CONCLUSION PAPER
Digital small-scale expert meeting
19 April 2024, WebEx

Attitudes towards migration and the impact on P/CVE

Key outcomes

Migration, and more precisely immigration, is an important, relevant and often polarising topic in society and in politics. The reality and perception of the different forms of immigration both feed into the breeding ground of extremism and are exploited in extremist narratives.

On 19 April 2024, a group of RAN Practitioners gathered a small group of experts and practitioners with the objective of broadening our understanding of the way anti-immigrant attitudes can develop, and how these developments can feed into the breeding ground for specific forms of extremism. They have collected insights and recommendations on how the practitioners can be supported to prevent and counter extremism, both violent and non-violent, in connection with anti-migration sentiments.

The key outcomes of the meeting were the following:

- Negative attitudes towards immigration are observed across the political spectrum, including the far left.

- The attitudes towards migration are influenced by factors, such as the perception of a symbolic threat (national identity and culture) or a growing threat to resources, as well as the loss of citizens' trust in governments and the European Union. The fact that political parties, such as populist and nationalist parties, exploit sentiments surrounding migration, as well as the framing by the media on aspects of immigration, also influence the way migration is viewed.

- The scale of right-wing extremism and radicalisation has changed to a more mainstream phenomenon. This is amplified by social media that exert influence on large parts of the population that do not hold extremist views, by operating in a grey zone.

- The rise of extremism in the mainstream, not only on immigration, but also on issues like climate change, as well as the involvement of certain politicians, call for new definitions for violent and non-violent extremism, to help address apprehension around migration.

This paper summarises the main takeaways of the discussion, including the different types of migration and anti-immigrant discourses, which are the main drivers for anti-immigrant attitudes and current developments. These are followed by recommendations, and a description of applicable practices and projects.

Highlights of the discussion

Different types of migration and responses

Fuelled by climate change and the loss of employment opportunities due to globalisation, international migration is expected to grow substantially in the future ([1]).

During the discussion, the participants shared stories that illustrated the different types of migration and the different responses that the arrival and presence of migrant groups may attract:

- Migrants have different backgrounds, ranging from illegal migrants and cheap-labour migrants to political refugees and well-paid expats. They may come from Asia, Africa or from other parts of Europe.

- Migrants also have different religions, a factor affecting how tolerant the receiving countries are towards accepting them. For example, it was discussed that Muslim migrants are less likely to be accepted in European countries.

- Compared to refugees from other regions and religions, Ukrainians fleeing the Russian war of aggression are more likely to be accepted. This frustrates refugees, whose reception was less welcoming, leading them to complain about double standards.

- In certain countries, migrants who arrived decades ago, or even half a century ago, are relatively well-integrated and sometimes regarded as "model migrants". However, those migrants may be harbouring negative attitudes towards recent migrants, fearing that any issues with the newcomers might reflect poorly on them as well.

Different anti-migrant discourses

Professor Katrine Fangen, from the University of Oslo, gave a short presentation on anti-migrant discourses in Europe (Norway, Italy, UK, Germany, and Austria) ([2]). According to her research, attitudes towards migration can be found across the political spectrum:

- The radical right takes an anti-globalist and nativist (ethno-nationalist) stance. Common narratives are: "it is us against the corrupt elite" and "the corrupt elite tries to tear down national cultures by encouraging migration". The radical right holds deep scepticism towards migration, with immigration being viewed as the main threat for a country's state and welfare.

- The moderate right aspires to modify global agreements to limit asylum seekers and cheap-labour migrants. Prevalent narratives are: "help refugees in safe third world countries, and not in Europe", or "immigration is a threat to the cohesion of the nation".

- The radical left takes an anti-globalist and anti-capitalist stance. Common narratives are "it is us against the corrupt elite, and immigrants are victims of the global elite's profit-driven efforts", or "the elite destroys the nation both here and in immigrants' home countries". The radical left claims that the elite uses immigrants for cheap labour and to fulfil the demands of the labour market.

- The moderate left wants to use global agreements to control migration to help secure the cohesion of the welfare state.

During the presentation, other observations were also shared:

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- In some countries, migration itself is not considered a major issue, but migration leading to a growth of the Muslim population is seen as problematic.

- Anti-migration feelings flourish when migration is discussed at group level, increasing the perceived distance from the individuals in question, thereby dehumanising migrants. However, attitudes towards migration tend to be less hostile, when an individual talks to a neighbour or a colleague.

Factors contributing to a rise in anti-immigration attitudes

Attitudes towards migration are negatively influenced by the following factors, amongst others:

1. the loss of **citizens' trust in governments and the European Union**, when they seem unable to adequately regulate and manage the process of regular and irregular migration, and border control;

2. the perception of a growing **threat**, including the fear that immigrants might compete for scarce resources, such as jobs, welfare benefits, affordable housing, and sufficient public services, or that they might pose a security risk to the host country. There are limitations to the extent societies can facilitate and integrate newcomers ([3]) ([4]);

3. the perception of a **symbolic threat**, including concerns that immigrants might undermine the identity, culture, and values of the host country, especially if they have different religious or ethnic backgrounds ([5]);

4. **political factors**, such as the rise of populist and nationalist parties that exploit anti-immigrant sentiments, and government policies and regulations on immigration and integration;

5. **media framing** focusing on selected aspects of immigration, selective exposure through social media, and disinformation.

