



# Dealing with extremism in an educational environment in the Western Balkans

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Radicalisation Awareness Network

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## Introduction & context

The Western Balkans is a region that is still affected by the consequences of recent conflicts, and growing ethno-nationalist extremism. Young people often lack knowledge about “other” religions and ethno-national groups in their communities, which provides fertile ground for intolerance and animosity among members of various nationalities or religions. Furthermore, poor socio-economic conditions, high unemployment and low standard of living are also characteristics of the Western Balkans. To top it all off, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk of young people in the Western Balkans more susceptible to radicalisation due to factors such as the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation, and social isolation.<sup>1</sup> These are some of the biggest challenges faced by the school staff and young people in the Western Balkans that can contribute to young people accepting some of the radical and extremist narratives and messages they encounter both online and offline. In addition, sufficient institutional capacities in the education sector that would prevent violent extremism in the education sector are yet to be developed and so is a comprehensive strategy to deal with this problem. Education practitioners in the Western Balkan region need support and guidance to better understand their role and deal with extremism in school.

The objectives of this paper are to:

- highlight the significance of the education system and schools in dealing with radicalisation and violent extremism;
- provide general guidelines and practical tips for addressing students exposed to extremist ideologies in a school environment;
- present methods for handling sensitive topics related to violent extremism in the classroom;
- provide information on existing models that aim to foster critical thinking and positive dialogue between teachers and students, focusing on sensitive topics concerning violent extremism in the region.

The target audience for this paper is teachers and education professionals in schools (particularly secondary schools) in the Western Balkan region. At the beginning of the paper, we will examine the role of education and schools in recognising, preventing and dealing with violent extremism. It will focus on the key knowledge and information required by teachers to effectively deal with these topics in the classroom. We will also discuss how teachers should respond to the extremist narratives and provocations in the classroom and how they can deal with various sensitive and contentious topics related to violent extremism.

We will also present different types of extremist ideologies and various responses and pedagogical approaches. Teachers can provide these to students with a view to enhancing awareness and building resilience towards radicalisation. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and social media on youth radicalisation will also be discussed. The paper will provide recommendations and suggestions for school-wide initiatives to support P/CVE efforts, recognising that it not only the responsibility of individual teachers.

In the second part of the paper, existing approaches and methods for promoting critical thinking and constructive communication both from the European Union and the Western Balkans will be presented. These can serve as a foundation for further education and skill development of teachers in the Western Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise.

## The role of schools in dealing with violent extremism

Schools are key institutions for strengthening resilience and preventing young people from becoming drawn to radical ideologies and organisations. As observers of potential changes in behaviour that could signify radicalisation, teachers are important intermediaries for those impacted, including the individuals themselves, their families, and friends.

In addition to observing their students, teachers also create a safe and inclusive environment that cultivates citizenship, critical thinking and identity formation. This approach is the strongest defence against extremist ideologies that threaten the rule of law and fundamental rights in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Western Balkans region lacks comprehensive strategies for addressing violent extremism in schools. This makes it a responsibility for individual teachers.

## What key knowledge and information do teachers need?

While mentioning different ways governments can support schools and teachers in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), a 2019 RAN paper recognised that schools should invest in training for all teaching staff so that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to detect the signs of radicalisation and intervene effectively.<sup>3</sup>

This P/CVE approach requires teachers to learn about controversial issues, religious and other aspects of diversity, human rights, current counter-terrorism legislation and school protection policies. They should know how to identify problems and how they are related to different age groups and different types of extremism.<sup>4</sup>

**To strengthen the role of the teacher in P/CVE, it is recommended that teachers have the following information and knowledge:**

- Understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and radicalisation.
- Knowledge of the radicalisation processes and radicalisation indicators.
- Awareness of the various causes of violent extremism and protective factors.
- Information about key mobilisers/recruiters at the national, regional and global levels.
- Knowledge of (national) legislation and school policies and procedures concerning protection against violence and discrimination.
- Familiarity with school resources when it comes to preventive action.

