Policy Brief

Civic education as a preventive measure and inclusionary practice

De-Radicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Re-integrate – D.Rad

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Executive Summary

Civic education programs show potential for combating radicalization and violent extremism but require nuanced approaches. Key challenges include:

- Engaging vulnerable youth who distrust institutions
- Customizing activities for different age groups
- Tailoring content and formats for prisoners amid restrictions
- Avoiding overbroad definitions that inaccurately label social issues
- Balancing customization and stigmatization risks
- Building trust and cultural competence, not coercion

Participatory methods like roleplaying, theatre-base activities, dialogues and arts activities have shown some promise for building critical thinking, empathy, cooperation, and resilience against extremist ideologies. Proper facilitator training is crucial to encourage reflection without endorsing radical perspectives. Community-rooted programs help tailor activities to local contexts while promoting inclusion.

Recommended policy actions:

- Support participatory civic education as part of comprehensive prevention
- Develop resources and trainings to equip facilitators with skills for managing sensitive discussions and activities
- Foster partnerships between schools, NGOs, and local authorities to establish inclusive civic education spaces
- Promote interdisciplinary input and community involvement in program design for localization and cultural resonance
- Refine target group definitions to avoid overreach
- Fund specialized reintegration programs incorporating civic education components for particular target groups such as detainees and returning foreign fighters

Policy Recommendations

- **Civic education programs shapes "personal efficacy"** (i.e., an individual´s belief in his/her ability to affect change, political participation, and tolerance). Furthermore, education tools as such **foster individuals' desistence from violent extremism** by broadening the scope of their political values, ideals, and concepts (e.g., justice, honour, freedom) and by **introducing alternative perspectives** and worldviews.

- **Coercive approaches fail** to offer an effective and long-term answer to radicalisation processes, mainly because they precisely lack a preventive component.

- **Top-down initiatives** relying on the pre-definition of concepts, issues and needs **lack in flexibility** and therefore adaptability to varying contexts.

- Actions of prevention require an **interdisciplinary approach** to better identify and analyse all the different factors (be social, political, legal, behavioural, psychological, etc.) that may cause a process of radicalisation, and consequently all those factors that can revert or prevent such event.

- **Participatory approaches** (focus groups, groups work, role-play and theatrical methods) are much **more useful in fostering empathy, inclusion, mutual understanding, knowledge sharing and communicative skills**, all factors that increase resilience to radicalisation processes. Specifically, participatory approaches **foster critical thinking** – that is, the ability to assess and question information, opinions, ideas, and to determine the validity of arguments and ideologies, which acts as a shield against fake news and biased propaganda, and support individuals in building their own identity and independent opinions.

- Participatory approaches should not be restricted to the organisation of planned activities but can be extended to reshape the used methods through perspectives of **co-definition and co-design**. Indeed, including relevant stakeholders (participants, facilitators, NGOs, social workers, community leaders, practitioners, etc.) in the process of defining issues and needs to be tackled has a positive effect in terms of both commitment and focus, enabling for more specific and direct interventions. Furthermore, co-design helps participants acquire new skills, while fostering a sense of belonging drawn from a common purpose. In addition, stakeholders should participate also in the evaluation phase: this helps researchers and policymakers detect better and more precisely processes of change, although impartiality and objectivity need always to be ensured.

- **Roleplay or theatre-based activities** serve an important purpose in this process, as they offer **an opportunity to fictionally re-enact everyday situations** or stereotypical figures and contemplate them from a 'depersonalised' angle. These also encourage participants to "**put themselves in the other's shoes**," taking on roles distant from their real identity in an attempt to empathise with others' realities and courses of action.

- Offering **shared spaces of dialogue** is also an effective approach to prevent and revert radicalization and violent extremism. Specifically, at-risk individuals should be encouraged to reflect critically on their lived experience and actively engage in diagnosing and deconstructing their own prejudices in spaces tailored to accommodate a tolerant exchange of opinions. In such spaces, even extremist views expressed by individuals are not immediately deplatformed, shamed or suppressed but approached through dialogue. This must not necessarily imply a political debate but even activities as simple as getting to know and interacting with people from different faiths or backgrounds can contribute to demystify one's own views of the 'other.'

- Radicalisation and violent extremism are tackled in an effectively and long-term perspective only with the **involvement of the youth**. This is achieved by collaborating more extensively with education institutions to offer preventive actions and therefore address radicalisation and violent extremism factors and provide tools for resilience as early as possible.

