

OVERCOMING YOUTH VULNERABILITIES TO FAR-RIGHT NARRATIVES

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Over the past decade, European countries have experienced a resurgence of far-right extremism and the internet has played an important role in facilitating this growth. The internet and social media are potent tools for the spread of extremist propaganda, especially among youth for whom these media constitute an integral feature of daily life. In recognition of this reality, far-right organizations have widely utilized social media to appeal to and reach out this target demographic.

The importance of fighting radicalisation and terrorism is highlighted by the 2015-2020 European Agenda on Security. Together with the establishment of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) in 2011, a number of actions have been taken to counter right-wing violent extremism and terrorism. In a recent document,¹ the Presidency of the Council of the European Union has emphasised the need for Member States (MS) to work jointly to prevent and combat right-wing violent extremism and terrorism. MS focus should also be on the analysis of the spread of unlawful right-wing extremist content online and offline. The use of the internet an important medium for the spread of far-right narratives has been on the rise across the EU.² Recognizing this threat, RAN has underscored that it is “the facilitation of hateful

KEY POINTS

- Far-right ideas and intolerance to “others” are widespread among Bulgarian youth (14-19 year old). However, these ideas don’t seem to be deeply internalised and youth are open to alternative narratives.
- Youth can be reached through targeted online campaigns and the combination of adequate messages, messengers and media generate significant positive response and change in attitudes.
- Online campaigns providing alternative narratives should be used as complementary tools to offline engagement with young people.
- Enhancing critical thinking should go hand in hand with building emotional intelligence skills and empathy. The interactive school lessons guide should be integrated in the school curriculum.
- Online campaigns need to be part of a sustainable strategy for countering the spread of the extremist and manipulative narratives with a more proactive role of various state and non-state actors. Collaboration with Facebook and other social media should be pro-actively deployed to counter the spreading of far-right narratives among Bulgarian youth.

¹ Council of the European Union (2019) *Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism - follow-up* (14132/19, LIMITE, 14 November 2019).

² Bayer J. and Bard, P. (2020) *Hate speech and hate crime in the EU and the evaluation of online content regulation approaches*. European Parliament LIBE Committee.



ideology and encouragement of violence through these online spaces which we need to collectively understand and work towards effectively countering “.”³

Bulgaria is among the EU states where the far right is on the rise. With a coalition of three right wing parties being part of the government of the last four years (2017-2021), the language of the far right has become mainstream both at the level of politics and in public discourse. Hate speech is particularly widespread on the internet.⁴

However, to date efforts at countering online propaganda as well as initiatives to make youth more resilient to far right radicalisation are still few. In addition, no targeted effort has yet been made to identify youth groups most vulnerable to far right content and recruitment online and to analyse youth’s online behaviour trends. The current policy brief details the results of the first alternative narrative campaign, **Find Another Way**, carried out in Bulgaria in 2020-2021. The goals of the campaign were to:

- **Reduce youth’s support** for anti-minorities sentiments and for use of violence against minorities;
- **Increase youth resilience** to far-right extremist narratives by developing awareness of alternative perspectives on “others”.

³ Daines, N (2020) The Evolving VRWE Challenge. In RAN, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism in Focus*.

⁴ Иванова, И. (2016) Обществени нагласи спрямо речта на омразата в България през 2016 г. София: Институт „Отворено общество“.; Иванова, И. (2018) Обществени нагласи спрямо речта на омразата в България през 2018 г. София: Институт „Отворено общество“. Даскалова, Н. (2015) *Медиите и езикът*

Youth vulnerabilities to far-right narratives and influences online

Minors have been identified as a main group at risk of far-right radicalisation both by Bulgarian institutions and independent research.⁵ The high susceptibility of young people to far-right ideas is indicated by the fact that individuals between 18-24 years of age are responsible for the majority of crimes with possible extremist motive.⁶ Hate speech is endemic online and especially in social media and youth are often in contact with such content,⁷ normalising negative views of ethnic, religious and other minorities.