## Part 1: General guidelines

This section presents general guidelines for teachers on how to handle various controversial topics related to violent extremism and how to respond to extremist narratives and provocations in the classroom including consideration of the influence of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic on extremist narratives.

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<sup>2</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2016). *The role of education in preventing radicalisation*.

<sup>3</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2019). Education and radicalisation prevention: Different ways governments can support schools and teachers in preventing/countering violent extremism.

<sup>4</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network/Edu. (2017). *Guide on training programmes. 'Effective and confident teachers and other school staff'*.

## Dealing with various topics related to extremism

Teachers often face difficulties in finding reliable information and taking a stand on controversial issues<sup>5</sup>, such as radicalisation and violent extremism.<sup>6</sup> This can be either in response to students' spontaneous questions, remarks and discussions around such topics or when teaching controversial subjects. For example, Stradling (1984) notes: "It simply is not possible to lay down hard-and-fast rules about teaching controversial subject matter to be applied at all times. The teacher has to take account of the knowledge, values and experiences which the students bring with them into the classroom; the teaching methods which predominate in other lessons; the classroom climate and the age and ability of the students".<sup>7</sup>

The Council of Europe provides practical suggestions for teaching controversial issues. These include the following:<sup>8</sup>

- Improving teachers' personal awareness and self-reflection.
- Increasing awareness of the nature of controversial issues and the challenges they pose.
- Understanding the make-up of the class and school environment.
- Use and apply a range of teaching styles.
- Create an appropriate classroom atmosphere and support a democratic school culture.
- Introduce students to democratic frameworks and conflict resolution strategies that can help them understand and practice non-violent methods for engaging in discussions and resolving conflicts.
- Eschew the role of "knowledgeable expert".
- Train students to identify bias.
- Plan and manage discussion effectively.
- Involve other stakeholders and teachers

RAN also recommends discussing cultures, religion, ideology and identity in the classroom. During these discussions, it is important to appreciate the diversity of students and foster an inclusive environment where all identities are respected. For example, a good starting point to work with students is their feeling that their identity is 'under attack'. Education professionals in schools can either try to cope with the differences or look for similarities and focus on what students have in common. The ideology of equality should be part of the school ethos.<sup>9</sup>

Considering all of the above, it can be concluded that it is important that teachers initiate talks about difficult topics in schools, such as ideologically motivated violence, political issues, religious and other aspects of diversity, conspiracy theories, and the like. Rather than behave like experts in the classroom, teachers should provide a safe space where students feel comfortable to express their own opinions.

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<sup>5</sup> The Council of Europe defines these as 'Issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society' (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015 : 13). These can be long-standing issues such as sectarian divisions and tensions between different groups, or very recent issues such as radicalisation and extremism, but also cyber-bullying, among others.

<sup>6</sup> Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (Eds) (2015). *Teaching controversial issues*.

<sup>7</sup> Stradling, R., Noctor, M., Baines, B. (1984). *Teaching Controversial Issues*.

<sup>8</sup> Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (Eds) (2015). *Teaching controversial issues*.

<sup>9</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network/Edu. (2017). *Guide on training programmes. 'Effective and confident teachers and other school staff'*.

## Dealing with extremist ideas and narratives in the classroom

How to react when faced with opinions, attitudes and ideas of students who approve of violent behaviours, i.e. students who might be vulnerable to radicalisation? Sometimes, teachers may also need to address students who have already formed strong opinions in line with extremist groups.

