

16/09/2021

CSEP BRIEFING

COUNTER@CT

Project description

The [Counteract project](#) aims to disseminate an alternative narrative to prevent young migrants and refugees (16-25 years old) in Portugal from adhering to polarised and extremist online narratives.



The campaign is called #thisismystory and consists of four video narratives. Each narrative is told by people who are representative of the target audience. The narratives feature refugees and migrants describing their reason to flee or emigrate. The aim of these personal stories is to create an alternative narrative to messages depicting refugees and migrants in a negative way. Additionally, it aims to create understanding and compassion through such narratives. The project collaborated closely with government agencies, marketing specialist and civil society.

Through online engagements, the projects perception of the result was confirmed in several comments where people stated they felt the same or had similar experiences good and bad in their own integration process in Portugal. We can then comfortably say that we had both hate speech, as much as we could expect unfortunately, but also a large number of positive interactions and comments. This is testimony of positive perceptions of young people (including the project's main target group) but also Portuguese society as a whole.

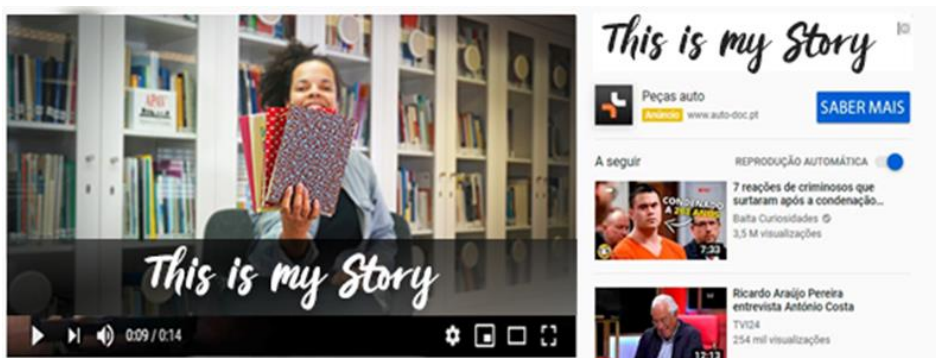
This paper follows a briefing structure that summarises the campaign, the main achievements of the project, the lessons learned on online campaigning in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and links to some of the campaign messages.



Brief summary of the campaign

#thisismystory is the claim of Counter@ct's online alternative narrative campaign that relies on real-life positive stories of integration of migrants and refugees in Portugal. These are first-person narratives and told by the migrants and refugees in their native language so that the message not only reaches other people within their communities, but also others in their home countries. The videos are subtitled in other representative languages spoken by other migrants in Portugal and in Spain. The success of the campaign greatly relies on in-depth desk research and in the knowledge gathered via the best practices shared in the CSEP events during last 4 years. Lastly, the campaign found its base in the effort and expertise of our consortium partners from the online communications and marketing agency, which presented us the concept of storytelling.

Furthermore, the impact assessment methodology was jointly designed with the expert partner in impact assessment, with insightful inputs from partners from law enforcement, intelligence services and civil society organisations that work very closely with young migrants and refugees.



The [GAMMA+ model](#) was considered a useful tool for designing a campaign. To properly apply it, there was a need to go beyond it. In an early stage, many challenges were faced in order to establish a consensus about what the definition of radicalisation is and which types of radical ideologies the campaign would cover. All this complexity had its consequences in the development of a model of what the campaign should and should not be.