Developments in extremism: normalisation

As it was discussed, extreme narratives about migrants are employed by political parties and extremist groups. This leads to normalising such narratives and exploiting anti-migrant feelings. This is done by:

- Trying to broaden the Overton Window and employing a strategy of normalising extremist narratives. Through "just joking" memes and "just asking", extremist narratives are introduced and spread in the public domain. By this, some narratives don't shock anymore, and extreme ideas are becoming more acceptable (6). According to Overton, the window frames the range of policies that a politician can recommend without appearing extreme. Considering that the populist parties in certain countries are gaining more power, anti-migrant narratives are getting more common.

Consequently, identifying extremist content and acting on it is getting harder, because of the use of borderline content, memes, videos, and jokes. This is also the case for extremist content on migration.
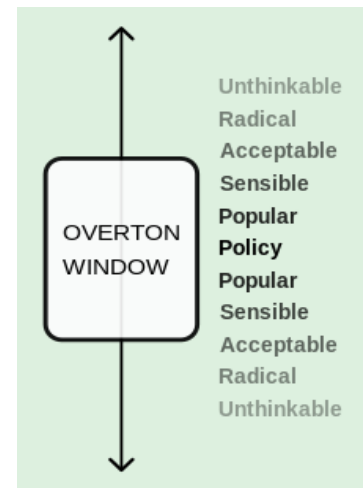
Figure 1 by Hydrargyrum on Wikipedia

([3]) VALA, J., PEREIRA, C., & RAMOS, A., "Racial prejudice, threat perception and opposition to immigration: A comparative analysis", *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, 2006, vol. 5, no 2, p.120

([4]) Pellegrini, V., De Cristofaro, V., Salvati, M. *et al.*, Social Exclusion and Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Europe: The mediating role of Interpersonal Trust. *Soc Indic Res* 155, 697–724 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-021-02618-6

([5]) GUIA, A., "The concept of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe", *European University Institute – Max Weber Programme*, 2016, p.11

([6]) Figure 1 Hydrargyrum illustrates the Overton Window in combination with Joshua Treviñothe six degrees of acceptance of public ideas

Challenges for P/CVE practitioners

During the discussion, it was determined that the way radicalisation leads to extremism has changed, causing the following challenges for P/CVE practitioners:

- A significant proportion of the population hold strong views on the subject of migration. Such individuals may also be susceptible to radicalisation. This is different from P/CVE, as we know it, with an approach that often focuses on "vulnerable individuals or small groups". Is there a risk of group radicalisation?

- How might one distinguish between concerns or anger on migration and potential extremism? What constitutes a legitimate concern, and when does it become a harmful extremist narrative? And should a practitioner act?

- Who defines what extremism is? Especially around heavily politicised topics such as migration, climate, and agricultural policies, there is a risk that the definitions of extremism and P/CVE are blurred. Identifying extremism can thereby be more challenging.

Recommendations

- The developments regarding mainstream extremism (not only on migration, but also on topics, such as climate change) call for new definitions of extremism, to help prevent or counterbalance it. In the beginning, the focus was on preventing *violent* extremism, but now there are other threats to society and democracy. Broadening the definition of extremism to *harmful* extremism might be an alternative. "Harmful" in this case can be both violent and non-violent.

- Study and possibly refresh the models of radicalisation and recruitment, because the classic model of recruiters targeting a susceptible and vulnerable individual to radicalise them is not how extremism mechanisms currently operate. At present, mobilisation, radicalisation, and recruitment for extremism may occur both in the "real world" and offline, and they can affect individuals, small groups, and potentially significant proportions of the population.

- If mainstream extremism leads to uncertainty about what constitutes extremist speech, practitioners may hesitate to act in accordance with their mandate. It is imperative that practitioners receive training in the recognition of hate and extremist rhetoric, and that they are empowered, as well as provided with the resources to navigate the grey zone of attitudes that may or may not be extremist.

Follow-up

Migration will remain to be a defining issue for Europe's future. The migration dynamics, labour market developments, and demographics will need to be addressed in a way that mitigates the risk of individuals being mobilised and exploited by extremists. Because of the mainstreaming in society and the fact that politicians, but also governments, are involved in this phenomenon, it is imperative that the Knowledge Hub maintains a focus on this issue. Although the meeting was brief and limited in scope, due to the complexity of the problem, it is recommended that further attention is devoted to it with input from professionals, researchers, and policymakers.

Further reading

Dr. Katrine Fangen has published some relevant research:

Fangen, K. (2020), An observational study of the Norwegian far right, 15, Some reflections (taylorfrancis.com)

Fangen, K. & Lichtenberg, L., (2021). "Gender and family rhetoric on the German far right, Patterns of Prejudice", 55:1, pp. 71-93

Fangen, K. & Nilsen, M. R., (2021). Variations within the Norwegian far right: from neo-Nazism to anti-Islamism, Journal of Political Ideologies, 26:3, 278-297, Variations within the Norwegian far right: from neo-Nazism to anti-Islamism (tandfonline.com)

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