Far-right narratives

A **diagnostic study** aimed at measuring levels of resonance of far-right messages and actions (online and offline) among youth highlighted a number of wide-spread far-right, polarizing narratives

Far-right narrative	% who agree
Roma birth rates have to be significantly limited, so Bulgarians do not become a minority in their own country	74%
Liberal policy has led to a situation in which the Roma live off Bulgarians	73%
The terror that Roma inflict on Bulgarians with their crimes has to be crushed with an iron fist	71%
Migrants should be stopped from entering the country at all costs	63%
No more mosques should be built in Bulgaria	62%

на омразата: ключови зони. София: Фондация „Медийна демокрация“.

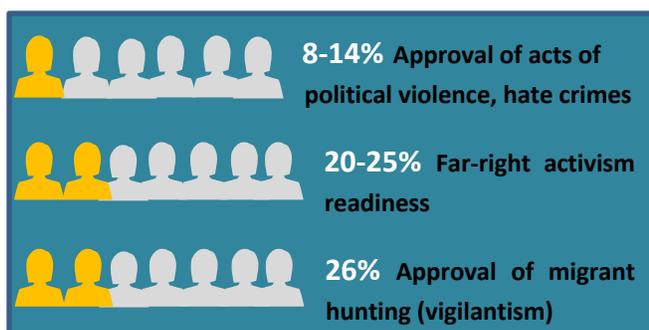
⁵ CSD (2016) *Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends*. Sofia: CSD.

⁶ CSD (2017) *Situational Assessment of Extremist Trends*. Sofia: CSD.

⁷ Даскалова, Н. (2015) *Медиите и езикът на омразата: ключови зони*. София: Фондация „Медийна демокрация“.

demonizing “others” as major threats and urging for (violent) actions.⁸ It should be noted that youth’s approval of other far-right messages is relatively lower: anti-systemic messages (37%), anti-NATO and anti-EU (32%), anti-Semitic (21%).

While the overall acceptance of far-right narratives is significant, these messages do not appear to be deeply internalised by the majority of young people, and far smaller share of them are inclined to turn their beliefs into violent actions⁹:



In addition, the far-right messages which resonated the most with Bulgarian youth are stereotypes of minorities, specifically Roma, LGBTQI and migrants, rather than the more conspiratorial aspects of far-right ideology.

Target audience for an alternative narratives campaign

The relatively moderate levels of approval of violent actions indicated that far-right attitudes among youth are subject to change if confronted by critical thinking, reflection, and debate.

Among the 14-19y old group, two main segments were identified as target audience for a campaign with alternative narratives: passive ‘endorsers’ and activists.

Passive “endorsers”: endorse to a greater extent far-right narratives

- ✓ boys 16-19 yo
- ✓ from vocational schools and middle class families exhibit lower political awareness and political dissatisfaction
- ✓ have had greater exposure to violence (school, neighbourhood)
- ✓ informed by social media and influencers (rather than by family and narrow social circle)
- ✓ low level of previous civic engagement (civic apathy)
- ✓ external locus of control, but positive image of self and social relationships

Activists: exhibit approval of violence and activism readiness

- ✓ boys 15-16 yo
- ✓ from Burgas, Vidin, Kyustendil, Yambol, Sofia
- ✓ engage actively with violent/hateful online content and approve of far-right narratives
- ✓ express political discontent
- ✓ more informed about politics
- ✓ lower level of trust in family negative image of self and social relationships (belonging)
- ✓ greater exposure to violence (school, neighbourhood)
- ✓ higher level of previous civic activism

⁸ The data are from an online research of social media (Facebook) and a national representative survey conducted in Bulgaria in May-June 2019 among 1 019 respondents aged 14-19. Percentages

indicate those who agree or strongly agree with the respective statements.

⁹ Data from the national representative survey (May-June 2019).