Teachers face challenges in identifying and addressing these issues in a safe and open manner. Failing to address these issues could fuel extremist narrative and put students at risk.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, if a student spreads radical religious or extremist ideologies and distributes promotional material with violent and extremist content to classmates, the teacher should act immediately. There is a risk the radicalised student's will have a toxic influence on the other students. The teacher should engage in a conversation with the student and ask about the source of these views (or propaganda material). The next step is to inform the school administration, which in turn should contact and work with the parents, social services and, if necessary, the police, especially if the content of the material is concerning, potentially harmful or illegal.<sup>11</sup>

A RAN paper<sup>12</sup> on dealing with far-right extremism in the classroom stressed that this form of extremism is often overlooked in P/CVE strategies. Schools must pay attention to this phenomenon because it takes only a few students expressing hate speech, polarising messages and/or extremist political views to deteriorate the climate in a school. When speaking with these students, teachers should avoid making generalisations or assumptions about their ideologies, as this could hinder a dialogue. If students are making far-right comments during lessons, it is best to keep them within the classroom even when physically separating such students from their classmates seems like a good option. Punishing these students is nothing more than a quick fix that might push them towards far-right groups where they feel more accepted. It is important to understand what is behind the students' feelings and thoughts. Asking the right questions will stimulate critical thinking. Ignoring specific topics does not mean that students will not discuss them.<sup>13</sup>

To effectively address extremist ideologies in the classroom, it is important to enhance teachers' skills in constructive conflict resolution and assertive communication. This is crucial in situations where the student is violent. In such circumstances, it is important that students are involved in the discussion and that they understand the causes and processes of conflict escalation leading to the use of violence. After incidents of peer violence, or any other socially unacceptable confrontation in a school, it is important to involve all those involved in carefully prepared activities designed to help them recognise and overcome inappropriate reactions in crisis situations.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst addressing the issue of violent extremism in the classroom, it is crucial to foster self-reflection and deliberate action among teachers. This means encouraging them to consider

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<sup>9</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, Prevent. (2015). *Manifesto for education – Empowering educators and schools*.

<sup>10</sup> Đorić, M. (2020). Manual for recognition, prevention and countering radicalization and violent extremism among students - for teachers of primary and secondary schools in Montenegro

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> RAN. (2019). *RAN EDU Academy: Far-right extremism in the classroom*.

how their personal beliefs and values impact their professional views about the controversial material and its handling. Teachers must be aware of and sensitive about how their personal experience regarding these topics may influence how they respond in the classroom.<sup>15</sup>

## The influence of social media

Social media networks provide a fertile ground for extremists to recruit new members. Teachers should be aware of the popular online platforms used by students and the potential dangers associated with them. To promote safety, teachers should also encourage students to develop resilience and critical thinking skills.

Teachers should be well informed about internet threats when it comes to recruiting young people for extremist groups: how extremist propaganda spreads online, what are the most common messages that extremists send online, how extremists recruit young people online. They should present their findings to students. If they do not have enough knowledge in this area, they can invite an expert to creatively explain to students how they should behave in the online space and recognise the influence of extremist groups. In this way, they will build a culture of online behavioural safety among their students.<sup>16</sup>

Teachers can also use online material to start a conversation with their students about the need to critically approach online content, especially on social media.<sup>17</sup> The online dimension of radicalisation in the Western Balkans remains little understood.<sup>18</sup> Particularly concerning is the dissemination of right-wing extremist narratives. This includes spreading hate speech and fake news, taking part in active online attacks on political opponents (trolling), and discussing and exchanging extremist views. It is not always easy for practitioners (including teachers) to gain insight into what is going on because students use coded language and vocabulary. Analysing and understanding online far-right messages is challenging because they can be presented as jokes to masquerade the underlying hate speech or violent ideas. Young people often use memes that may be ambiguous, and it is recommended that teachers consider these and other online phenomena. Students may not always be aware of the messages behind provocative content that is being disseminated. This offers opportunities for discussion, whilst the analysis of such phenomena may serve as part of building media literacy skills.<sup>19</sup>

## The COVID-19 pandemic and extremist narratives

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges in preventing and countering violent extremism. The pandemic has contributed to an increased risk of radicalisation among young people through the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, increased influence of social media and social isolation.

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<sup>13</sup> Kerr, D., & Huddleston, T. (Eds) (2015). *Teaching controversial issues*.

