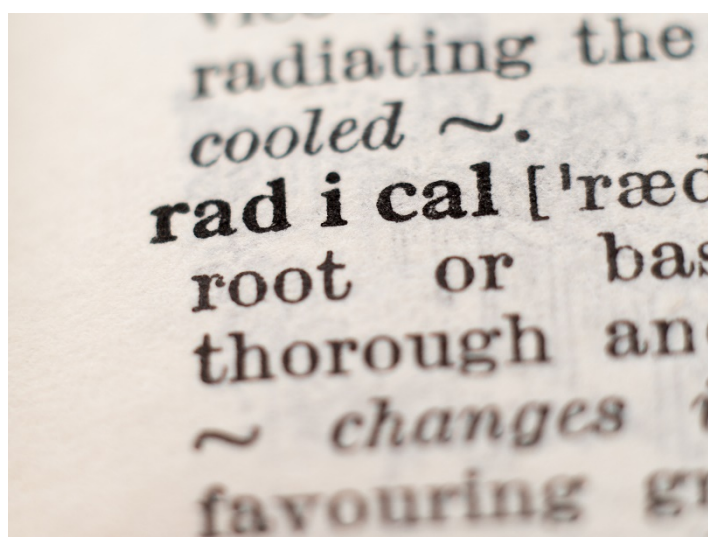




Preventing radicalisation in the European Union

How EU policy
has evolved



IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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The EU's counter-radicalisation policy dates back to 2004, when the term 'radicalisation' was used in a public EU document for the first time. Since then, policy-makers have gone a long way from focusing almost exclusively on jihadist terrorism to adopting a much broader view to take account of various forms of 'violent extremism'. The paper describes this evolution, starting with the origins of the concept and the debates surrounding it, walking the reader through the EU's legal, institutional and financial frameworks, and ending with recent policy assessments. It also recounts EU policy developments and presents the issues currently at stake, as extremists continue to seek ways to further their cause and the EU continues its efforts to prevent them.

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Executive summary

Having originated in national police and intelligence circles in the early 2000s, the concept of 'radicalisation' quickly attracted the attention of EU policy-makers and became the framework of choice for analysing what it is that brings individuals and groups to terrorism. There is no uniform definition of radicalisation, even though the academics and institutions involved in tackling this phenomenon have come up with multiple interpretations. Experts tend to describe the radicalisation process as a set of stages and use models to illustrate how someone might go through these stages before becoming a terrorist. They disagree, however, on the role of specific factors in this process, such as ideology. Some have pointed to the undesired consequences of policies targeting radicalisation and questioned the concept's suitability as a tool to advance our understanding of terrorism.

With the notable exception of rules on terrorist content online, EU action to prevent radicalisation is essentially non-legislative. The EU supports its Member States in countering radicalisation by coordinating their activities and facilitating information sharing and the exchange of best practice. The latter mostly takes place within the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), an umbrella network connecting 'first-line practitioners' – including youth workers, local authority representatives and prison officers – from across the EU. Projects tackling radicalisation receive funding from a range of EU funds and programmes, such as the Internal Security Fund and the EU's framework programme for research and innovation (Horizon Europe).

The scope of EU activities is very broad, going beyond counter-terrorism policy and extending to areas such as education, employment and social inclusion, to name but a few. However, this comprehensive approach faces competence limitations: some of these areas are outside the EU's remit, while in others the EU only plays a secondary role, in line with the principle of subsidiarity. Unsurprisingly, the European Commission's direct engagement with local and regional players – which is characteristic of its counter-radicalisation efforts – has led to tensions with the Member States. Over time, national governments have increasingly demanded a greater say in defining policy priorities. The EU has responded by restructuring the RAN and creating some additional cooperation structures to ensure the Member States' participation.

The EU's counter-radicalisation policy has been shaped by broader policy instruments on EU security and counter-terrorism and by strategies specifically targeting radicalisation. Their content has evolved over time to reflect the evolution of the EU terrorism threat landscape since the inception of the EU counter-radicalisation policy. Policy changes have been introduced, as the initial exclusive focus on jihadist terrorism has given way to a broader approach targeting various forms of extremism.

