

CONNEKT's researchers in a fluid and equalitarian environment. It brought together a diverse group of young people engaged in their communities to develop creative and innovative ideas and strategies for the prevention of VE. The engagement of youth in the discussion of prevention measures, besides empowering young people, contributes to the quality and appropriation of results. Moreover, it gives more legitimacy to the results and provides useful insights to inform the following phases of the research.

The inclusion of young participants in the seminar required creative approaches in order to find spaces for discussion, interaction and exchange. The facilitators of the sessions made efforts to create a safe, free, relaxed and comfortable space for young people to share and discuss their ideas, for example, by introducing ice breaking or energiser exercises. During the sessions, youngsters were working on their own with the facilitator/s of the session, while, in parallel, adults were trying to capitalise on how the learning from the exercises could shape future research.

The Forum was divided in two sections: a first one devoted to discussing youth's understanding of radicalisation and the seven pre-determined drivers of radicalisation and VE, setting the basis for the discussion and testing the results obtained by CONNEKT so far, particularly throughout the macro and meso empirical research; and a second dealing with prevention, with a final session dedicated to the design of a pilot action plan for the prevention of VE. After the Forum, a declaration circulated amongst the youngsters that attended the event where they expressed expectations, needs and potential applications of CONNEKT's research. Overall, the sessions provided a space for discussion for the youngsters, reaching a vivid and concise brainstorming of ideas, questions and concerns that will serve to bridge the macro and meso research and the micro research and to inform the second phase of WP5, focused on prevention. The valuable contributions of all participants revealed the importance of giving an active role to youths in dealing with the phenomenon of VE.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic in its initial phase, CONNEKT has adapted to restriction measures on mobility and social interactions. Now that most countries have removed major restrictions on travelling, and onsite activities can be organised again, the project has faced mobility issues when bringing people together. The geographical scope of CONNEKT requires reaching out to different points on the globe, as well as comparing countries and regions. However, the global mobility divide has posed some difficulties when bringing young people from the MENA region together. Some young participants that were supposed to travel to Skopje to attend the Forum could not issue the required authorisations before the planned activity took place. Therefore, what was initially conceived as a face-to-face seminar evolved into a hybrid event where both onsite and online participants shared with the partners of the project their views on prevention. The previous experience of CONNEKT's Academic Seminar, which was organised online and was very successful, served as a guideline for the online discussion.



UNDERSTANDING RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The first part of the Forum aimed to provide a conceptual approach to radicalisation and VE and to explore participants' own understanding of the topic in relation to their social contexts. Among others, the session focused on the following questions: What does it mean to be "radical"? Does radicalisation always involve violence? What are the factors leading to VE? The session allowed participants to discuss the seven drivers identified by CONNEKT and the relevance of these drivers in the different countries under study.

➤ **SESSION 1: "LET'S TOUCH GROUND: CONCEPTS"**

The main objective of this session was to find out if the perception of young people participating in the Forum fits with the perception identified at the macro and meso levels of analysis (presence of securitisation elements, focus on religion, relevance of social and economic factors, etc.).

This session was divided into three brainstorming exercises based on an association methodology of concepts and ideas. In the first exercise, participants were asked to write the first word that came into their mind in association with the concept of **Radicalisation**. The cited keywords were *Consequence, Terrorism, Roots, Bad, Attacks, Isolation, Ideology, Violence, Process, Politics, Deviant, Chaos, Strong, Possession, Extreme, Norms/Values* and *Hate*. In a second round of the exercise, participants were asked to focus on three keywords in order to develop them. The first keyword to be discussed was **possession**, understood as a desire for domination with a reference to social media involved in radicalised groups. The second keyword was **isolation** and the need to create an alternative community, mainly understood as a vulnerability. It was identified both as a push factor (isolated individuals have more chance to be attracted by radical groups and ideologies) and as a consequence for already radicalised people being isolated from common values and norms. However, as stated by one of the participants, even those who are radicalised are in contact with someone. While individuals that are radicalised may be isolated from family, friends or activities that they used to do, they are involved in other circles that also act as socialisation agencies. In this sense, it is relevant to highlight that CONNEKT's research at the meso level has found that in some communities characterised by the lack of leisure, cultural and educational spaces for youths, individuals that are socially isolated may replace physical socialisation by online socialisation. Finally, the link between radicalisation and **terrorism** was discussed, with participants almost unanimously of the opinion that radicalisation leads to joining terrorist groups and actions. Some participants defined radicalisation as the position of legitimisation or taking action in the field of violence. However, participants showed different understandings of radicalisation, some of them involving violence while others did not establish a direct causal relationship between radicalization and violence. CONNEKT acknowledges that radicalisation does not necessarily involve violence, with radicalised individuals



that do not defend the use of violent methods, or that justify violence while not adhering to or supporting violent attacks.

In the second exercise, the core concept was **Activism**, focusing on the differences between Radicalisation and Activism. The cited keywords were *Rights, Engagement, Common Interest, Political, Positionality, Interaction, Opinion, Expression, Acceptable, Transparency, Good Cause, Positive*. The first keyword to be debated was **positionality**, which made reference for participants to contexts and historicity with the idea that the same groups or actions cannot be labelled as radicalised in all contexts and/or periods of time. The definition issue of what and who is considered as radical was identified as a core aspect of the project in WP3. Youth representatives emphasised the need to take into account cultural and historical particularities and circumstances when explaining radicalisation. Some raised the point that radicalisation is not necessarily something negative, and what is considered radical depends on what lenses it is seen through. The second keyword to be discussed was **political**, where participants raised normative aspects of activism in order to make a difference with radicalisation: activism is for “good” causes and objectives, and radicalisation is for “bad” ones. That is, activism was seen as a positive form of radicalisation. This approach collided with the subjective consideration of what is “good” or “bad”.