<sup>14</sup> Đorić, M. (2020). *Manual for recognition, prevention and countering radicalization and violent extremism among students - for teachers of primary and secondary schools in Montenegro* <sup>15</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, Prevent. (2015). *Manifesto for education – Empowering educators and schools*.

<sup>16</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2019). *RAN EDU Academy: Far-right extremism in the classroom*.

<sup>17</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). *COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise*.

<sup>18</sup> RAN in the Western Balkans. (2022) *Online radicalisation and P/CVE approaches in the Western Balkans*, Regional small-scale meeting 16 June 2022. [add link].



A recent RAN conclusion paper<sup>20</sup> aimed to help teachers discuss about polarising narratives concerning COVID-19. The paper highlighted the importance of a creative approach to information so that students can assess their convictions and arguments. RAN practitioners have stated that during discussions with students concepts such as facts and opinions, media reliability and argumentation are important. As such, it is recommended that students are asked to think about where the information comes from, question their sources and do not trust everything they see and read on social media.

When it comes to conspiracy theories, depersonalising and distancing strategies may be effective teaching methods. Where there is a particularly sensitive issue, it may be safer to approach it directly. One example of such a strategy is to teach about conspiracy theories that existed in the past. This way, students will be less emotionally involved with the conspiracy (i.e. depersonalised) and more open to discussion, critical thinking and different perspectives. These strategies help prevent explosive topics to get out of hand and enable students to put aside their initial prejudices and assumptions and become more open to the complexity of the topic they are discussing.

### **When dealing with P/CVE, teachers should:**

1. Inform and raise students' awareness of the risks of extremism.
2. Develop students' critical thinking.
3. Educate young people about democratic values, political, religious and ethnic tolerance.
4. Provide a safe space for dialogue about difficult and controversial topics in the classroom.
5. Provide alternative narratives to the extremist propaganda and views of the world.
6. Strengthen students' media literacy.
7. Build a safe online culture.

**When dealing with P/CVE, schools should:**

1. Create a safe and secure school environment for all students.
2. Promote tolerance and social inclusion.
3. Prevent violence and discrimination among students.
4. Raise employees' awareness of the dangers of violent extremism.
5. Build staff capacity for constructive conflict resolution.
6. Establish partnerships with non-government organisations, external experts and representatives of religious communities.

## Part 2: Existing Approaches and Methods for Teachers and Schools in P/CVE

This chapter will focus on practical and relevant approaches for **education practitioners looking to enhance their skills and knowledge in the field of P/CVE**. It will also provide methods of self-education and professional development. The practices presented are from the Western Balkans region and across the EU. However, these are only a selection of what is available. There are many more significant projects in the field which could not be presented in this paper.

Prevention work in the education field concerning violent extremism and radicalisation that can lead to violent forms of extremism or terrorism can be divided in the following two categories.

1. Prevention oriented towards teachers/educational practitioners and differentiating three types of actions/roles:
  - a. Capacity building programmes for teachers/educational practitioners:
    - i. In-service training for the pedagogical staff of a school
    - ii. Multi-sectoral training with other social partners (social workers, health workers, youth workers, etc.)
  - b. Study visits with both education staff and relevant social partners
  - c. Engagement of teachers in a local cross-sectoral P/CVE team
2. Prevention targeted at schools/institutions consists of two types of measures:
  - a. Schools serving as community centres and creating dedicated spaces and workshops
  - b. Schools playing a lead role in P/CVE work in the local community

Before introducing the inspiring practices, it is crucial to note that the initial step in planning any P/CVE intervention in education should be an understanding of two key principles.

1. 'Do-No-Harm principle' answers the question: Will I do more harm than good with my intervention?
2. 'Whole-of-society approach' answers the question: Have I involved all relevant partners in planning or implementing my intervention?

