08/06/2021
CSEP BRIEFING

Resilient Youth against Far-Right Extremist Messaging Online (YouthRightOn)

Project description

The 'Resilient Youth against Far-Right Extremist Messaging Online' (YouthRightOn) project aims to strengthen prevention and address underlying factors contributing to far-right radicalisation by putting forward alternative narratives and promoting critical thinking, open-mindedness and civic engagement. 'Find Another Way' is an online strategic communications campaign, developed as the main impact tool of the project. The campaign seeks to build the necessary skills young people need to filter online content and resist hostile or manipulative narratives.

The overall goals of YouthRightOn are to reduce support for use of violence and anti-minority narratives, increase awareness of alternative perspectives about 'others', increase engagement with resilience-building activities and build essential skills and competences. The target audience(s) of the project include youth (ages 14–19) residing in Bulgaria. Two target sub-groups were identified: passive endorsers of far-right messages and activists.

Below are some of the key outcomes of the project.
- Based on thorough diagnostics, the project achieved a **deep understanding of the target group**, its vulnerabilities to far-right messages and potential avenues of change. The rich data and helpful insights generated serve as a baseline in future resilience-building initiatives and campaigns.
- To build comprehensive core resilience skills among youth, the campaign effectively **combined online alternative messaging with offline engagement in schools** (through interactive lesson plans and training for teachers).
- The campaign **reached** a substantial part of the target group on social media and **sparked genuine debate and exposure to positive and alternative narratives** around the most polarising topics such as anti-minority sentiments and disinformation. This helped in **challenging the echo chamber** of predominantly negative reporting on Roma and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQI) community.
- The evaluation shows that the majority of **youngsters recognised the core campaign messages and could relate to these** through their own personal experiences and emotions. The readiness to **act against hateful or extremist content on social media** (by reporting it) increased dramatically following the project intervention.

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network **(RAN)**
Based on a briefing template prepared by RAN staff, a webinar and after consultation
with the project lead of YouthRightOn

European Commission

This paper follows a briefing structure that includes a brief summary of the campaign, the 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

Find Another Way is described as an online strategic communications campaign developed as the main impact tool of the project. It was based on a thorough analysis of a mapping of the most prominent far-right narratives on social media, a national representative survey and focus groups of youth (ages 14–19) in Bulgaria.

The main **goal** of the campaign is to reduce youth's vulnerability to far-right narratives in Bulgaria. Specifically, its aim was the following:
- Reduce support for anti-minorities sentiments and messages
- Reduce support for the use of violence against minorities
- Increase awareness of alternative perspective on 'others'
- Increase engagement with resilience-building activities

Products: Videos, social media posts, influencer stories/videos, social media mini games, infographics, motion graphics, press releases and media articles. The campaign ran from January 2020 to January 2021.

Key messages:
- Not all stories you read online are true, share only those from credible sources.
- Not all 'others' are the same, so don't judge before you know more.
- Violence only brings more violence, hate and isolation.
- Make sure you are not manipulated by someone else's agenda.
- There is a place for you to find your voice and engage with others in a constructive way.

Media: Website, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, digital media banner campaign, influencer channels

Messengers: Peers and influencers

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Achievements

What?	Reach
Substantial reach of the target group	• Targets from initial Communication Strategy exceeded
Relatable messaging which is understood and resonates with youth	• Online evaluation survey among 500 youth, focus groups with 51 participants • After viewing selected materials, 80 % of those surveyed identified the core campaign messages • 65 % of those surveyed say the campaign resonates with their personal experiences • 66 % of those exposed to the campaign materials said they would report aggressive and hateful online content (compared to only 6 % prior to the campaign)
Debate fostered around contentious topics such as tolerance towards different minorities	▶ 9 campaign videos on YouTube: 651 000+ views, 1 100+ comments, 25 400+ reactions f 94 posts on Facebook: 13 200+ reactions (10:1 ratio between positive and negative) 📷 66 posts on Instagram: 4 000+ reactions (80:1 ratio between positive and negative)

Lessons learned

- The development and launch of the Find Another Way campaign has shown that **deep understanding of the target group** is essential in designing appropriate messages.

- Using a **change journey model** cognizant of how and what youth think, feel and act and of factors facilitating change is key. Do they have the capacity, willingness and resources to achieve the desired change?

- **Offline & online** interventions have a **complementary effect**. Building **critical thinking skills** and openness to alternative messages go hand in hand with enhancing youth's **emotional competences**.

- Online campaigns require a **sustained engagement** with the audience and capability to **address negative reactions** to campaign content.

- **Young people** should be included in the development of campaign products and work alongside **strategic communication experts**, researchers and activists for maximum impact. A **common language** and understanding between these actors is a key prerequisite for the campaign's success.

Campaign links

Find Another Way: https://anotherway.bg/
YouthRightOn: https://youthrighton.com/

- o YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHaVxGKNw1rxn6lPyHt28HQ
- o Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/anotherway.bg
- o Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/findanotherway.bg/

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Follow-up

What is the project's added value for P/CVE policies?

- The project provides **in-depth analysis and understanding of youth's vulnerability to online far-right messaging**. It also identifies avenues for positive change that can be used as a roadmap for structuring subsequent campaigns and policy responses. It provides a **baseline for the formulation of more targeted and context-specific prevention policies** as part of the overall P/CVE policy infrastructure in Bulgaria and beyond.

- The campaign **tested and validated key tools and methods for the use of strategic communication** in alternative messaging as a resilience building approach, such as target group diagnostics, narrative development and evaluation.

- The project demonstrates the **need for a holistic approach to building resilience** to radicalisation among youth. As such, it aims to combine online and offline engagement and calls for the **proactive participation of key institutional actors** (such as the educational system, social services, youth delinquency bodies, law enforcement) in recognising their stake in early prevention of radicalisation.

Are there any strategic recommendations for policymakers?

In terms of reducing the supply of extremist content, recommendations from this project include the following.

- Improve **coordination between authorities and the tech sector** for content moderation and removal.

- Invest in **independent fact-checking services**, conspiracy de-bunking and pre-bunking, as well as redirecting methods in partnership between state authorities, civil society and the private sector.

- **Challenge legitimisation** by providing systematic societal 'sanctions' of hate speech, hate crimes, disinformation and extremist narratives.

Recommendations for reducing the 'demand' of extremist content include the following.

- **Integrate critical thinking, media literacy skills and social or emotional competences** in the school curriculum and train educational professionals to engage youth proactively in school.

- **Upscale and embed** online campaigns providing alternative narratives as **complementary tools within a 'whole-of-society' approach** to address polarisation, hate speech and disinformation.

- Make **democracy a lived experience** for youth. This can be realised through ongoing assessment of structural deficiencies and continued efforts to reform key sectors such as education, social services, juvenile justice, to systematically support democratic education and participation of young people.

How should the project be followed up (within an international, national and/or local context)? What could/should be the next step?

- **Provide sustainable funding and capacity building** for strategic communications efforts combined with offline direct engagement for P/CVE. **Civil society organisations should be empowered** (through the overall policy framework, institutional support and cooperation and funding) to become active owners of such initiatives.

- Policy 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. Online campaigns should 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.

For more information, see the policy brief from the Find Another Way campaign:
https://csd.bg/publications/publication/overcoming-youth-vulnerabilities-to-far-right-narratives/

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