What is considered radicalisation is a matter of the lenses through which we see the world

4

Finally, the last keyword was **engagement**. Both radicalisation and activism were described as forms of engagement. However, activism was labelled as civic engagement, arguing that it entails a certain degree of respect for the rule of law and it is based on ethics and a common interest, integrating several categories of people, while radicalisation was seen as excluding and involving coercion. Violence is, according to some of them, what separates radicalisation from activism. Coming back to the idea of positionality, some participants argued that what is considered radicalisation is a matter of the lenses through which we see the world. The discussion raised the question of the sometimes blurred lines between non-violent protest, polarisation and extremism. In fact, there is a thin line between activism and radicalisation, and some radical groups see themselves as activists for a good cause. Again, subjectivity helps explain the different understandings that emerge from the same phenomenon.

Finally, the last exercise analysed the concept of **Security**, focusing on their understanding of it and how radicalisation is impacting it. The keywords that were expressed were *Protection, Safety, Freedom, Force, Human Rights, State, Fear,*



*Opposing, Comfort, Prevention, Power, Threat, Challenge, Strict Measures, **Affiliation**.* This last one was the first to be grasped upon by the group and a discussion was engaged between two different visions about how affiliation works. For a part of the group, people vulnerable to radicalisation or involved in radical groups have a feeling of not belonging anymore and a lack of representation. For others, disaffiliation can be a driving factor for adhesion to radical ideologies. Not feeling part of the society to which they belong, mainly because they are seen as different from the majority, is a very important ingredient to engage in a radicalisation process. Recent cases in Europe show that well-integrated individuals, but with a social grievance of a sense of belonging, may be more vulnerable to radicalisation. Experiencing episodes of discrimination can end up generating young people without expectations. Such lack of expectations and disenchantment can facilitate radicalisation processes when these individuals are faced with some recruiting agent or force that offers them a whole life project that provides them with an identity and meaning to their life.

The second keyword to be discussed was **prevention**, where participants took a stance against the context of securitisation, raising the fact that prevention cannot only be a task of state security actors but must come from below and from community actors. It is worth mentioning that the role of families or prevention by economic empowerment were not mentioned. While there is a lot of research on families' role in prevention, focused on how to empower parents to make their children more emotionally resilient, when it comes to economic deprivation, reducing inequalities remains a chimera for most prevention of violent extremism (PVE) policies. While some programmes deal with socioeconomic issues at an individual level, very few target structural factors such as economic deprivation or territorial inequalities (Connekt, 2021). To the question of what **safety** represented for them, participants related it to freedom of expression and action, to doing what they want and not being judged, to the preservation of rights and to the absence of violence.

➤ **SESSION 2: "CONSTELLATING DRIVERS"**

The objective of the second session of the Forum was to identify drivers of VE, as well as the relations between them. When asked about what makes someone radical, youth representatives came up with an enormous amount of potential drivers, such as ideology, mindset, education, fake news, social bubble, deprivation, inequality, alternative exclusion, upbringing, discrimination, oppression, economic inequalities, fulfillment, etc. The drivers of radicalisation were grouped in two categories: those internal to the individual, meaning those social interactions that belong to the private sphere (family, friends, psychological issues such as traumas, feelings of isolation, marginalisation), and external factors (economic deprivation, unemployment, political oppression).

While the study of radicalisation and VE at a macro level has been mainly focused on religion as the main concern (Bieber & Pollozhani, 2021), the role of religion



was highly contested during this session. Instead, young participants highlighted the relevance of socioeconomic, cultural and political drivers, and focused on factors related to social interactions and the way they are dealt with, as well as feelings (traumatic experiences of bullying, discrimination, etc.) and social perceptions and expectations. Ideology was mentioned as a potential driver of radicalisation, but when accompanied by other factors. In the same way religion was considered, ideology was understood as a channel being used to express grievances, therefore highlighting its intersection with other drivers such as political claims and grievances. Moreover, participants expressed acknowledgement of other forms of radicalisation beyond Jihadism and far-right extremism. Some of them considered Islamophobia as feeding or fuelling radicalism, but also considered it a form of radicalisation itself.

Participants unanimously emphasised the lack of participation mechanisms and claimed the need for spaces for young people to voice their concerns

One of the gaps that were identified between the macro and meso level of analysis in CONNEKT is that political issues are much more present and highlighted at the meso than the macro level (Anzil et al., 2022). During the seminar, participants unanimously emphasised the **lack of participation mechanisms** and claimed the need for spaces for young people to voice their concerns. The **culture, education and leisure** driver was revealed as crucial and it was linked with the **digital socialisation** driver. The absence of leisure, culture and educational spaces for youths to express their creativity was identified as leading to the replacement of physical socialisation by online socialisation. The results of CONNEKT's research at the meso level, which indicate that digital socialisation is increasingly replacing physical socialisation (Chirchi, 2022), fit with the perception of the youth representatives attending the Forum.