Find Another Way: the communication campaign



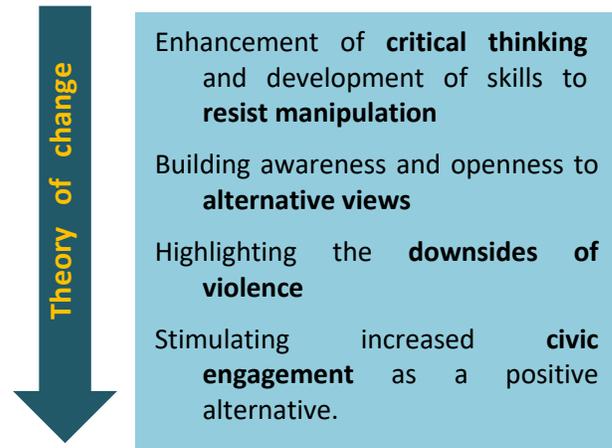
Alternative narrative campaigns are important tools helping to shape discourse in order to counteract hate speech,¹⁰ which Bulgarian youth readily encounters on the internet.¹¹

Moreover it has been demonstrated that “users online tend to prefer information adhering to their worldviews, ignore dissenting information, and form polarized groups around shared narratives”.¹² This has important effects on decision making as research has shown that even in neutral situations people tend to disbelieve others with opposing views even when they are more competent.¹³ Considering the widespread prejudice and agreement with certain narratives espoused by the far-right in Bulgaria, social media dynamics have the potential to exacerbate attitudes towards minorities and bring about radicalisation in vulnerable individuals.

The diagnostic study supported the development of a communication campaign targeting Bulgarian youth population between 14 and 19 year old (estimated at 300 000), and focusing on the two identified segments, passive endorsers and activists.

The campaign aimed on one hand to reduce youth’s support for anti-minorities sentiments and for use of violence, and on the other, to increase resilience to far-right extremist narratives and openness to alternative perspectives on “others”.

The theory of change underlying the campaign had several pillars:



Enhancement of **critical thinking** and development of skills to **resist manipulation**

Building awareness and openness to **alternative views**

Highlighting the **downsides of violence**

Stimulating increased **civic engagement** as a positive alternative.

The **Find Another Way** communication campaign was rolled out in four phases, starting in March 2020 and ending in March 2021.

PHASE 1: Challenge hateful content online in order to build awareness, enhance emotional ability to recognize and withstand propaganda and violent/hateful content online.

PHASE 2: Educate about tolerance, acceptance and inclusivity to enhance critical thinking and resilience to extremist content online.

PHASE 3: Inspire a feeling of empowerment through example

PHASE 4: Act and mobilize participation in public life because there are direct and indirect ways to contribute to the community and increase the feeling that “something depends on me”.

¹⁰ Schlegel, L. (2020) The Ongoing Trouble with Counter-Narratives: Why Evaluation May Not Be Everything. *European Eye on Radicalisation*.

¹¹ Иванова, И. (2016) Обществени нагласи спрямо речта на омразата в България през 2016 г. София: Институт „Отворено общество“.; Иванова, И. (2018) Обществени нагласи спрямо речта на омразата в България през 2018 г. София: Институт „Отворено общество“.

¹² Cinelli, M. et al. (2021) The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 118 (9): 1-8, p 5.

¹³ Marks, J. et al. (2019) Epistemic spillovers: Learning others’ political views reduces the ability to assess and use their expertise in nonpolitical domains. *Cognition* 188: 74-84.

Engaging youth: media, messengers, content



To reach the target audience most effectively, the **media** used for the campaign covered the most prominent social platforms widely used by Bulgarian youth: Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

The **messengers** of the campaign were youth **influencers, peers,** and positive role models.

The campaign built a significant online presence:

- youthrighton.com
- anotherway.bg
- instagram.com/findanotherway.bg
- facebook.com/anotherway.bg
- youtube.com/channel/UChAVxGKNw1rxn6IPyHt28HQ
- vbox7.com/user.findanotherway

Within the 12 months of the campaign, the youth audience was reached through a diverse set of online media tools:

- Media tools**
- 13** campaign videos
- 1** animated story
- 10** infographics
- 100+** social media posts
- 3** social media mini-games
- 50+** influencers' stories and posts
- 66** media articles

The slogan of the campaign and the messages contained in the videos, stories, games and other media tools did not only challenge negative stereotypes of “others” but were also a **call to action:** to *find another way* to express one’s frustrations, to be heard and to contribute to .

The following messages are examples of the content of the campaign:



REACT

Influencers and teens react to real hate comments

Key messages:

Hate to Roma has become normalised – challenge yourself and react to such content online - there is another way.

