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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN small-scale expert session 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation'
Online, 25 November 2020

The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation

Key outcomes

While violent extremism is a global phenomenon, extremists start their radicalisation process in their local context. Radicalisation to violent extremism, however, is not happening everywhere. Even between cities, neighbourhoods or communities that are comparable in regards to political, social or socioeconomic circumstances or grievances, there are often very different radicalisation-related developments. In other words, some neighbourhoods struggle with a significantly higher number of radicalised individuals than others, making them "hotbeds of radicalisation". Why do some neighbourhoods turn into hotbeds while others, facing comparable challenges and factors, do not?

During the meeting, Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist hotbeds were analysed and discussed. While the topic is still under-researched, two **key factors** have been identified that seem to be particularly relevant **when present at the same time: 1) charismatic "entrepreneurs of extremism",** and **2) indifference and/or incompetence by local actors (government/civil society) who miss out on the opportunity to intervene early on.** Recommendations on the prevention or countering of hotbeds of radicalisation were discussed and collected.

Highlights of the discussion

This expert meeting aimed at collecting lessons learned and good practices from experienced prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners and researchers from different Member States on how to prevent or counter hotbeds of radicalisation.

Two case studies of an Islamist extremist hotbed in Denmark and an extremist right-wing hotbed in Germany were presented and discussed in depth. Other cases and lessons learned from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom were shared and analysed.

The presented case studies and the shared insights indicate that socioeconomic factors like unemployment, (lack of) access to social services, high crime levels or lower levels of education are not the determining factors for the emergence of hotbeds of radicalisation in a way that is significant for P/CVE practitioners. Focusing solely on these factors, which should all be addressed by effective social policies and investments, will not solve **the "1 per cent" problem, meaning that when considering all neighbourhoods or communities that face these difficult circumstances, "99 per cent" of them don't turn into hotbeds of radicalisation.**

The following key questions were of particular interest at this meeting:

1) Which are the core components of hotbeds of radicalisation? Are there significant differences between Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist hotbeds?

2) Which factors (e.g. political/social/cultural/socioeconomic) are contributing to the emergence of hotbeds of radicalisation?

3) Which preventive or repressive strategies or actions by P/CVE actors addressing hotbeds have led to positive or negative results and why?

4) How can stigmatisation of neighbourhoods/communities affected by hotbeds of radicalisation be prevented? Which communication strategies can be recommended?

5) How can the resilience of affected neighbourhoods or communities be strengthened?

6) How can we involve affected neighbourhoods/communities more effectively in P/CVE activities?

7) What is the online dimension of this phenomenon? Which virtual hotbeds of radicalisation do exist or have existed, and which good P/CVE practices can be shared?

Central to all hotbeds of radicalisation are narratives of injustice, victimhood and a threat by an out-group. Leaders of such hotbeds claim to offer membership in an elite group that is defending the (sub-)community while protecting their sacred values, using violence if deemed necessary.

Hotbeds of radicalisation seem to appear within inward looking sub-communities, with little (interest in) connection with the outside and who are aiming to solve their own problems. The term sub-communities is particularly relevant when describing Islamist extremist hotbeds of radicalisation in the EU, since this phenomenon usually exists around specific leaders and their followers who are not only in conflict with non-Muslim communities, but also with mainstream Muslim communities.

Extreme right-wing hotbeds of radicalisation share many of the described characteristics of Islamist extremist ones, but either decide to self-segregate, since they are usually not affected by any kind of objective discrimination or exclusion based on, for example, ethnicity or religion, or they are actually the dominant (sub-)culture in some neighbourhoods or villages.

One case study highlighted that a socioeconomically weak neighbourhood "benefited" from having a hotbed, since due to negative media reporting it moved up on the policy agenda and received additional financial support. This had, however, no impact on the "hotbed" itself, which exists up to today despite significant efforts of governments and civil society that appear to have missed the time window when an intervention might have had a preventive effect.

Another case described the **hotbed being located in an "idyllic" village** with no significant socioeconomic problems and where the terrorist group members consisted of well-off individuals motivated by narratives and ideology.

The fact that many hotbeds are located in poorer neighbourhoods might be driven by low rents and affordable real estate prices, making the creation of the physical infrastructure less costly. Extremist organisations that are building hotbeds usually ask their followers to move into the close proximity of the group headquarter. Some extremist groups offer social services like free food or free childcare to appear as a positive force, to gather local support and to recruit local followers.