In regard to the **digital socialisation** driver, associated with the rapid expansion of internet access, the lack of control and regulation of the online sphere was identified as the main concern. While mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook have started to de-platform content that promotes hate speech and violent conspiracy theories, extremist groups have migrated from open to closed encrypted platforms that may not have the same reach but still offer the ability to connect people around the world. Normalising violence through gaming was also identified as a driver, with participants expressing their concerns on the mainstream use and reach of videogames, such as Roblox and Minecraft, which can lead to a de-sensitisation to violence. It is worth mentioning that the trend of hybrid forms of extremism is also manifesting in the online world, with an increase of individuals that do not fit into the traditional



categories of far-right extremist, Jihadist, etc. People with mixed, unstable or unclear ideologies operate in the same spaces (Telegram, Reddit, certain videogames, etc.) and different extremist movements use similar range of formats to communicate their message, e.g., memes with certain aesthetics (Köhler and Ebner, 2019).

Like religion, social media has become a channel for the spread of extremist narratives, and it emerges as central to social polarisation, especially considering the effects of the algorithm, which creates echo chambers. The rapid spread of fake news was associated with the deficits in audiovisual and digital literacy. Despite children and young adults being found to be traditionally more vulnerable to fake news, one of the youth representatives highlighted the fact that they are better equipped at identifying social media bots and fake news and distinguishing them from real information, as they have better media literacy and knowledge of the online tools that can create certain feelings or ideas. On the contrary, older generations seem to be more prone to believe and spread fake news (Guess et al., 2019). The fact that youths are better equipped at identifying online disinformation situates them in a position of key central actors in the field of audiovisual and digital literacy.

The digital socialisation driver is not only linked to the culture, education and leisure driver, but it also refers to **political issues**. The circulation of extremist ideologies, conspiracy narratives and fake news through social media was also associated with the loss of trust in state institutions and political actors. Political participation is increasingly important for youths; and the lack of socio-political mechanisms and opportunities was identified as a grievance that could lead to radicalisation. According to youngsters, the loss of trust in public authorities is related with the absence of political representation in state institutions and the widening gap between the “rulers” and the “ruled”, which makes young people feel that they are not being heard and thus leads them to disengagement. This mistrust towards political elites was also highlighted at the meso level of research in CONNEKT (Chirchi, 2022).

Regarding **transnational dynamics**, while at the macro level stakeholders focus mainly on foreign influence and FTFs (Anzil et al., 2022), participants highlighted the impact of international political dynamics and conflicts as a driver. While very few approaches take the dimension of foreign policy into account, radicalisation is often related with international issues. In this sense, war, EU double standards regarding conflicts or third countries were seen as having a role in driving radicalisation.

Territorial inequalities were also taken into account in specific country contexts. Rural environments were seen as more vulnerable because there is less opportunity for diverse inputs and references. In rural contexts, the role of a single voice might have a stronger impact on the whole community, as there is an absence of alternative voices/ideas.

Economic deprivation was pointed out as a factor that could lead to radicalisation, with one of the participants stating that people economically integrated are more



grounded in reality. However, there is no clear connection between economic deprivation and VE according to the participants. Both at the macro and meso level of research, poverty is seen as an indirect trigger that works in combination with other drivers and is linked with the possibilities of reaching an economic stability conditioned to political opportunity structures (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020).

On contrast, **gender norms and values** were not mentioned during the discussion. While almost completely absent at the macro level, the meso level research of CONNEKT has found that gender roles and expectations placed upon young males regarding their capacity to provide, as well as epic heroic roles of masculinity, play a role in some communities (mainly in the MENA region but also in the Balkans) (Chirchi, 2022).

➤ **SESSION 3: SOCIAL CONTEXTS / DRIVERS OF VE: INTERACTIONS AND SIGNIFICANT DYNAMICS. "DOES CONTEXT MATTER?"**

The academic literature on VE tends to be centred on the macro and micro level of research, with the context tending to be left out, while its analysis is extremely relevant to take hold of the complexity of the phenomenon, and to design preventive measures that are connected to the needs of each social context. The objective of this session was to explore participants' views on the contexts that they consider more enabling and the interaction between the factors and the contexts that make young people vulnerable. Some questions that guided the discussion were the following: are there specific contexts/communities making young people more vulnerable to radicalisation than others? How do drivers relate with contexts? What are the contexts that are more likely to activate/de-activate the drivers of radicalisation and VE amongst youths?

Specific social contexts were given to each group of participants, who focused on identifying the drivers involved, the interaction of drivers with social groups and local stakeholders, and the contexts that favoured the activation of those drivers. The ultimate goal was to start identifying opportunities for prevention and de-activation of the drivers.

In the **Balkans**, ethnicity appeared to be more relevant than in the MENA region. In all case studies, youngsters associated youth vulnerability with radicalisation and VE with conflicting narratives around ethnicity and nationalism and political exclusion of ethnic or religious groups.

In the **Bulgarian** case, youth representatives prepared a roadmap linking radicalisation with political and economic grievances. Political grievances related with multi-ethnic contexts are taken to the online sphere, which serves as a venue for the spread of illiberal values coming from the far right, which in turn fuels other types of radicalisation, creating a vicious cycle where extremists feed each other's narratives (reciprocal radicalisation) (Blackman and Gartenstein-Ross, 2019). As for economic deprivation, unemployment and the worsening economic prospects were considered as



leading to isolation and rendering individuals more vulnerable to social polarisation and intolerance. Socioeconomic and political inclusion for those that feel like outcasts and fact-checking for misinformation were identified as key preventive measures.