The coronavirus pandemic created a new context that may prove to be a breeding ground for extremism. Groups from various ideological backgrounds have already incorporated COVID-19 into their narratives; furthermore, the pandemic seems to have contributed to the emergence of new ideologies with a potential impact on radicalisation and violence. As internet use has soared, the increased online presence of extremists is particularly problematic, given its potential to exacerbate the already increasing polarisation of opinions. With social media platforms in the spotlight, these groups have been exploring other, less controlled environments. For example, there are reports of online video games being used as a tool for spreading propaganda among young people.

Whereas over the past 20 years the EU has adopted a prolific number of counter-terrorism measures, only recently have the first attempts been made to review and evaluate them. In 2017, the Commission gave a positive assessment of EU efforts to prevent radicalisation, stressing, however, the need to improve the coordination, outreach and impact of existing instruments. One year later, following an audit of the Commission's counter-radicalisation activities, the European Court of Auditors concluded that the policy objectives and actions had been designed in a way that reflected Member States' needs, but that there were some shortfalls regarding coordination and evaluation.

Table of contents

1. Exploring a new path	1
2. Behind the concept	2
2.1. The definition	2
2.2. What we know about radicalisation	3
2.3. Is 'radicalisation' a useful concept?	5
3. EU legal and institutional framework	6
3.1. Doing much with little	6
3.2. The main players	8
3.2.1. EU institutions and agencies	8
3.2.2. Commission advisory groups	9
3.2.3. Radicalisation Awareness Network	9
3.2.4. Other cooperation forums	10
3.3. Addressing online terrorist propaganda	11
4. Policy developments	12
4.1. Successive EU strategies	12
4.2. The current focus	14
5. EU funding	16
6. Policy assessment and evaluation	18

1. Exploring a new path

When almost 20 years ago EU policy-makers first became interested in the process of radicalisation as a possible explanation of why individuals turn to violence and commit terrorist acts, the concept had not been widely used in social science.¹ Although this does not mean that prior to that time the root causes of terrorism had been outside the sphere of interest of terrorism experts, nevertheless this strand of counter-terrorism research had failed to gain ground, perhaps due to its complexity, thus giving way to more practical policy-oriented studies.² This did not change with the 9/11 attacks, which heavily affected the EU's approach to terrorism. Quite the contrary, the 'war on terror' rhetoric made it difficult to address the root causes of terrorism: not only was the threat considered as external to the Western World, but also investigating the reasons behind terrorist activities could arguably be interpreted as an attempt to justify attacks perpetrated.³

The concept of radicalisation originated within European police and intelligence circles, notably in Belgium and the Netherlands, after they became aware of signs of radicalisation among youth in migrant communities. A public report by the Dutch intelligence service (AIVD) released in December 2002 was reportedly the first source to refer explicitly to and analyse 'radicalisation processes' that prompted individuals 'to travel abroad to participate in or support the jihad'.⁴

However, at the EU level, terrorism continued being perceived as an external threat related primarily to al-Qaeda activities. This changed with the March 2004 Madrid attacks, which were widely but mistakenly regarded as cases of 'home-grown' terrorism.⁵ From that point on, the terrorist threat in the EU was increasingly seen as internal, signalling a major shift in perception; the July 2005 London bombings only reinforced this trend. The two brutal attacks raised questions as to what had led 'ordinary EU citizens', not fitting what many would see as the standard terrorist profile, to 'radicalise' and commit terrorist acts. Whilst this shift did to an extent reinvigorate the debate on the root causes of terrorism, the focus was now on the violent tendencies in individual offenders. The term radicalisation thus provided a new framework to conceptualise terrorism as the result of a process leading individuals or groups towards legitimising violence and committing violent acts.