It is important to remember that in prevention work, practitioners do not stand alone. Teachers, school management and education practitioners have multiple allies. Civil society practitioners

have proven to be highly valuable in the Western Balkans. It is advisable to use all resources available locally. In the case of civil society organisations (CSOs), they often have developed training programmes for teachers and prevention activities for students. These are readily available or can quickly support multi-sectoral approaches tailored to a specific school, class or a young person. Therefore, it is relevant to reach out to other P/CVE practitioners such as CSOs that are developing structures and approaches in this field.

## Practices oriented towards teachers and educational practitioners

### In-service teacher training

In the Western Balkans region, there are a number of teacher training courses on preventing and countering violent extremism. These have already been developed as part of professional development for teachers at school level. They have all been tested and approved by the Ministries of Education. A growing number of accredited training providers are currently developing more content, testing it or waiting for accreditation.

For example, in Montenegro there are two accredited P/CVE training programmes<sup>21</sup> available for all school teachers, as well as for high school and vocational school students. Professional development for teachers, which is required by law throughout the Western Balkans region, enables teachers to receive training on current trends in education, as well as on many social trends such as violent extremism, hate speech and cyberbullying. These are state-of-the-art materials tailored to the six Western Balkan countries (WB6).

The recent training in Montenegro led to the creation of a P/CVE action plan at school level<sup>22</sup>. Activities included workshops, teacher trainings, work with Student Parliaments, inter-school student visits, artistic performances, visits to local immigration centres, etc. For interested teachers and practitioners, further information on all accredited P/CVE teacher training courses and programmes can be found through the education ministries in their countries.

### Multi-sectoral training with other social partners (social and health workers, youth workers).

In Kosovo, the EU-funded training "Together to Prevent and Counter violent extremism"<sup>23</sup> was carried out in seven regions between 2020 and 2022. This initiative brought together education practitioners with representatives of CSOs, local community imams, members of the business community, students and youth activists, as well as education practitioners, retired teachers and municipal officials. This whole-of-society approach was also demonstrated through a joint learning experience.

Teachers in particular valued the hands-on activities through which they learned and practiced joint planning in P/CVE. The most commonly used joint planning model is the school-parent-police interaction model, elaborated below as an example. It was tested in the town of Gjilan/Gnjilane in Kosovo, where several cases were successfully handled, identifying persons at risk or vulnerable to extremism. They also facilitated the work of institutions and agencies involved. In these instances, identified and registered cases of arrested persons were treated by Referral Mechanism (RM), a pilot project in Gjilan Municipality. The RM in Gjilan Municipality serves for the early identification of persons at risk or vulnerable to radicalism and violent

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<sup>21</sup> Professional teacher training catalog accredited programs for 2020 in Montenegro <https://cso.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=417057&rType=2&file=Katalog%20programa%20strucnog%20usavrsavanja.docx> page 281 and 285.

<sup>22</sup> E publication and article <https://djecarnegore.me/kole-kao-resurs-za-prevenciju-i-suzbijanje-govora-mrnje-ekstremi>

<sup>23</sup> NGO Partners Kosova centre for conflict management, <http://partnerskosova.org/>

extremism, as well as to facilitate the work of all institutions and agencies engaged in the multi-stakeholder case management of individuals at risk of radical or violent extremist behaviours.

In Albania, teachers and education institutions play a crucial role as part of a multi-sectoral approach in protecting children as the most vulnerable members of our society, as well as in prevention and resocialisation of child returnees from conflict zones.<sup>24</sup> In a long process of rehabilitation that requires the involvement of several state institutions, community and civil society, religious institutions or other social structures, an approach is taken that involves the whole society.