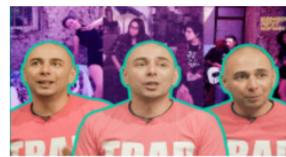


DEBATE

Naratives about “others” (Roma, refugees, LGTBI)

Key messages:

Search for other viewpoints, before forming your own. Things are not always what they look like. Before sharing aggressive content, ask yourself whose interests it is serving. Don't allow to be manipulated.



ENGAGE

Alternative spaces for youth engagement

Key messages:

Everyone can go down the wrong path. You can always find support if you are open to get it. Asking for support is a sign of strength. There is a place for you to express your anger and creativity and connect with others.

Impact on youth

The success of the campaign can be measured by two main indicators: the size of the audience reached through the various media channels and tools, and the change in attitudes (and in the long run, in behaviour) that can be attributed to the campaign.

Audience reach

The campaign on social media (Facebook Instagram and Youtube) attracted a fan base of 2 176. The combined number of comments (engagement) exceeded 35 000, and the number of video views exceeded 650 000 at the end of the campaign. Traditional media (news websites) generated over 107 000 views. Given the estimated size of youth 14-19 year old in Bulgaria (300 000), the campaign reached a substantial part of its target audience.



9 campaign videos, 651 000+ views, 1 100+ comments, 25 400+ reactions, 831 subscribers



94 posts, 13200+ reactions (10:1 ratio positive to negative), 909 followers, 849 total likes



66 posts, 4000+ reactions (80:1 ratio positive to negative), 455 followers

Changes in attitudes

The change in attitudes can be demonstrated by comparing the results of the diagnostic study (carried out before the launching of the campaign) and the analysis of online comments, focus group discussions and a survey at the end of the campaign (carried out as an online game with 500 participants).

One of the most impressive changes was registered in the willingness of youth to report aggressive/hateful online content (a 10-time increase, 66% compared to only 6% before the campaign).

FIND ANOTHER WAY Campaign impact

80+% **recognize** the core campaign **messages** after watching selected materials

65% say the campaign **messages** **resonate** with their personal experiences

66% would **report aggressive/hateful online** content (compared to only 6% prior to the campaign)

Reflecting on their reaction to the campaign materials, a large majority of the youth (73%) claimed the campaign **made them think**. More than half (58%) were encouraged to be **more careful in the future when sharing content or commenting** on the internet. About half of participants (45%) shared they had become **more interested in the topics** covered by the campaign. On the other hand, a very small share of youth (3-4%) disapproved of the campaign message or remained indifferent.

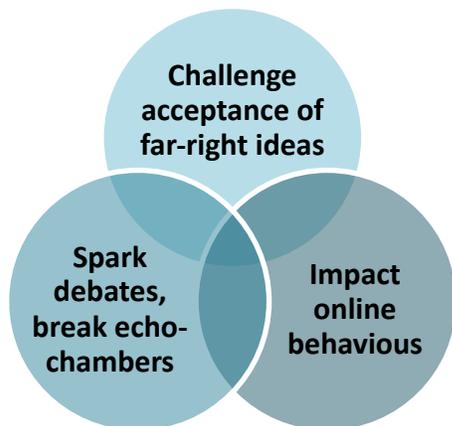
The potential of engaging youth online

While a single alternative narratives campaign can hardly be expected to produce long-term effects in a society where far-right ideas are not adequately addressed at a national policy level, the 2020-2021 online campaign demonstrated the powerful potential of this approach:

Firstly, the campaign raised the awareness of youth that **content online can be untrue** or misleading and one-sided. Secondly, campaign content **sparked debates on the most controversial topics** such as prejudice against migrants, Roma and LGBTQI

people. This has happened even on those channels where due to platform operation specifics, controversial and hateful comments are “rewarded” the most, namely YouTube and Instagram.¹⁴ Therefore, the campaign has contributed to challenging the echo chamber of predominantly negative reporting on Roma and LGBTQI in social media. It has given an arena for negative views of Roma especially to be challenged through positive messaging and alternative views. Further initiatives are needed in order to have sustainable impact and offset to a degree harmful dynamics of social media platforms. Importantly, sustainable initiatives can have bigger impact, as online comment sections have been found to reflect changes in social norms, while at the same time having the potential to impact attitudes.¹⁵

Potential of alternative narrative campaigns



Thirdly, the campaign appear to have the potential to **impact youth online behaviour** and ultimately to potentially decrease or slow down sharing and distribution of hateful content. An instance of changed attitudes was demonstrated in the comments under campaign messages. A **number of users prejudiced**

against minorities have showed sustained engagement with campaign products. In some cases, these people were challenged by other users and even made concessions to their original prejudiced opinions.