A third case showed that sub-communities react very differently to real or perceived injustice or discrimination, many of them existing as "parallel societies" while only a few of them develop into "counter societies". The differentiation between parallel and counter societies is particularly relevant **to avoid stigmatisation** because in most cases **parallel societies do not pose a risk in the P/CVE context. However, counter societies do pose a risk since they aim at overthrowing the existing pluralistic liberal-democratic systems of governance and civil society.**

While the topic is still under-researched and needs more input from practitioners and researchers, two key factors have been identified that seem to be particularly relevant when <u>present at the same time</u>:

1) charismatic "entrepreneurs of extremism", and

2) indifference and/or incompetence by local actors (government/civil society), who miss out on the opportunity to intervene effectively early on.

Many other factors like grievances, ideologies and psychological needs of individuals were discussed but only seemed necessary yet not sufficient factors for the development of hotbeds of radicalisation. When charismatic entrepreneurs of extremism and an indifferent or incompetent social and political environment are added to the situation, they seem to have a **tipping-point function** that could lead a sub-community or neighbourhood into becoming a hotbed.

The online dimension of hotbeds of radicalisation

The online dimension of hotbeds of radicalisation can be understood as twofold. One dimension is based on the **online activities of physical extremist groups**, promoting their narratives and ideology and aiming at recruiting members and supporters. Here, social media and video sharing platforms have played, and sometimes still play, a key role in serving as areas of operation for these groups. Pressure by civil society and policymakers has led to increased efforts by the tech companies to deplatform illegal content. Upcoming EU legislation like the Terrorist Content Online Directive and the Digital Services Act aim at mandating drastically increased effectiveness and transparency standards of social media and video sharing companies when policing their platforms for illegal content, since voluntary efforts have proven to be insufficient (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.).

The second dimension is that of an (almost) exclusively online hotbed of radicalisation, where individuals co-create a space for fellow extremists who do not necessarily want to connect physically with each other or an extremist group but **feel connected** as an "unorganised collective" that shares specific extremist and anti-democratic narratives. Here, mostly unmoderated subgroups of image boards (e.g. 4chan, 8chan, Meguca) and online gaming-related platforms (e.g. Steam, Twitch) can serve as hotbeds that, in some cases, have inspired violent extremist/terrorist acts.

The similarities to the physical hotbeds appear obvious and the same functionality seems to apply. For online hotbeds to exist, they need: 1) (virtual) entrepreneurs of extremism, and 2) indifference and/or incompetence by the platform-owning companies and the responsible government bodies who miss out on the opportunity to intervene effectively early on.

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Recommendations

The attending P/CVE practitioners and researchers made the following recommendations, which were not necessarily agreed upon by all participants.

- Once the build-up of a hotbed has been verified, establish a local network comprised of pro-democratic/pluralistic associations, local policymakers and P/CVE experts early on to plan for effective actions and interventions.

- Aim at supporting pro-democratic/pluralistic actors without framing the support as being a P/CVE intervention, to avoid stigmatisation. This also demands flexibility from government donors to not publicly label programmes as security-related.

- Focus on the actual geography or group; sometimes it is just one street that is serving as a hotbed. By targeting the whole neighbourhood, you run the risk of stigmatising a whole community.

- Showcase initiatives and individuals that contribute to a more positive outlook on the neighbourhood and therefore show the resilience of people living in the neighbourhoods or communities.

- When considering to publicly speak to extremists, make sure there is an in-depth understanding of the internal dynamics of the affected sub-community. A public dialogue between extremists and policymakers could weaken pro-democratic opposition and could strengthen the standing of extremists. This has happened in different cases, for example in Germany and the Netherlands.

- Once an extremist group is building up a hotbed, policymakers should establish a qualified taskforce with staff from different institutions that will apply general administrative measures to slow down or hinder the development. This could include audits on taxation and donations and the proper implementation of building or labour regulations.

- As soon as evidence is available that an extremist group is building a hotbed to recruit individuals for illegal activities, proceedings leading to a full legal ban of this group should be considered.

Follow-up

The key elements of hotbeds of radicalisation and potentially effective preventive- and countermeasures are under-researched topics and need more input from practitioners and researchers. Follow-up actions by the RAN and the European Commission, for example additional interdisciplinary expert meetings and workshops that focus on the identified key factors contributing to hotbeds of radicalisation or on collecting more local good P/CVE practices, are advised.

Further reading

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