- Participative approaches targeting young people face the **challenge of establishing friendly and transparent connections between facilitators and participants**. Projects in schools for which regular teaching staff is trained to act as facilitators face the obstacles of students not trusting teachers' discretion and hesitating to stay engaged in extracurricular activities associated with the school itself. This is particularly the case among the 'at-risk' of radicalisation and violent extremist students, as they are usually the most disenchanted with school and most hesitant to engage with it beyond what is mandatory. For this, training teaching staff to better connect with students outside of regular school lessons or working with third-party moderators remains a necessity.
- In prisons, civic education plays a crucial role in preventing radicalization and violent extremism, necessitating tailored approaches that accommodate the **unique constraints within prison environments**. Specialized reintegration programs are vital for individuals returning from conflicts or convicted of terrorism, emphasizing disengagement and individualized support. However, further research is needed to customize content and format of civic education programmes to the specific needs and realities of this category of target groups, as well as to evaluate their effectiveness for prisoners in terms of recidivism.
- Definitions of **terms** like 'violent/dangerous extremism', 'terrorism', 'radicalization', and 'at-risk' are often **overly expansive**, leading to misidentification of psychological or social issues as signs of radicalization and violent extremism. This includes adolescent conflicts with authority, experiences of bullying, the search for group belonging, and exploration of diverse political ideas.
- Avoiding stigmatization while customizing programs is challenging. Customization, though effective, may inadvertently be perceived as **targeted stigmatization**. This raises questions about whether state-organized deradicalization efforts may be met with distrust, particularly among populations that feel aggrieved and profiled.

Context

The D.Rad project defines radicalization and violent extremism as processes wherein an individual undergoes a psychological and ideological transformation due to perceived injustice leading to the rejection of established political and legal norms, and the adoption of an alternative identity that justifies the use of violence. However, it is important to note that processes of alienation and perceptions of injustice do not automatically lead to violent extremism. Indeed, the gaps between lawful protest, radicalization, and violence provide an opportunity for effective preventive interventions.

D.Rad's approach is rooted in perceptions of injustice, which generate feelings of grievance, alienation, and polarization, represented by the I-GAP spectrum: injustice-grievance-alienation-polarization. This encompasses conflicting narratives of justice, grievances as motivating forces, alienation as a factor contributing to radicalization, and polarization leading to a breakdown of constructive dialogue.

In terms of prevention, there are primary, secondary, and tertiary approaches. Primary (or universal) prevention focuses on strengthening democratic, critical, and social skills in society. Secondary prevention targets groups at risk of radicalization, often overlapping with crime prevention. Tertiary prevention is dedicated to individuals who have already turned to extremism, aiming to prevent further radical behaviour.

In the framework of the D.Rad project, WP10 aimed to prevent youth radicalisation and violent extremism through civic education, specifically by identifying new pedagogical methods and participatory tools to build pro-social resilience to radical ideologies.

Civic education programs, defined as initiatives that shape people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions, play a crucial role. These programs enhance personal efficacy and promote desistance from extremist groups. Civic education addresses issues of injustice, alienation, and polarization, aiming to improve community life through various forms like classroom learning, informal training, experiential learning, and mass media campaigns.

In D.rad's WP10, the focus is on civic education programs that adopt a participatory approach. This means involving all participants in expressing their ideas and bringing about change. Specifically, these methods empower marginalized voices, promoting civic engagement, problem-solving, and networking. Using techniques like role-plays and interactive tools, these programs foster critical thinking, empathy, democratic literacy, active citizenship, resilience, and socio-emotional learning. Critical thinking involves making reliable judgments based on sound information. It includes steps like asking questions, gathering relevant data, and considering various perspectives. Research shows a positive link between critical thinking and personal efficacy. Empathy is vital in civic and peace education. It means understanding and resonating with others' emotions. Pedagogical approaches like group work and cooperative tasks nurture empathy, as well as exposure to diverse choices and scenarios. Democratic literacy involves recognizing, valuing, and respecting all individuals as legitimate members of society. Non-formal education, like theatre, is a powerful way to engage communities in raising awareness and fostering democratic literacy. Active citizenship means actively participating in one's local community with values like respect, inclusion, and assistance. Educational programs equip participants with skills and knowledge for resilient societies built on trust. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges, a crucial skill in personal development against extremist ideologies. Research links resilience to pro-social behaviour and life satisfaction. Civic education fosters pro-social behaviour through empathy and voluntary actions that benefit others. Socio-emotional learning (SEL) includes five key components: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. Through SEL, individuals understand and regulate emotions, set positive goals, show empathy, build healthy relationships, and make responsible choices. Effective SEL training leads to improved academic performance and positive attitudes. It reduces disruptive behaviours and disciplinary issues. Educators prioritize SEL through activities that encourage communication, cooperation, emotional regulation, empathy, and self-control.

Against this background, the final goal of WP10 was to foster social cohesion, democratic literacy, active citizenship and a shared sense of belonging to counteract tendencies of grievance, alienation and polarisation through the **development of a participatory role-play** targeting community organizations, youth centres, social/educational workers and interested citizens.