This common approach has the following core dimensions:

- Prevention of VE in schools through the School as Community Centre model which relies on the collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach in terms of inclusiveness and shared responsibilities of all actors. This makes it a unique model of the hitherto functioning of SCC approach in Albania. The SCC model (introduced for the first time by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation- under the support of the US Embassy in Albania) integrates several activities organised by the school, in cooperation with other local actors, such as the government institutions and the law enforcement agencies. Each year the schools part of the SCC network in Albania, design their own "Yearly SCC plan" and its activities are coordinated by the teacher-coordinator of SCC (as a school contact point for P/CVE). Some of the activities organised in frame of this plan are:
  1. Discussion meetings between parents, teachers and school psychologists/social workers on the role of psychosocial services for students and breaking "taboos" on the individual-psychologist relationship.
  2. Open meetings among students, youth in the community and health service workers on various healthcare issues.
  3. Sport activities among high school students and among students from different schools in the communities.
  4. Regular meetings between students and local police.
  5. Regular meetings between students/youth and municipalities aiming to increase youth engagement in local decision-making.
- Reintegration of children returned from conflict areas through the development of special educational programmes in public schools. The aim of these programmes is to support the integration at the educational level based on their knowledge. The children also receive medical/psychosocial treatment based on the assessments/screening carried out during the return phase and continuous monitoring of their social skills or psychosocial health.

### Additional programmes for teachers and educational practitioners

It is also possible and highly advisable for teachers to inquire about open, ongoing calls for capacity-building programmes, such as the Leaders against Intolerance and Violent Extremism (LIVE)<sup>25</sup> training courses for community leaders run by the OSCE Transnational Threats Division in the region. LIVE aims to strengthen participants' understanding of violent extremism and teach human rights-compliant methods to prevent and counter it. In addition, the courses provide participants with relevant skills to address local manifestations of violent extremism and develop their own ideas for action, with a focus on prevention, conflict resolution, critical thinking and strategic communication. It also strengthens participants' knowledge and ability to work with other actors, including law enforcement and other agencies. Furthermore, the RAN Practitioners e-learning module on dealing with radicalisation and polarisation in the classroom provides an on-demand learning resource for teachers, educational staff and

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with P/CVE Expert Ms. Dalina Jashari.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.osce.org/node/476476>

school-based social workers to identify and deal with dynamics of radicalisation and polarisation in educational settings.

## Practices targeted at schools

Schools and education institutions in the Western Balkans region play a key role when it comes to P/CVE. This section focuses on good practices that engage not only individual teachers, but the whole school or relevant institutions that can support prevention efforts.

### Schools as community centres

This is an interesting approach to preventing VE in the context of education in Albania. Twenty-two general secondary schools were included in the 'School as community centre' (SCC) multi-sectoral approach. It was implemented between 2017 and 2022 as part of the ongoing Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) project to create resilient communities against violent extremism in Albania.<sup>26</sup>

Key SCC practices at the local level are:

- Establishment and functioning of the School Community Centre Advisory Group involving all stakeholders at the local level - school, municipality, police, parent council, students, religious community.
- Development of the activity plan for the SCC based on a comprehensive methodology and close coordination with the stakeholders in the school (students, teachers, parents), the community and the police. The plan is based on school-community-police interaction to empower young people and promote their activism in the community.
- Supporting the creation of multi-functional classrooms in the schools, equipped with furniture, computers and a library with many books necessary for the students, but also for the young people and the community.
- Involving young people in decision-making processes at the local level through participation in community council meetings, allowing for more interaction of young people with local government representatives.

The main lessons learned are described below.

The implementation of the "School as Community Centre" model has been limited, demonstrating that it is not solely the responsibility of the school, but also of the educators and students. So far, the initiatives have mainly been limited to extracurricular projects within certain subjects. The lack of successful implementation has been attributed to the insufficient involvement of local stakeholders. As such, the educational institution should not be seen as having the sole responsibility for the implementation of this model.

In this context, several local actors were assisted to become engaged in the SCC activities.

The targeted **municipalities** were encouraged to engage in P/CVE efforts. They were provided with a structured and coordinated approach that facilitates cooperation and mutual commitment. Also, local government agencies were encouraged to establish longstanding partnerships with stakeholders (particularly local law enforcement agencies) in order to address community needs.