The October 2004 Commission communication on the prevention, preparedness and response to terrorist attacks⁶ was the first public EU document to refer to '(violent) radicalisation'. Since then, the EU has supported a substantial amount of research on the issue. Furthermore, the prevention of radicalisation has gradually become a key component of the EU counter-terrorism policy, while also extending to other policies in the 'whole-of-government' efforts to address the phenomenon.⁷

¹ S. Aerts, [Radicalisation and violent extremism](#), European Crime Prevention Monitor 2019/1, European Crime Prevention Network, 2019, p. 9.

² R. Coolsaet, 'Radicalisation: the origin and limits of a contested concept', in N. Fadil, M. de Koning and F. Ragazzi (eds.), [Radicalisation in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security](#), I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 40.

³ A. Kundhani, '[Radicalisation: the journey of a concept](#)', *Race & class*, Vol. 54, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 4-5.

⁴ R. Coolsaet, [op. cit.](#), p. 31-32.

⁵ F. Reinales, 'Jihadist Radicalization and the 2004 Madrid Bombing Network', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2(11), pp. 16–19, 2009; quoted after S. Léonard, Ch. Kaunert and I. Yakubov, *Preventing radicalisation and enhancing disengagement in the European Union*, in S. Jarle Hansen and S. Lid (eds.), [Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement](#), Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, p. 184.

⁶ European Commission, [Communication – Prevention, preparedness and response to terrorist attacks](#), COM (2004) 0698 final, 2004.

⁷ These efforts include activities falling under the EU external action, as illustrated by the 2017 [Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Counter-terrorism](#) and the 2020 [Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and](#)

Whereas over the past two decades the EU terrorism threat landscape has evolved and so have the relevant policies, the number of recent counter-radicalisation activities by the EU indicates that its interest in the problem continues unabated.

2. Behind the concept

2.1. The definition

Over time, the term radicalisation has become widely used by politicians, academics and even the general public, to the extent that it has become 'the buzzword of the post 9/11 era'.⁸ There is, however, no uniform definition of the underlying concept. In 2005, after the term had first emerged in the EU police and intelligence circles, the Commission defined 'violent radicalisation' as the 'phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism'.⁹ The first Commission expert group to address the problem proposed a comparably concise working definition of radicalisation as 'socialisation to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism'.¹⁰ Quite interestingly, the group found the term to be confusing due to its relationship with radicalism as an expression of legitimate political thought, which does not in itself lead to violence. Taking account of the absence of a commonly accepted definition, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) defined radicalisation in 2016 as 'a phenomenon of people who regard the use of violence as legitimate and/or use violence themselves in order to achieve their political objectives which undermine the democratic legal order and the fundamental rights on which it is based'.¹¹ The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has used a more complex working definition of radicalisation as 'the process through which an individual comes to adopt extremist political, social, or religious ideas and aspirations which then serve to reject diversity, tolerance and freedom of choice, and legitimise breaking the rule of law and using violence towards property and people'.¹²

Academia has come up with a wealth of definitions that may be partly overlapping but are far from uniform; this can also be said of related terms such as radicalism, extremism and terrorism. While all these definitions regard radicalisation as a process,¹³ they differ on the outcome of this process, framing it as radicalisation 'towards (political) violence', towards '(violent) extremism' or 'towards terrorism'. In contrast to the above working definitions, most of the academic definitions are extensively long and complex.¹⁴

[Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism](#). This paper, however, does not cover these aspects, as it focuses exclusively on the relevant internal policies.

⁸ N. Bennett, '[One Man's Radical: The Radicalisation Debate and Australian Counterterrorism Policy](#)', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 15(1), 2019, p.1.

⁹ European Commission, '[Communication concerning terrorist recruitment – Addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation](#)', COM/2005/0313 final, 2015, p. 2.

¹⁰ European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, '[Radicalisation processes leading to acts of terrorism](#)', report, 2008, p. 7.

¹¹ Committee of the Regions, '[Combating Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Prevention mechanisms at local and regional level](#)', opinion, 16 June 2016, p. 4.

¹² RAN Centre of Excellence, '[RAN Polarisation Management Manual](#)', ex-post paper, July 2017, p. 5.