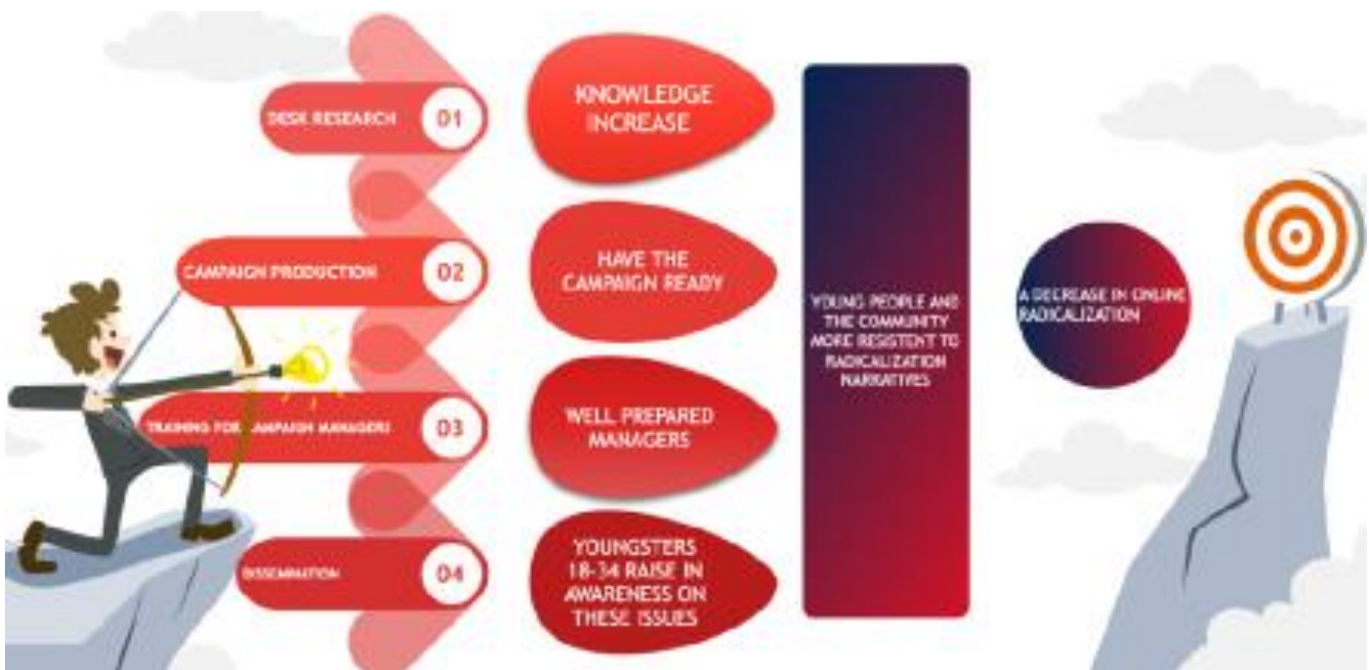
The goal was previously established: to change the mind-set of the target audience and make youngsters less prone to adhere to radical ideologies leading to violent extremism. Project Counter@ct focused on primary prevention due to the fact that in Portugal there is no significant phenomenon of terrorism and violent extremism, so the main goal was to undermine extremist propaganda through positive stories of integration of migrants and refugees.

It is important to mention that one of the conclusions of the desk research was the fact that difficulties in hosting and integrating migrants and refugees were exploited both by far-right populist movements and by jihadist extremists. In this sense, the main goal was to debunk the idea that there is no room for these migrants and refugees to live in Portugal so, at least in theory, undermining this idea would lessen the risk of migrants and refugees to simply leave the country and therefore contribute to the reduction of polarisation.

The risks were many. By showing positive stories of integration, it was possible to unintentionally give the idea that Portugal was a dream for foreigners looking for a better life. Also, if the campaign just showed positive stories of integration, it could potentially lead to alienation of the audience that would not relate to the testimonies.

If we wanted to summarise the core evaluation process and methodological options made, these would be the main points:

1. Created a shared understanding of the project strategy and goals using a Theory of Change.
2. Defined what impact was and what changes we aimed to evaluate.
3. Created an open and constant dialogue with the project partners and especially with the communications and project teams.
4. Developed an evaluation plan in line with the impact framework chosen.
5. Created a set of data collection tools, both online and offline, which granted us access to the relevant data to measure the process of implementation key points but, especially, the outcomes and outcomes to impacts causal connection.
6. Create an evaluation panel from both the primary and secondary target groups to access and react to the campaign in a before/after assessment strategy.
7. Collected and analysed in real-time the data from the campaign guaranteeing that we retrieved qualitative and quantitative indicators and metrics and go beyond online statistics.



Achievements

- **Data on views:** The videos with life stories from young migrants and refugees were seen 4 194 989 times (based on global data from Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). Considering the campaign separately at global numbers from Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, it could be concluded that the campaign had a strong reach in numbers. It also showed good interactions rapport.
- **The medium:** The Portuguese internet ecosystem of the campaign was stronger on Facebook than on any other platform.