In the case of **Kosovo**, ethnic affiliation and national identity were identified as the main driver leading to radicalisation, with the influence of post-war narratives that has resulted in the political exclusion of ethnic or religious groups. The lack of spaces where citizens can openly communicate and have a positive dialogue was considered to be connected with the spread of hate speech in social media. Like in the Bulgarian case, unemployment was identified as a driver of radicalisation. In terms of prevention, acknowledgement of political grievances and inclusion of all ethnic communities in the political and social sphere were pointed out as the main key areas to counter the spread of radical ideas.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the correlation of religion imbalances, nationalism and social exclusion was identified as the key factor leading to radicalisation. Youth representatives also highlighted the lack of dialogue between different ethnicities, and the presence of social bubbles that fuel isolation and social exclusion. As well as in Bulgaria and Kosovo, the absence of political participation mechanisms leads young people to express their frustrations and sense of marginalisation and injustice through violence, instead of through mechanisms for civic participation.

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In **North Macedonia**, the ethnic tension was identified as central, informing other narratives such as religion or political grievances. The reintegration potential of the punitive justice system was put into question, stating that penitentiary institutions are reinforcing the drivers of radicalisation instead of countering them. Youngsters considered them as spaces where individuals can form another society in the margins, stimulating particular values or actions that affect the individual after their release from prison.

When it comes to the **MENA** region, youngsters highlighted the lack of leisure opportunities for youths and teenagers and territorial inequalities as the main factors driving radicalisation.

In the case of **Morocco**, marginalisation (related to territorial inequalities) was identified as leading to isolation and making people more vulnerable to radicalisation. Religion



and ideology, mainly linked with the predominance of conspiracy theories, was also pointed out as a driver but also as a strong de-activator of radicalisation, emphasising the lack of religious education as the main factor in turning religion into a radicalisation driver. As for prevention, religious education and strong local religious leaders can de-activate the attraction of extremist religious narratives, according to Moroccan participants. Schools and teachers can also be relevant actors in prevention, countering the predominance of conspiracy theories by promoting critical thinking.

In **Tunisia**, the lack of spaces for political and social participation, as well as for socialisation, coupled with the unequal distribution of funds and development, were highlighted as the main drivers of radicalisation. In marginalised areas, the lack of artistic and cultural spaces to channel ideas and emotions was seen as having a huge impact on young people’s ability to express grievances without violence.

In **Jordan**, the lack of spaces for leisure and the limited access to opportunities and freedom of movement in the refugee camps were identified as the main drivers. Transnational dynamics, mainly the impact of the war in Syria on the local context, creating new frustrations and fears, were also seen as having a role in driving radicalisation.

UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

10

After laying the basis for the discussion in the first section of the Forum, the second part focused on youngsters’ understanding of prevention, encouraging them to reflect on potential ways to make their communities more resilient and supportive.

➤ **SESSION 4: WHAT WAS MISSING THERE?**

The objective of this session was to explore the aspects of community resilience that are important to young people in their environment. Participants were invited to imagine communities in which they would feel safe and supported, as well as the institutions and actors that should be involved. Youngsters brainstormed different situations where one may be potentially confronted with radical actors/ideas/events: a violent attack against a media outlet, racist comments made by an authority figure, a bomb alert, student violence, online hate speech, etc. The facilitators picked up three of these situations and each group worked on one of them, thinking how to address it and how to avoid escalation of violence.

What to do in a situation where someone in a position of authority makes an offensive remark towards a minority?

In the hypothetical case where these remarks are made by a teacher, youngsters highlighted the importance of having an **ecosystem of support** where students are encouraged to report the violations that may occur. This ecosystem of support would be constituted by an **Ethics Department** that monitors these issues, conducts psycho-social



evaluation of the educational personnel and provides psychological support for both students and teachers; a **Student Union** that is supported by the Ethics Department; and digital platforms that would serve as **open safe spaces** where individuals can anonymously vocalise their problems.

Youngsters highlighted the importance of having an ecosystem of support

Great emphasis was placed on the **institutional response**, urging institutions to give visibility to the conflicts that arise and apply punitive measures in accordance with the violation, which will in turn have an effect on institutional trust and transparency. Strong public condemnation by the institution can prevent future violations, as perpetrators would be aware that it is not socially accepted, and they will be held accountable for it. At the same time, for those who have been victimised, having institutional support that reaffirms that what happened is not their fault is essential.

What to do when someone popular uses their wide reach on social media to single out another person or a group of persons based on their identity?

Linked to previous discussions on the spread of hate speech in social media, possible responses to harmful narratives online were discussed. To protect the victims by offering them **psychological support and counselling** was identified as the most urgent action to take once the violation has occurred. Moreover, for the victim/s of the attack, especially if they belong to a minority group, it is important they feel supported by the majority. This support can be expressed through a well-known community actor that speaks up against the act and expresses their support to the victim/s.