¹³ P. R. Neumann, '[The trouble with radicalization](#)', *International Affairs*, Vol. 89(4), 2013, p. 874.

¹⁴ A. P. Schmid, '[Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review](#)', *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 4, No 2, 2013, pp. 5-6.

2.2. What we know about radicalisation

There is no agreement among experts not only regarding the definition of radicalisation but also as to **why** and **how** individuals and groups radicalise. For researchers investigating the root causes of radicalisation, the one element that seems unquestionable is that no single factor is a sufficient or necessary condition for radicalisation.¹⁵ Alex P. Schmidt notes in this regard that most radicalisation research indicates that there is 'no single cause but a complex mix of internal and external pull and push factors, triggers and drivers that can lead to radicalisation of individuals and even turn large collective groups into radical milieus and violent extremists'.¹⁶ He therefore argues that the analysis should be undertaken at three different levels:

- micro level i.e. the individual level, involving issues such as identity problems, failed integration, and feelings of alienation, 'often combined with moral outrage and feelings of (vicarious) revenge';
- meso level related to the social surround that the author refers to as a 'radical milieu';
- macro level referring to the role of government and society at home and abroad, as well as the radicalisation of public opinion and party politics.¹⁷

However, from early on, radicalisation studies have mostly addressed the micro level, placing emphasis on how individuals are influenced by one specific factor: ideology. Radicalisation has thus been routinely linked with Salafism – a conservative branch of Islam – seen as breeding ground for terrorism and an indispensable condition for radicalisation. Within the EU, what has been perhaps the most dynamic national-level debate on the role of Salafism thus far, unfolded in France. Participants in the debate upheld two opposing hypotheses: that of the 'radicalisation of Islam' as the principal explanation of radicalisation towards terrorism, against that of 'Islamisation of radicalism' in which religion plays a secondary role, only providing a narrative of self-significance to disenchanted youth in generational conflict with their elders. More recently, attempts have been made at reconciling the two stances.¹⁸ Overall, establishing the role of ideology in the radicalisation process is relevant not only for early prevention but also for de-radicalisation efforts, as it makes it possible to make assumptions about the effectiveness of the potential strategies to adopt.

As for the question of **how** people radicalise, the phenomenon has been modelled in various ways with all models subscribing to the idea that "'becoming extremist" is a process, and that studying radicalisation is about discovering the nature of that process'.¹⁹ Most of those models are step- (or phase-) based, with the individual going through a series of cognitive and behavioural steps before finally accepting and committing violent acts. The 'four-stage', 'staircase' and 'pyramid' are three well-established models that have been widely debated in literature.

Under the four-stage model, developed by Randy Borum, the process begins with a grievance ('It's not right'), which is framed as unjust ('It's not fair') and blamed on a person or group ('It's your fault'), which is then vilified ('You're Evil'). Such vilification provides justification for violence overriding

¹⁵ S. Aerts, [op. cit.](#), p. 7.

¹⁶ A. Schmid, [op. cit.](#), p. 5.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 4.

¹⁸ J.-P. Azama and J. Ferret, [Radicalization of Islam or Peddling Radicalism? Lessons from the French Experience](#), 2022.

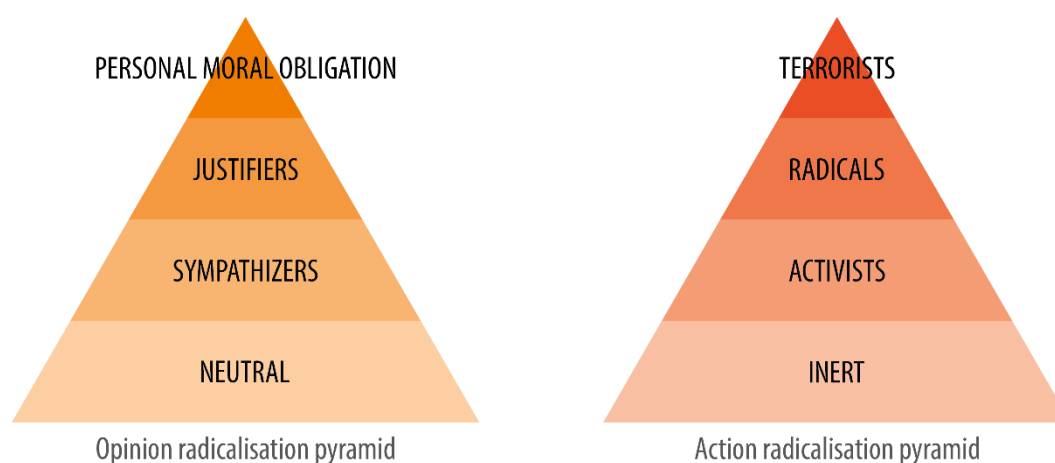
¹⁹ P. R. Neumann, [op. cit.](#), p. 874.