- **Duration of video engagement:** From the global data of young migrant viewers (aged 18-24 years) that are both Portuguese-speaking migrants, the project concluded that young people were more prone to view the videos for a longer time. This is important as it can be seen as a confirmation that young people could easily relate to the young migrants and refugees' life stories, struggles and triumphs.
- **Call to Action:** Campaign staff focused on the campaign viewers that followed the campaigns 'Call to Action' and the overall campaign path. These represent the people with the highest engagement levels with the campaign and were the *explorers* that revealed interest to fully engage with the alternative narrative campaign and understand this young migrants and refugees life stories. Most of the people who navigated the full campaign path and followed the 'Call to Action' of the campaign *started their journey* on Facebook.
- **The Arab speaking target audience:** The project had 317 viewing sessions started by Arab-speaking young people (aged 18-24 years). This number is relevant because Portugal received considering Portugal received just under 1 500 refugees from 2015 to 2018, and only 721 refugees (23 from Syria) between 2019 and April 2021.
- **Hate speech vs supporting messages:** One important aspect to consider is the engagement reached online with the reactions from viewers and their comments online either on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. The number of comments was particularly relevant on Facebook where xenophobic and discriminatory comments were found. On the other hand, it is also true there was wide support for refugees and migrants and emphatic messages. A lot of people, migrants in Portugal or young people, but also older ones, were able to put themselves or 'see' themselves in the personal life stories as told by the young migrants and refugees in Portugal.

What we could do differently next time

- The target group does not want to share too much personal information, particularly about the subject of 'radicalisation'. They were more keen to discuss lateral issues such their grievances as migrants and/or refugees in Portugal. What allowed us to disseminate a message of non-violence and tolerance, was providing them coping strategies and also getting information about their pathways. We also encouraged them to speak to other people in the same situation.
- Brainstorming and pre-written answers prepared us to address the amount of hate speech the project would be facing in the near future. Monitoring social media every few hours proved essential for management.

Campaign links

- Campaign website: <https://apav.pt/thisismystory/>
- Campaign Practical Guide for Preventing and Combating Online: <https://apav.pt/publiproj/index.php/95-projeto-counter-ct>

Follow-up

What has been the added value of this project for P/CVE policies?

- Ultimately, Counter@ct is a first preventive effort founded in a multi-stakeholder initiative. The added value of the project hinges on the impacts achieved as a pilot project of multi-sectorial actors, including law enforcement, intelligence services, victim support services and community-based organisations working with vulnerable groups to radicalisation and violent extremism, altogether working in the development of an alternative narrative.
- The Portuguese National Strategy on Combatting Terrorism (EN) derives from the transposition of EU Directive 2017/541/UE on combatting terrorism. It is based on 5 pillars: (1) detect; (2) prevent; (3) protect;

(4) pursue; and (5) respond. Four of these pillars are closely related to the missions and attributions of the security and law enforcement agencies, intelligence services and the military, in strict cooperation between agencies and other stakeholders among governmental structures. The prevention pillar, in turn, in accordance with the EN is characterised by “Know and identify the causes that determine the emergence of radicalisation processes, of recruitment and of terrorist acts”.

- In addition to the development of the alternative narrative, Counter@ct offered the possibility of strengthening the necessary multi-sectorial cooperation foundation and establish the necessary knowledge (though the desk research phase) about the most vulnerable groups to radicalisation and violent extremism, which we believe is an absolute added value in a preventive perspective. These groups were offered the alternative narrative but also the possibility of engaging in awareness-raising session on the subject (relying on storytelling and on the concept of the campaign).

Do you have any strategic recommendations for policymakers?

- Radicalisation is dynamic. It is both an individual and a group process. Radicalisation occurs both online and offline, in small conversations, at schools, in neighbourhoods and communities. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies are not the only groups playing a vital role in combatting radicalisation. Those who closely work with the communities, or with children and youngsters, and those who study crime and victimology are also important players. As such, P/CVE policies must engage local actors and include a multi-level and multi-sectorial approach, including the investment with civil society stakeholders.

How can it be followed up (in international, national and/or local context) or what could/should be the next step(s)?

- All those who wish to develop an online alternative narrative campaign like the one developed under project Counter@ct, it is advised they consult the [Practical Guide for Preventing and Combating Online Radicalisation](#). This guide sheds lights on all the steps that need to be carefully considered before developing an alternative narrative campaign. These include the following:
 - (i) Study the target audience, not only their online habits (which online platforms and social media they usually use), but also their personal history, positive moments and grievances;
 - (ii) Design a campaign strategy, intricately related with the former and with
 - (iii) impact assessment methodology and indicators;
 - (iv) Reply strategies and pre-prepared answer to social media antagonistic or discriminatory posts;
 - (v) campaign management strategy in the event of hate speech, and denial of service attack (DDoS).
- APAV and the partner entities will follow with the wide dissemination of the Practical Guide. The Guide also includes information on how to implement awareness raising sessions to vulnerable groups to online radicalisation as well as the training course for alternative narrative campaign managers. The guide will be available in Portuguese, English and Spanish and the Practical Guide is widely transferable and replicable.