The role of strategic communications campaign in the digital future

The development and implementation in Bulgaria of the first alternative narrative campaign *Find Another Way* has produced the following insights on the role such initiatives can play in the prevention and countering of radicalisation and violent extremism:

- **Influencer generated content, followed by messages presented by actual activists** have had the most appeal. On the other hand, animated characters and young actors performed less well, indicating that young people appreciate and relate most to authentic messengers and believable messaging expressed through practical examples and real stories. This is supported by other research, which showed that personal experiences but also strong emotive content yield strongest reactions.¹⁶
- **Online campaigns can yield positive results but sustainability is needed to increase impact** - the *Find Another Way* alternative narrative campaign has shown that even in settings where no such initiatives have been launched previously and some facets of extreme ideology (e.g. prejudice against minorities) are widely accepted by the general public and are part of the official public discourse, an online alternative

¹⁴ For more information on why this is the case see: Lorenz, T. (21 March 2019). [Instagram Is the Internet’s New Home for Hate](#). *The Atlantic*. ; Tait, E. (26 October 2016). [Why are YouTube comments the worst on the internet?](#) *NewStatesman*.

¹⁵ Stoud, N., Scacco, J., Muddiman, A. and Curry, A. Changing deliberative norms on news organizations’ Facebook sites.” *Journal*

of Computer-Mediated Communications. vol. 20, no. 2, 2014, pp. 108-203.

¹⁶ Langer, A. Et al. (2019) *Counter Narratives in Social Media – An Empirical Study on Combat and Prevention of Terrorism*. WiPe Paper – Social Media in Crises and Conflicts Proceedings of the 16th ISCRAM Conference – València, Spain.

narrative campaigns can have a positive impact and are thus an important tool for countering and preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. However, in order to ensure long-term impact in the dynamic online world, it is key to design and support sustainable initiatives.

- **The effectiveness of online campaigns will be diminished if their messages are undermined by developments in the offline world** – Developments in the offline world will often contradict the messages of counter and alternative narrative campaigns. However, it is important for policy on related issues to facilitate efforts to strengthen resilience to far-right narratives. In Bulgaria, urgent actions are needed to reform the educational system to prioritise critical thinking and tolerance, counter hate speech as well as to desegregate schools and counter prejudice among parents.
- **Online campaigns are only one tool in the toolbox for prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism** – online campaigns can raise awareness and foster dialogue on contentious topic, teach critical thinking skills and media literacy and even potentially influence online behaviour leading to diminished acceptance of some far-right ideas and a decrease of the posting of, sharing and engagement with hateful content. As important as they are, alternative or counter campaigns, however, should be used as complementary tools to offline engagement with young people (e.g. interactive debates around realistic scenarios in schools and family settings). Enhancing critical thinking should go hand in hand with building emotional intelligence skills and empathy. In turn, both offline and online measures should be embedded in a sustainable “whole-of-society” approach to countering extremism, polarization, hate speech and disinformation.
- **It is necessary to educate the public and particularly youth of the propensity of social media to facilitate the spread of intolerance** – Considering that social media algorithms have been found to “reward” hate and confrontation and lead to the formation of echo chambers, it is key for future campaigns to spread awareness and promote caution in online behaviour. Action is needed to sanction more decisively hate speech and build awareness among the wider society of the corrosive effects of disinformation and extremist narratives on social cohesion and democracy.
- **Future online campaigns should ensure most impact through the use of emotive, positive examples and authentic storytelling and messengers** – Content dealing with highly polarizing topics such as dominant anti-minority narratives should be less rational and in the form of a debate, but more emotionally engaging through personal stories and real people that are relatable to the audience at a personal level and speak to their empathy. people that are relatable to the audience at a personal level and speak to their empathy.
- Collaboration with Facebook (and other social media) should be encouraged to **counter the spread of far-right narratives** among Bulgarian youth.