one's inhibitions towards committing violent acts. The model was originally developed as a training tool for law enforcement rather than as part of a formal social science theory.²⁰

In Fathali M. Moghaddam's model, the process of radicalisation is portrayed as a staircase that narrows as it goes five floors up. The higher one goes, the fewer choices they see, until the only choice left is terrorism. On the ground floor are people experiencing injustice or deprivation; some of them climb to the first floor in search of solutions. Those who find ways to improve their individual situation get off the staircase, while others go on to the second floor, where their anger and frustration are projected onto an 'enemy' such as an ethnic group. Those who have reached the third floor begin to see terrorism as a justified strategy; on the fourth, they are recruited by terrorist organisations. Finally, on the fifth floor, specific individuals are selected and trained to 'sidestep inhibitory mechanisms' and then sent to carry out terrorist acts.²¹

In McCauley and Moskaleiko's 'pyramid' model, the successive levels of the pyramid are associated with increased commitment of individuals who are categorised, starting from the bottom, as sympathisers, supporters, activists, and radicals. The authors see radicalisation as emerging from the dynamics of intergroup conflict, rather than from psychological processes experienced by individuals. Interestingly and contrary to the common discourse on radicalisation focusing only on non-state groups, they demonstrate how state action can contribute to the radicalisation of non-state groups.²² Taking into account the view shared by a growing number of scholars that radicalisation of opinion should be distinguished from radicalisation of action, the authors later developed a two-pyramid model (see Figure 1 below).²³

Figure 1 – The two-pyramid model



Source: C. McCauley and S. Moskaleiko, 2017.

²⁰ R. Borum, '[Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research](#)', *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4(4), 2011, p. 39.

²¹ F. M. Moghaddam, '[The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration](#)', *The American psychologist*, Vol. 60(2), 2005, pp.161-169.

²² C. McCauley and S. Moskaleiko, '[Mechanisms of political radicalization: pathways toward terrorism](#)', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, Issue 3, 2008.

²³ C. McCauley and S. Moskaleiko, '[Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model](#)', *The American Psychologist*, 72.3, 2017, pp. 205-216.

More recent models include the constructivist model, based on the 'personal construct' theory,²⁴ the social-developmental model focusing on the age range from early childhood to late adolescence as 'the most dynamic period for social development',²⁵ and the 3N model. The latter identifies need, narrative, and network (the 3N) as the three interconnected categories of factors producing radicalisation. According to this model, radicalisation results from the 'universal need to be someone and to be respected by others that matter' ('quest for significance'). Social alienation is one form of significance loss that induces a 'cognitive opening' – a receptiveness to new ideologies, which in turn provide narratives justifying violence against outgroup members, e.g. by dehumanising them. Individuals adhering to a specific ideology are likely to liaise with others sharing similar beliefs. In such a network, the use of violence is socially condoned and those who defend the group's existence are seen as heroes and martyrs.²⁶

Whereas phase-based models are widely used to describe the process of radicalisation, some authors point to their inherent weaknesses. It is argued, for example, that such models i) do not explain why and under what circumstances one moves to the next phase, and ii) tend to assume that radicalisation is linear in nature, which can be questioned. Moreover, as their focus is primarily on vulnerabilities, they do not explain why some individuals are resilient to radicalisation, which is crucial for shaping de-radicalisation initiatives.²⁷ Overall, researchers seem to agree that the process of radicalisation can stop at any stage and does not necessarily lead to violent extremism or terrorism.²⁸