WP10 was carried out in **three parallel and complementary phases**:

- project partners involved in the WP (EURAC – Bolzano/Bozen, AUP – Paris, FUB – Berlin, BILGI – Istanbul and PRONI – Brcko) **analysed civic education programs implemented in their countries** to combat radicalisation and violent extremism in order to highlight approaches, practices and challenges that needed to be taken into account in the development of WP10's toolkit; EURAC complemented such analysis with an overall recognition of existing programmes at EU level and beyond;
- WP partners also contacted **experts** (academics, practitioners, NGO-leaders, public officers at the Ministry of Justice, social workers) **in the field of de-radicalisation, civic-education, cultural mediation and theatrical methods** to provide both feedback on challenges faced in past projects and opinions on the role-play developed in the framework of WP10;

- EURAC, assisted by project partners and external experts developed a **role-play as a preventive tool for youth radicalisation**; WP partners then tested the role-play in their respective countries to collect feedback on its implementation and effectiveness.

Evidence, Analysis and Results

Marginalized and disenfranchised youth are particularly susceptible to messages of violent extremism. They often experience social exclusion and may lack a strong sense of civic identity and personal efficacy. Offering alternative perspectives to these young individuals, enhancing their critical thinking abilities, and providing avenues for active participation in public life are regarded as proactive measures against radicalization and violent extremism. Schools emerge as crucial sites for interventions with vulnerable youth, despite the challenges in engaging students who already exhibit distrust towards educational systems. Beyond the classroom, community centres and youth clubs hold potential for reaching young individuals outside conventional school settings. Nevertheless, it is crucial to pay attention to the selection of activities that can be tailored to different members of the target group in terms of age, culture, origin, etc.

Parallelly, prison populations emerge as a crucial demographic for civic education initiatives, often intersecting with the youth demographic when addressing juvenile offenders. Given the potential for radicalization and violent extremism during incarceration, there have been several attempts at equipping prison staff with skills to critically evaluate extremist ideologies and providing prisoners non-violent avenues for addressing grievances. However, it is important to stress that civic education activities should be designed in a manner that accommodates the limitations within prisons: for instance, civic education activities should be designed in a feasible way considering the prohibitions in the prisons, lack of materials and restrictions on the movements of the prisoners. Moreover, when the target demographic includes returnees from foreign conflicts and individuals convicted of terrorism, specialized reintegration programs are necessary, integrating civic education components focused on disengagement. Nonetheless, deradicalization activities directed at detainees may also necessitate a case management approach, providing individualized mentoring and tailored plans to address specific needs. Hence, it is crucial to customize both content and format to align with the realities of the participants. Finally, civic education activities (especially when implemented as secondary or tertiary prevention tools) require to be integrated into wider deradicalisation programmes encompassing a 'holistic approach' to the radicalisation and violent extremism processes to better identify and tackle their diverse driving social, political, legal, behavioural, and psychological factors).

In terms of broader strategies, the adoption of participatory methods is positively correlate with the effectiveness of civic education activities by cultivating critical thinking, empathy, cooperation, and skill development. Small group discussions, role-playing, artistic expression, sports, and theatre-based activities provide direct experiences for understanding, exploring and sharing diverse perspectives. Such participatory approaches are considerably more effective in nurturing empathy, inclusion, mutual understanding, knowledge sharing, and communication skills - all of which enhance resilience against radicalization and violent extremist processes. Specifically, role-playing allows participants to discuss sensitive topics from an impersonal standpoint and engage with perspectives distinct from their own identities or lived experiences. In these cases, the role of the facilitator is crucial. While facilitators need to pay attention to avoid endorsing radical and violent extremist positions, it is also important to refrain from an immediate rejection of individual perspectives (even if radical) since this would lead to a shutdown of dialogue. Instead, facilitators should focus on creating opportunities for critical reflection among participants, even with diametrical and seemingly irreconcilable positions.

Furthermore, participatory activities are positively influenced by the integration of multiple stakeholders. Locally grounded initiatives draw from grassroots insights while establishing vital networks. Relying solely on school teaching staff can potentially hinder this community connection, as students may not feel at ease discussing sensitive topics with their regular instructors. External facilitators and venues, such as NGOs organizing activities in informal community spaces, help navigate this challenge. In general, trust can be fostered by emphasizing cultural proficiency and avoiding securitized, coercive approaches that may categorize students as potential threats. Instead, it is fundamental to reject oversimplified definitions of radicalization and recognize the complexity of identities.

In this regard, one key concern revolves around the definitions of 'violent/dangerous extremism', 'terrorism', 'radicalization' and 'at-risk', since often their scope is overly expansive. Consequently, typical psychological or social issues such as bullying, adolescent conflicts with authority figures, the search for group belonging, or the exploration of diverse political ideas are occasionally misidentified as signs of radicalization and violent extremism. Furthermore, it is fundamental to avoid stigmatisation by profiling target groups. This may become a difficult task when customization is required, which in turn may be perceived as targeted stigmatization. Consequently, while tailoring programs to resonate with specific vulnerable groups is considered effective, it needs to be further assessed whether direct state-organized deradicalization initiatives may instil distrust from the outset among populations who feel aggrieved and profiled. An overly securitized approach may be perceived as an extension of state suppression.

Overall, civic education has potential to combat radicalization and violent extremism through cultural competence, co-creation, and interactive delivery. A crucial element of success lies in avoiding pre-assumptions, simplistic messaging, as well as securitizing perspectives.

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