Community actors, if properly equipped, can also strengthen resilience against radical narratives by raising awareness on the need to confront hate speech

Within the scope of social digitalisation as a driver, one of the measures identified by the youngsters, and that aligns with recommendations formulated in CONNEKT (Anzil et al., 2022), is to implement **digital literacy programmes in schools**. To prevent online hate speech, resources should be allocated to schools so that they are able to ensure digital literacy to every child and teenager. Community actors, if properly equipped, can also strengthen resilience against radical narratives by **raising awareness** on the need to confront hate speech. More on the policy level, youngsters highlighted the need for **regulation** forcing **internet providers** to



remove hate content. As stated before, not all platforms are equally compromised with de-platforming harmful content, so the main challenge would be how to get these platforms and providers on board, as well as defining what constitutes freedom of expression and what does not.

What to do when a group of people is threatening a media outlet that writes about issues that are sensitive to a significant part of the population, such as LGBTQ+ or minority rights?

In this case, youngsters highlighted the importance of **education** in a long-term prevention plan, arguing that it has the potential to prevent individuals from falling into radical ideas. Enabling and installing dialogue as a proper tool of expression between different members of society, allowing them to express their opinions while respecting the others, would reduce youth vulnerability to radicalisation and VE. Providing a **narrative** that gives a positive alternative view to adjust the issue of concern was also identified as a relevant measure to take. This counter-narrative should be designed with the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders (religious leaders, teachers, celebrities, etc.) so that it can be spread amongst different parts of society. It is worth mentioning that there are different opinions on whether providing counter-narratives to those extremist ideas conveyed via internet or, in this case, in a real-life situation, is an effective strategy to prevent radicalisation. Finally, youth representatives emphasised the need for **security**, stating that police officers should protect those groups in society that are more endangered or vulnerable, preventing violent situations to occur.

Enabling and installing dialogue as a proper tool of expression between different members of society, allowing them to express their opinions while respecting the others, would reduce youth vulnerability to radicalisation and VE

Although the three cases analysed displayed different situations involving radical ideas, similar actions to deal with each of them were identified. First, in all cases youngsters highlighted the need to find tools to prevent violence from happening and to have structures dealing with anti-minority attitudes, either through a code of ethics setting out ethical guidelines of conduct, regulation in social media, or through law and police enforcement. Second, on a punitive level, youth representatives emphasised the need to establish a culture where radical ideas or actions are not socially accepted and using them has consequences for the perpetrators. Lastly, having support structures that assist communities or individuals when they are victimised was seen as essential.



➤ **SESSION 5: FROM A LOCAL/COMMUNITY ACTOR PERSPECTIVE**

This session consisted of a role-play simulation where, based on the measures and actors in the field of prevention identified in the previous activity, young participants assumed the role of one of these actors and identified actions that could be implemented, as well as the resources needed to implement them.

To guide the activity, the facilitator described three types of prevention strategies: primary prevention, a general prevention strategy that is aimed at society as a whole; secondary prevention, which only targets specific groups that are considered as being vulnerable to radicalisation; and the last type of prevention, even more focused and specific, one that is addressed to people that have already been radicalised and have shown violence in their actions, such as convicted individuals in prisons, people on probation, etc. This prevention of recidivism, which involves reintegration, is very much linked to the families of the individuals. In CONNEKT, prevention is seen as “a long-term social investment, the realm where transformations can be achieved, and where alternative narratives can have a greater effect” (Anzil et al, 2022:7).

**Too much focus on certain communities
leads to stigmatisation
and to overlooking
other communities at risk**

There was a debate among participants on whether prevention should be addressed only to those considered at risk, or if it should be addressed to society as a whole. While sometimes it may be more efficient to direct PVE efforts to some concrete population, those in charge of identifying the target audience should look beyond those communities that are considered as being vulnerable to radicalisation (typically minorities or those with lower educational or economic backgrounds) to avoid stigmatisation and to avoid overlooking other groups that are at risk of radicalisation. For example, in Europe there is tendency to over-securitise Muslim communities, while giving less attention to other significant threats. Moreover, it is necessary to consider that those groups “at risk” differ from one community or social context to another.

Parents/families, religious local representatives, NGOs, CSOs and activists, municipal authorities, teachers or educational staff, and law enforcement and local police officers were the actors and organisations that youngsters pointed out as being more concerned in prevention. Divided into groups, youngsters impersonated one of these actors in a role play exercise and examined what their approach to preventing VE should be, drafting a list of guiding principles or minimum standards of their work.



Parents/families:

Families were considered as important supportive actors in prevention efforts. While there is a lot of research on the families' role in reintegration of individuals in society, and mainly on the role of mothers in prevention, more emphasis should be put on the families' role in prevention, focused on how to empower parents to make their children more emotionally resilient. A **trust-based relationship** between parents and children was identified as the key element to healthy and supportive relationships where children feel comfortable enough to confide in them and seek advice. Regarding digital socialisation, youngsters highlighted the importance of **parental control** when navigating the **online sphere**, for example, controlling time spent on digital devices, or preventing children and teenagers from accessing certain sensitive contents through parental control software mechanisms. It is worth mentioning that continued restriction or monitoring can break the relationship of trust between parents and children, and therefore a balance needs to be found between keeping children safe and allowing them some flexibility to explore the online space. Finally, youth representatives emphasised the need for **cooperation** with other actors such as community leaders.

Religious leaders:

Adopting and promoting a **moderate religious discourse** was highlighted as the main key point. In this respect, one of the recommendations that was formulated towards national stakeholders in CONNEKT's Policy Paper is to promote a moderate confessional discourse using existing acknowledged and respected religious/trainings institutions (Anzil et al., 2022). Religious leaders should monitor and analyse messages that are spread by extremist groups to be able to correct misconceptions. Moreover, in some cases it may be necessary for religious leaders to engage in a reinterpretation of religious texts in light of our realities and from a human rights perspective. As well as in the case of parents/families, youth representatives pointed out the need for cooperation with other actors and institutions to be able to reach comprehensive responses.