**Police** engagement in the activities throughout the project implementation is crucial. It addresses some of the challenges that these institutions face at local level, particularly those related to the low levels of public trust, and a lack of knowledge and interaction with the local

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<sup>26</sup> <https://shkollaime.org/> and <https://idmalbania.org/scc-beyond-school-framework/>

community, especially with youth, parents and teachers of the targeted secondary schools in the targeted municipalities.

The local **business** community's experience from the projects revealed that this is one of the most neglected stakeholders. In this regard, the SCC model contributes to involve the local business community aiming to pay attention to the necessity for vocational skills training among youth. This also responds to the needs of the local businesses for trained employees.

The **youth** communities in remote municipalities of Albania face several challenging issues. These include a lack of opportunities/infrastructure to engage in sport and cultural activities; discrimination based on their background, disabilities, gender or religious beliefs; lack of positive role models; and a lack of engagement in the local decision-making. There is also a lack of cooperation and communication between students, teachers, students, parents, and psychologists and social workers within the education institutions. In this context, the activities under the SCC model focus on increasing knowledge, awareness and ownership of the local youth communities as regards key important issues related to community resilience. These include community engagement, volunteerism, problem-solving and empathy, institutional accountability, social businesses and use of local resources, etc.

**Schools** should play a key role in preventing hate speech, radicalisation and extremism, but not bear the sole responsibility of a centre. A participatory approach involving all relevant stakeholders, including young people, can result in successful prevention programmes. In Montenegro<sup>27</sup>, for example, a participatory approach was taken by NGOs and associations of pedagogues in a similar programme. This involved all relevant stakeholders, including young people, in the implementation of the programme which was similar to the school action plans. This created a new component of networking with schools carrying out different pedagogical approaches and their management. It was a simple step that enormously helped teachers and school management to develop successful prevention programmes. It also supported them in their peer review methods by learning from others' experiences and thus promoting improvements. Through this project, schools developed action plans for P/CVE and hate speech prevention with the support of mentors. In this way, tailored, activity-rich and inclusive school action plans are being created across Montenegro.

The project design included education, capacity-building activities, and networking at different levels: professional school support staff (pedagogues and psychologists), teachers and students in the targeted communities. During the project phase, trained school staff and teachers partnered with other schools and implemented diverse community initiatives through mentored follow-up activities. These initiatives included workshops, visits to local immigration centers, inter-school student visits, and school performances. The training programme for teachers has been accredited and enlisted in the professional teachers training which will ensure long-term impact.

## Examples from other parts of Europe

Among the numerous inspiring practices from across the EU and which are included in the [RAN collection](#), we will focus on two projects from Western Europe. Both projects can serve as inspiration for practitioners in the Western Balkans in working with schools on various initiatives.

More specifically, these methods can be used by teachers and schools, as is common in Europe, or by civil society partners for support activities.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://djecacrnegore.me/data/163/Publikacija-%C5%A0KOLE-KAO-RESURS-ZA-PREVENCIJU-I-SUZBIJANJE-GM-E-i-R.pdf>



## Grassroots inspired multi-sectoral approaches in Belgium

Belgium, a country struggling with a disproportionate number of P/CVE cases at the European level (both in terms of population and absolute numbers) has taken a decentralised approach. Pilot cities such as Antwerp, Mechelen and Vilvoorde are developing their own ways to deal with extremism. In turn, this has paved the way to a multi-sectoral approach based on the capacities of organisations from different institutions.

For example, the city of Mechelen has conducted intensive resilience trainings for teachers, youth workers and prevention officers.<sup>28</sup> In this way, each professional could be trained to promote resilience in young people. The train-the-trainer programme had an unexpected positive effect. Indeed, teachers who had participated found they felt more comfortable in dealing with precarious situations afterwards, which prevented unnecessary escalations and enabled real support for young people at all stages of grievance. The project in Mechelen also assigned teaching assistants to the classrooms. These were mainly youth workers who were closer to young people than other pedagogical practitioners. This proactive approach ensures the young person concerned does not suffer further harm and that responses remain proportionate, especially given the constant possibility of false positive referrals. On the other hand, youth workers can help teachers look at situations with young people from a different perspective. This can be supportive, especially in difficult cases.

