist or is it the opposite, the more knowledge and access the more susceptible to radicalisation? Is leisure and non-formal education at the community level the key to prevention? Which are the secondary socialisation groups that have more influence in youth in terms of values and lifestyle in your country/region of study?
- **COVID-19:** Will the economic and societal anxiety resulting from the pandemic increase the relevance of these seven drivers? Some are going to become more relevant than others. New drivers will emerge as a result of the pandemic.
 - How all the previous driving factors interact in the collective dimension? How social perceptions and expectations impact on the identified drivers?

S3 - Micro research on radicalisation and violent extremism drivers

Coordinator

Khalid Mouna, Moulay Ismail University (WP6 leader)

Micro-level drivers refer to push/pull factors that play at the level of individual, in this case youngsters. This session will discuss the drivers of radicalisation from an individual perspective, focusing particularly on the target population group, youth.



The word radical encompasses the idea of a willingness to return to “roots” in the Marxist sense of the word: “Being radical is taking things by the root”. Thus, behind the phenomenon of violent radicalism is there not a rejection of the dominant societal model? Or rather a project to build an exclusive society? Doesn't violent extremism send us back to the processes and trajectories that lead to radical positions and acts of violence? Can we speak of a temporal and interactionist dimension which leads back to adhesion and, subsequently, the progressive acquisition of radical/violent skills? Doesn't this process initially include a progressive modification of representations of the world and of oneself?

These are some of the questions we would like to discuss during this virtual meeting. We also propose other questions for discussion such as:

1. **Religion:** Is it the individual attitude towards religion what drives young people to radical ideas and actions? Has religious education a role in preventing violent extremism? Do youngsters identify with existing religious leaderships?
 2. **Economic deprivation:** How can the growing socio-economic divide within societies impact on the individual abilities to create resilience against directly impacting drivers? How macro-economic factors and global trends have an effect on individual opportunities for personal development? Which are the main challenges youth encounter in the transition to adulthood?
 3. **Territorial inequalities:** to what extent can we address territoriality from an individual perspective?
 4. **Digitalisation:** Is the digital powerful role as driver so overwhelming at the individual level as it is widely suggested? To what extent personal interactions are more determinant than digital access in radicalisation? How the contrast between the real conditions some youth live in and what they see in the massive flow of Internet can be a source of frustration nourishing the sense of relative deprivation?
 5. **Transnational dynamics:** How do young individuals relate to transnational dynamics? Is globalisation raising youth expectations and ways of interaction or is rather challenging values, habits and behaviours? Is this a new generational environment that could explain trends in radicalisation processes?
 6. **Socio-political demands/ideas:** Which are the main narratives, claims or deficits identified by young people in regards to radicalisation and violent extremism? How do young people feel framed by radicalisation research and narratives? Is politicisation a core element of individual radicalisation processes?
 7. **Cultural factors:** Education opportunities or educational attainment? What is more relevant in analysing radicalisation and violent extremism?
- **COVID-19:** Will the economic and societal anxiety resulting from the pandemic increase the relevance of these seven drivers? Some are going to become more relevant than others. New drivers will emerge as a result of the pandemic.
 - How all the previous driving factors interact in the personal dimension? How individual perceptions and expectations impact on the identified drivers?



S4 - Approaching prevention from a local perspective

Coordinators

Lurdes Vidal and **Jordi Moreras**, CONNEKT Scientific Coordinators

Concerning prevention, traditional approaches have been more focused on detection or identification than to preventive long-term measures per se. Therefore, prevention is sometimes addressed more as a firewall against potential violent actions than as a long-term social investment. From the security approach, prevention is often seen as the step to impede behavioural radicalisation, and thus too often intersects with the aim of detecting potential violent extremists to be. On the other hand, prevention in the sense of building resilient communities should be focused on stages previous to cognitive radicalisation. Even though advances have been made, monitoring individual behaviours and beliefs, a strategy assumed mainly by security approaches, has been mainly a matter of police services. Particular criticism has been directed towards the impact these approaches have had in stigmatising Muslim communities and rendering them both a source of risk, and as a “vulnerable group” at risk of “radicalisation”.

Prevention cannot be understood as the sum of initiatives to avoid a series of dynamics that destabilise the social order. It should also be understood as a perspective from which to review those aspects that favour social polarisation, which is the justifying basis for the processes of radicalisation and violent extremism. The main setting for the development of prevention initiatives is the local one, since it is in this context where social life is articulated, and where these interventions materialise, involving institutions and social groups.

Specific objectives:

- Share the results of prevention initiatives at the local level, good practices, to be applied to other contexts.
- Raise the efficacy and limits of prevention initiatives in the face of changing forms of radicalisation and violent extremism.
- Analyse the collaboration between institutional and social levels, reviewing the top-down perspective, to propose a more transversal logic and bottom-up approach.
- Incorporate the idea of social resilience as a mechanism to respond to the effects of violent extremism.

Some ideas for discussion:

- Prevention as a sum of actions in different areas and levels. Articulation, complementarity and compatibility between actors and institutions.
- Consider the positive effects of prevention: make the idea of collective security more comprehensive, appeal to collective responsibility, give prominence to social groups, reinforce collective trust, legitimise the action of institutions, increase social capital.



- Strength the social ties: social bonding and social bridging.
- On education: promote critical thinking, skills to respond to social polarisation, avoiding the opposite effect of pointing out some students as suspects due to their cultural or religious origin.
- Avoid the opposite effects of a prevention perspective: securitisation, “suspect communities”, social anxiety, pessimism, resignation.
- Resilience implies to recognise the potential and agency of individuals and communities.
- Resilient communities that have mechanisms to prevent its members from engaging with extremism.

POLICY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

How can CONNEKT serve EU’s challenges concerning P/CVE?

Coordinator

Corinne Torrekens, Université Libre de Bruxelles (WP3 leader)

Research on radicalisation has been primarily focused on European/Western societies and individuals, whereas research on non-Western European societies is less advanced and less integrated in the global epistemic community. However, the threat posed by violent extremist individuals and groups cannot be circumscribed to any boundaries or territories, since it is genuinely a global threat. The

Globalisation is also a strong trend in violent extremism as well. The transnational nature of radical movements and violent extremist groups cannot be addressed from a uniquely European or even less a Western European approach. The dynamics of migrations, diasporas, and constant flux of people in the move poses a challenge on understanding new relational modes and fluxes that security and countering radicalisation practitioners have to address. This is visible through the very different trajectories of the two young perpetrators of Nice and Vienna: the former being a 21-year old Tunisian recently arrived to Europe and the latter a 20-year old Austrian-born citizen of North Macedonia origin. Both Tunisia and North Macedonia are countries where CONNEKT’s research will be conducted.

- What is the relevance of transnational dynamics as a driver of radicalisation and which is the impact for EU security?
- Which measures and strategies addressed to communities in MENA and Balkans can also be implemented at a European level?
- How can research be useful to respond to the needs and concerns of policy-makers at a EU level?
- Are the agendas of foreign actors a disruptive factor for a more holistic approach on radicalisation and violent extremism in target countries?



- What are the main gaps regarding ongoing EU-funded research on radicalisation and violent extremism from the perspective of EU institutions?
- How can we promote a fluid articulation between expectations from policy-makers and objectives of ongoing research?
- Which EU mechanisms and strategies provide a more holistic approach to radicalisation and violent extremism?

* Debates will be held under [Chatham House Rule](#)