Local authorities:

The group that played the role of local authorities departed from the assumption that their approach should be **participative** and built on the principle of proximity with street-level actors at the local level. The youths insisted on the need to have national and regional legislations and PVE plans that back up the action at the local level, emphasising the need for cooperation between institutions. In those cases where a National Plan for PVE does not exist, the government should produce one. As well as the other groups, **cooperation** with other actors, such as NGOs, schools or universities, was also highlighted. Youngsters emphasised the need to bring together **actors of action** (such as NGOs) and **actors of reflection** (such as universities) that can feed the action of NGOs, making sure that the measures implemented are based on empirical research. This would allow for a grounded approach that links reality to the local level. The idea is to build an **ecosystem of actors** from different levels that will regularly meet in a



space of consultation and coordination to decide, with a participative approach, what are the best preventive measures and how to implement them.

Local police/law enforcement officers:

The position of the police when dealing with radicalisation has been very much debated. The group that impersonated local police and law enforcement officers focused on examining police responses that are not harmful and **avoid stigmatisation and criminalisation**. For example, racial profiling was identified as a discriminatory and ineffective procedure that should be removed, as it stigmatises certain groups, which can cause distrust in the authorities and aggravate social grievances. Youngsters also highlighted the importance of building a trusted working relationship with **local communities**. This relationship should be based on listening to their concerns or demands and equipping them with the necessary resources to deal with radicalisation and VE, not over-relying or placing all responsibility on them. Moreover, youth representatives emphasised that, rather than resorting solely to punitive measures and securitisation as the first response, local police officers should, as much as possible, try to deal with the conflicts at a community level, for example with the help of acknowledged and legitimate community members that can act as **social mediators**. Finally, youngsters highlighted that, to be able to deal with the complexity of the phenomenon, police officers should **be informed and updated** and have the latest information on radicalisation trends, new ideologies, forms of recruitment, etc.

Youngsters also highlighted the importance of building a trusted working relationship with local communities

CSOs:

While there is a growing acknowledgement that CSOs can play a critical role in prevention programmes, both the MENA and Balkan region are characterised by the lack of participation of CSOs in PVE, as well as the poor collaboration between them and state agencies (Anzil et al., 2022). The youngsters playing CSOs highlighted the potential of these organisations in dealing with radicalisation, and proposed that they use their knowledge and expertise for an array of different tasks: organise workshops to **raise awareness** on radicalisation, offer **psycho-social support** to victims, assist with the integration of minorities to prevent their alienation, counter **social polarisation** bridging the gap between isolated social bubbles and society as a whole, etc.

Teachers/education staff:

Teachers and education staff are key potential actors that have the possibility of shaping children’s beliefs and have a positive impact on their upbringing.



According to the youth representatives, teachers should promote principles of **peace, inclusivity and fairness**, and should develop emotional intelligence and the required skills to deal with difficult situations. Recognising that schools are key institutions that can help individuals to build skills that relate to civic resilience means that more **resources** need to be allocated in education so that teachers are equipped with the necessary tools to deal with potential problematic ideas that may arise. Youngsters also emphasised that schools should devote efforts to ensure **digital literacy**. Finally, teachers should have **institutional support** and report mechanisms to notify potential problematic cases to other actors that can address the situation, not exclusively law enforcement ones. While cooperation with other actors is essential, special caution needs to be taken to ensure that teachers remain education professionals and are not turned into some kind of police officers in charge of detecting potential radicalisation cases.

All actors and institutions need to be involved, cooperate and try to coordinate a common approach

Social media:

The group that worked on social media stressed the need to **enforce regulation** and to develop **easy reporting tools** so that internet users have accessible mechanisms to report content and accounts that spread hate speech or promote violence. They also identified the need to cooperate with local authorities and schools to raise awareness on media disinformation and hate speech. Finally, they agreed on the need to delve more into how social media is used by different kinds of movements, so that **tailored responses** can be developed.

As can be seen, different key points were repeated amongst the proposals of all different actors: the need for cooperation among different actors, trust-based relationship, awareness raising, training and capacity-building, institutional support, tailored approach, etc. A lot of emphasis was put on the need to have a common approach amongst all actors and institutions involved, as well as willingness to cooperate, as the key elements to guarantee that the mission of the prevention plans is accomplished. In this respect, CONNEKT identified the lack of coordination between institutions as an obstacle for a coherent and unified approach to PVE (Anzil et al., 2022).

A lot of emphasis was put on the need to have a common approach amongst all actors and institutions involved



In the second part of the exercise, all groups came together to propose **concrete actions** of prevention that could be a backbone of a prevention campaign. The key points agreed amongst them were the following:

- To **reinforce capacities**, for example through general trainings directed to a large array of actors, such as law enforcement officers, local police, prison officers, educational professionals; or with specific trainings directed to concrete actors, for example, workshop trainings for journalists on addressing misinformation, reporting sensitive issues, etc.
- To promote **platforms for cooperation and exchange**, such as **local anti-violent extremism councils** where all stakeholders can come together and share experiences, methodologies, etc.
- To develop an interactive strategy and have the **collaboration** of different actors (external experts, academics and practitioners) that are up to date with the newest trends in the field in order to broaden the perspective and reach a better understanding of the phenomenon.
- Within the scope of **culture, educational and leisure opportunities**, encouraging educational institutions to enhance **youth creativity and resilience**, for example through the creation of **artistic hubs in schools**. These spaces would allow students to express their emotions and channel their frustrations in a healthy environment, as well as to develop critical thinking and empathy. Art, through the expression of emotions, can help people mitigate their anger and freely express their emotions.