## ORPHEUS Safe Spaces

Online and Offline Prevention of Radicalisation Holding back Extremism and Upholding Security ([ORPHEUS](#)) is a consortium between partners from France (Calais), the Netherlands (Dordrecht) and England (Portsmouth). Funded by the European Regional Development Fund (InterReg2Seas), its aim is to take an effective look at how to deal with extremism, and build on this with methods from all sectors and at all levels of engagement.

Most professionals working in the field of P/CVE have a preventive function and should not stigmatise young people with the label 'VE', but empower them to reintegrate into society. However, ORPHEUS assumes that the young people might be prevented from doing so by grievances. Therefore, the goal of the project is to establish safe spaces for youth where their issues can be addressed in a confidential and non-judgemental manner. Professionals, including teachers and external actors, can use their existing education expertise aligned with European standards for addressing violence and abuse.

ORPHEUS provides professionals with tools to improve their skills, deal with controversial issues and address the dangers of online activities. The tools can be found on the [website](#) and include webinars, manuals and guides. Considering cultural differences and the specific needs youth, one of these guides relates to how the tools can be used in different context.

## Closing Remarks

This paper outlined the pedagogical approaches, practices and interventions to support teachers and educational practitioners in addressing the complex issue of violent extremism in the classroom. Although the role of teachers is crucial, the most effective solutions are achieved through a comprehensive school-wide approach to preventing violent extremism. This includes the creation of a supportive environment for all students, fostering tolerance and social inclusion, and establishing partnerships between the school and community.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.sensespraktijkhuis.be/specialist/bram-de-groote/>

The analysis demonstrates that while not all schools in the Western Balkans have access to programmes, materials and activities to prevent violent extremism, there are existing programmes and initiatives that can serve as a useful reference for school personnel. Teachers and educational practitioners in the Western Balkans have the opportunity to gain knowledge about P/CVE through projects run by civil society organisations that aim to understand the phenomenon, understand its drivers and develop prevention measures. To a lesser extent, lessons can also benefit from related programmes focussed on effectively managing interdisciplinary teams and defining the role of the teacher in these teams.

It is recommended to establish a network of educational practitioners and encourage the sharing of knowledge and experiences, peer learning, and the development of a community of practitioners. This approach can aid in the dissemination of knowledge among practitioners.

When dealing with P/CVE, teachers can draw on existing approaches and resources:

1. External support from CSOs, the local community, the state P/CVE coordinator
2. Online webinars, trainings and tools
3. Alliances with other community members and forming a team
4. Methods that build on teachers' existing expertise

Resources and tools from Western Europe, while not fully applicable to the Western Balkans context, offer valuable insights.

Regardless of the approach chosen, there are two guiding principles that should be considered before using P/CVE.

1. Schools play a crucial role in preventing VE. As such, all P/CVE efforts must be collaborative and take a whole-of-society approach, sharing the responsibilities across sectors.
2. Before taking any actions, it is important to consider whether they may cause harm. The goal is to offer support without causing any negative consequences.

## Further reading

The documentary film “*Resilient. React. Rebuild.*” has been produced in four languages: English, BiH-MNE-SRB, Albanian, and Macedonian. It provides practical and easily understandable strategies for promoting resilience against radicalisation, making it useful resource for educators and others working in educational settings. All language versions are available on YouTube.

- BiH-MNE-SRB: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKuqsa2rsAA>
- Macedonian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7CeWXoG1wA>
- Albanian: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj7C4dE\\_0Vk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj7C4dE_0Vk)
- English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHYQ9N-JXF8&t=464s>

How to prevent risky behaviour among students: Guidebook on application of interactive learning in workshops, Publisher: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), January 2022 <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-serbia/510515>

Information and resources on ORPHEUS project (English): <https://orpheusproject.webflow.io/>



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