2.3. Is 'radicalisation' a useful concept?

Ever since the concept of radicalisation started gaining prominence in political and academic circles, its usefulness as a means to understand the causes of terrorism has been debated. Noting that the term could be misleading and that it had not been used in a uniform manner, the very first expert group set up by the Commission to assess the state of play of research in the field observed that '[w]hile radicalism can pose a threat, it is extremism, and particularly terrorism, that ought to be our main concern since it involves the active subversion of democratic values and the rule of law'.²⁹ In 2011, Alex P. Schmid argued that the popularity of the concept was incommensurate with its 'actual explanatory power',³⁰ and Rik Coolsaet has repeatedly described it as 'ill-defined, complex and controversial'.³¹ These are only two of many negative assessments of this kind.

²⁴ D.A. Winter and G. Feixas, ['Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Conceptual and Methodological Proposal'](#), *Front. Psychol.*, 2019.

²⁵ A Beelmann, ['A Social-Developmental Model of Radicalization: A Systematic Integration of Existing Theories and Empirical Research'](#), *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol. 14(1), 2020.

²⁶ J.J. Bélanger et al., ['Radicalization Leading to Violence: A Test of the 3N Model'](#), *Front. Psychiatry*, 2019; D. Webber and A.W. Kruglanski, ['Psychological factors in radicalization: a "3 N" approach'](#), in G. LaFree G, J.D. Freilich JD (eds.), *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016, pp. 33–46.

²⁷ L. Mann et al., 'Exploring the viability of phase-based models in (de)radicalization', in S. Jarle Hansen and S. Lid (eds.), ['Routledge Handbook of Deradicalisation and Disengagement'](#), Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, p. 43.

²⁸ S. Aerts, [op. cit.](#), p. 7.

²⁹ European Commission Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, ['Radicalisation processes leading to acts of terrorism'](#) report, 2008, p. 7

³⁰ A. Schmid, [op. cit.](#), p. 1.

³¹ R. Coolsaet (ed.), ['Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experience'](#), 2nd edition, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, p. 240; R. Coolsaet, 'Radicalisation: the origin and limits of a contested concept', in N. Fadil, M. de Koning and F. Ragazzi (eds.), ['Radicalisation in Belgium and the Netherland: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security'](#), I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. 30.

One criticism concerns the fact that, not by accident, ideology has become the primary angle in examining the process that individuals go through to become terrorists, despite the lack of scholarly consensus on this point. The emergence of radicalisation discourse as an attempt to explain jihadist terrorism and its focus on psychological processes in vulnerable individuals may have resulted in it having an in-built bias and somewhat automatically assuming the decisive role of one specific ideology. Set against the background of growing concerns over immigration and Islam, the concept of radicalisation may thus have contributed to reinforcing the popular image of Islam as a threatening value system and of Muslims as a suspect community.³² Moreover, with radicalisation research focusing on individual and ideology, the broader political, social and economic context of terrorism has been underexplored, if not largely neglected.³³

Not only the approach used by researchers has been criticised but also the way research is funded by governments and, more generally, the process of commissioning research and adopting policies based on its findings. Some interesting questions in this regard were raised by Derek M.D. Silva in his 2018 study³⁴ building on earlier work by A. Kundnani.³⁵ Whereas the study concerns Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, its conclusions are worth reflecting on also in the EU context. In the author's view, governments tend to adopt research results selectively and legitimise only specific elements of those results while ignoring others. Consequently, research challenging the existing surveillance and policing strategies is discarded in favour of studies presenting radicalisation as an observable process that can be prevented by policies addressing a set of 'indicators'.

Overall, the debate on the value of the radicalisation concept is ongoing, enriched by the ever-growing body of research. At the very least, this will tangibly improve our understanding of the processes at the micro level. However, as some authors pointed out, it is hard to say whether this proves that the analysed concept is useful or is the inevitable result of many years of research on radicalisation.³⁶ The question may remain forever unanswered.