Youth representatives highlighted the need to move away from securitised approaches towards actions that provide support and accompaniment

- Within the scope of **religion**, establishing an **official training certificate** for religious leaders. This raises important issues such as who is authorised to deliver this certificate and who is entitled to train the religious leaders. While these issues require further reflection, it seems clear that communities must have a say on the design and issue of these certificates. Moreover, reflection on how state actors should interact and cooperate with religious representatives and institutions is a necessary task. Both reinforcing the supervision of religious institutions and leaving the religious sphere less regulated seems to pose potential risks for radicalisation.



- Nonetheless, the need to **involve religious entities** is well recognised in both the MENA and Balkan regions, while giving some agency and autonomy to religious institutions so that they are not linked to an official discourse appears to be the best practice. In this respect, it will be interesting to know young people’s opinions on what state-religion connections should look like.
- At the **micro level**, when approaching individuals with links to radicalisation or VE, the need to respect their **confidentiality**, guaranteeing the **highest ethical standards**, was emphasised. Youth representatives also highlighted the need to move away from securitised approaches towards actions that provide **support** and **accompaniment** to the victims of radicalisation and VE, instead of only considering them as being subject to punishment.
- Finally, pushing and supporting initiatives to **address the structural causes of radicalisation**, and improving social and migration policies from the perspective of human rights.

➤ **SESSION 7: DESIGN OF PILOT INTERVENTIONS – ACTION PLAN ON THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

After a recap of the previous sessions (Session 6), the last session of the Forum focused on the design of an action plan using the 5W1H model. The idea was to develop an action plan focused on the secondary type of prevention with the actors identified in the previous sessions, and linking drivers, contexts, prevention indicators, actors and strategies. During the session youth representatives identified key potential stakeholders; driving and restraining forces; risks, assumptions, issues, and dependencies; and, following the 5W1H method, answered all the basic elements within a problem (what, who, where, when, why and how). All groups presented their plan to the other participants and to the partners of the project.

The following table represents a brief summary of the action plans developed:



CONNEKT CROSS-REGIONAL YOUTH FORUM

	NGOs	Municipalities	Teachers	Parents
Why?	Preventing VE is one of the NGO action lines.	Municipalities have the ability to reach funders interested in PVE strategies.	Teachers spend a lot of time with children and youngsters, and they can have a positive impact in their upbringing.	Parents are concerned about the possibility of their children being influenced by or involved with radical actors.
What?	To prevent VE by improving socio-economic insertion of youths at risk of exclusion through improving their employability skills.	To seek funding to design and implement an action plan to prevent the radicalisation of youths.	Teachers will identify potential issues, teach coping mechanisms to children, and cooperate with relevant institutions.	Families build a trust-based relationship with their children. When families or schools notify issues, a protocol with psychological support is activated.
Who?	Youth centres, schools, local media, local community leaders, families.	Teachers, religious leaders, local representatives, youths.	Schools, teachers, Ministry of Education, families, youths.	Teachers, family members, friends, psychologists and therapists, trainers, youths.
How?	Reinforcing capacity-building through workshops on employability skills and social and solidarity economy.	Identifying key community leaders and building a consultative space to interact with youths and find solutions for PVE.	Developing an action plan for radicalisation in collaboration with different stakeholders, considering latest achievements and mistakes.	Key stakeholders come together to determine preventive measures and develop a protocol of action.
When and where?	Youth centres and schools from a marginalised neighbourhood.	5-year pilot plan in a medium-sized town with a diverse population.	Mainly educational centres, but it can be replicated in correctional centres for children.	School settings and households.
With what?	Own funding from the NGO.	Funding from the state or international organisations such as the UN.	Funding and support from state and NGOs. The Ministry of Education should include the plan in the educational curricula.	Support and cooperation of all stakeholders involved.



CONCLUSION

Youngsters pointed out very specific measures to prevent radicalisation, rejecting the idea of using solely punitive measures and focusing, instead, on preventive long-term measures. While research at the macro level revealed the dominant role of state security actors in prevention and the absence of civil society actors, young participants highlighted the relevance of community and the need to apply a bottom-up approach. Throughout the sessions, the local dimension, communities and resilience-building were emphasised as a priority when designing PVE strategies.

**The local dimension, communities
and resilience-building were emphasised
as a priority when designing PVE strategies**

The focus was placed on community resilience as opposed to individual resilience. Given that a lot of weight falls upon the communities, and they have limited capacities, they should be adequately equipped with the resources required to tackle radicalisation. To enhance community engagement, prevention should be approached with participatory methodologies, building ecosystems for information sharing and exchange amongst different actors, and providing space for researchers to design prevention measures. Finally, prevention strategies should be based on tailored approaches, addressing relevant concerns according to the specific local contexts. When implementing measures, stakeholders should look at the community that is being targeted, ask what they need, and adapt the measures to the drivers on the local context. While there are common preventive measures that may work in different social contexts, community approaches should be based on local specificities and contextual factors.

Overall, the Forum was an opportunity for youths to influence CONNEKT's work in the following months, when designing the Prevention Toolkits and testing them on communities. Their inputs will be used to identify and design strategies to prevent radicalisation at a community level, and to formulate recommendations on prevention strategies for national governments and the European Union. With their action plans, youths made it clear that only by working together we can prevent VE, and CONNEKT is engaged in finding better mechanisms to give continuity to the work done by the youth representatives, as well making their ideas visible.



**THE FOLLOWING TABLE SUMMARISES THE KEY
INSIGHTS ON PVE DEVELOPED BY THE PARTICIPANTS
OF THE SEMINAR:**

- **Long-term PVE strategies** should be developed in **collaboration with different stakeholders**.
- The local dimension, **communities** and **resilience-building** need to be placed at the centre of PVE strategies. Local actors play a leading role in creating **safer communities** for everyone.
- PVE strategies should be based on **tailored approaches**, addressing relevant concerns according to the specific local contexts.
- Victims of radicalisation and VE should be provided with **support** and **mentorship**.
- The **lack of political participation mechanisms** to express concerns is a grievance that can lead to radicalisation.
- Policy-makers should **involve youth** in PVE **policy-making** and implementation.
- **Social media** emerges as central to **social polarisation**. In those cases where young people lack access to culture, education and leisure opportunities, online socialisation replaces physical socialisation.
- **Media literacy** and **fact checking** are important to tackle the spread of **misinformation** on the online sphere.
- **Religious education** can be a strong deactivator of deradicalisation.
- Local police officers should build a **trust-based relationship** with acknowledged and relevant **community leaders**.



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CONNEKT YOUTH STATEMENT FOR THE PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

On 13-14 December 2022, a group of young leaders from the MENA and Balkans region, participated in the Cross-Regional Youth Forum on violent extremism (VE) in Skopje, North Macedonia. It represented a great opportunity to bring together young community leaders to discuss and promote our views within the field of prevention of violent extremism (PVE).

Most of the literature on youth radicalisation does not take into account youth's opinion and treats us as subjects instead of relevant voices in understanding the phenomenon and constructing prevention strategies. Young people have the ability to challenge the norm and bring innovative ideas that can create real change, but we are rarely part of decision-making processes and are not involved in meaningful policy changes.

Against this background, we have elaborated a **CONNEKT Youth Statement** presenting our common vision to improve PVE initiatives. It is the outcome of the ideas of young leaders active in their local communities and coming from different backgrounds. This Statement expresses our ideas on prevention, shows our commitment to address violent radicalisation, and aims at contributing to setting the agenda and shaping policies.

We understand prevention as a long-term strategy that requires the cooperation of all key stakeholders: civil society organisations, parents, teachers, religious representatives, municipalities, media institutions, social media companies, police officers and policymakers. The following are our ten priorities in terms of PVE addressed to the aforementioned individuals, organisations and institutions.

1. Children need a **safe environment** and to engage in trust-based relationships with their parents and guardians. The online sphere at which children are exposed at very early ages requires parental control and certain degree of digital literacy for all, children, teenagers, parents and guardians.
2. **Education** is a powerful tool to **promote principles of peace, inclusivity, and fairness**, as well as **critical thinking**, thus reducing the attractiveness of violent narratives. To do so teachers and educators need to be equipped with sufficient resources to **enhance youth creativity and resilience** in schools.
3. **Local authorities** play a leading role in creating safer communities. Cooperation with key community leaders working at the local level is a priority to build consultative spaces to interact with youth, and platforms for cooperation and exchange with all stakeholders at the local level.
4. Through civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs greater **community engagement and resilience should be pursued**. Context-sensitive, knowledge-based, youth-oriented, and grassroots-owned approaches should be incentivized.



5. Victims should receive support and accompaniment, **moving away from securitisation approaches** that only consider them as subjects of punishment.
6. In many communities where young people lack **access to culture, education and leisure opportunities**, online socialisation emerges as central to social polarisation. Social media companies should acknowledge **their social responsibility in the spread of disinformation** and **adopt regulations** against content that promotes hate speech and violent narratives.
7. Media institutions (TV, Radio & Press) needs to accept responsibility on creating **inclusive, educative and compassionate, human-centered content** that speaks to all the different parts of the social structure (including minorities) and enables them to feel represented and not vilified or laughed at.
8. Religious leaders and/or institutions shall **promote a moderate religious discourse**, and engage in a **interpretation of the texts** in light of our realities and from a human rights perspective.
9. Law enforcement actors should **avoid harmful interventions** that increase stigmatisation and criminalisation of certain communities, such as racial profiling. Local police officers should **build a trust-based relationship with acknowledged and relevant community leaders**.
10. **Youth needs to be acknowledged as a primary stakeholder** in PVE policy design and implementation. National actions plans for PVE should include **collaboration with different stakeholders, addressing the structural causes of radicalisation**, like socio-economic, political and cultural drivers, instead of focusing mainly on religion.
11. **Political participation** and inclusion are essential to prevent feelings of alienation and marginalisation amongst certain groups and communities. Policymakers should also take into account the consequences of adopting double standards in the international arena both on domestic and foreign audiences.

There are no perfect formulas but only the engagement of a variety of social actors will be able to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism successfully. Youth are not only part of the problem, youth are key to the solution.





What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.

Consortium Members



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