3. EU legal and institutional framework

3.1. Doing much with little

The EU has applied a multifaceted approach to radicalisation involving a range of policies addressing various aspects of the problem. This approach extends beyond counter-terrorism policy to areas such as education, employment and social inclusion, to name but a few. This wide array of activities is often described as 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) or 'countering violent extremism' (CVE), there being no clear-cut boundaries between the two concepts.³⁷ Since the

³² R. Coolsaet, [op. cit.](#), pp. 36, 43 and 47. See also A. Kundnani, '[Radicalisation: the journey of a concept](#)', *Race & class*, Vol. 54(2), 2012, pp. 3-25.

³³ A. Schmid, [op. cit.](#), pp. 5-6.

³⁴ D.M.D. Silva, '[Radicalisation: the journey of a concept revisited](#)', *Race & Class*, Vol. 59(4), 2018, pp. 34-53.

³⁵ A. Kundnani, '[Radicalisation: the journey of a concept](#)', *Race & class*, Vol. 54(2), 2012, pp. 3-25.

³⁶ A. Silke and K. Brown, 'Radicalisation: The Transformation of Modern Understanding of Terrorist Origins, Psychology and Motivation', in S. Jayakumar (ed.), *State, Society, and National Security: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2016, pp. 129-150.

³⁷ [Preventing and countering violent extremism \(PVE/CVE\)](#), UNODC website consulted on 30 September 2022.

adoption of the 2005 EU counter-terrorism strategy, tackling radicalisation has been the core element of the 'prevent' strand (see Section 3.2. below).

EU preventive efforts are very broad, as they include what in crime prevention theory is typically referred to as 'primary' (or 'upstream') prevention i.e. early preventive measures aimed at the whole of society and addressing issues such as discrimination and poverty, 'secondary' ('midstream') prevention – targeting persons vulnerable to radicalisation – and 'tertiary' ('downstream') prevention, aimed at preventing offenders from relapse.³⁸ Regarding the latter, the EU has increasingly supported initiatives on 'disengagement' (i.e. a behavioural change leading individuals to refrain from violence) and, to a lesser extent, 'deradicalisation' (a deeper cognitive change whereby one denounces the ideology legitimising the use of violence), as well as 'rehabilitation programmes' and 'exit strategies' seeking to reintegrate offenders into society.³⁹

Such comprehensive EU action faces major competence limitations. The scope of the EU's involvement in crime prevention is clearly delineated by Article 84 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) granting the European Parliament and the Council a possibility to 'establish measures to promote and support the action of Member States'. These measures, however, exclude any harmonisation of the Member States' laws and regulations. Other policies – non-security-related ones (for instance, policies on religious matters), including those addressing the presumed socio-economic causes of radicalisation – are either a primarily national competence or fall entirely outside the EU's remit.

The EU and its Member States have shared competence regarding police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, yet Article 4 of the Treaty on European Union explicitly excludes 'safeguarding national security' from the EU's remit. Moreover, in any area of shared competence, the principle of subsidiarity applies, that is, the EU intervenes only when the objectives of an action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States but can be better achieved at EU level, 'by reason of the scale and effects of the proposed action'.⁴⁰ Indeed, considering the nature of the phenomenon, radicalisation is addressed primarily at local, regional and national levels.

Relevant EU policy documents seem to attest to the Commission's recognition of the EU's secondary and supportive role, as they mention the 'challenge of combating radicalisation and terrorist recruitment [being] the responsibility of the Member States ... accountable to their parliaments and people for their action in those fields'⁴¹ and 'local actors [being] usually best placed to prevent and detect radicalisation'.⁴² Through the RAN, the EU has been liaising directly with front-line practitioners, operating, in theory, within the constraints of the subsidiarity principle. Yet, this direct engagement with sub-national (local and regional) players has led to tensions with the Member

³⁸ A.P. Schmid, 'Terrorism Prevention: Conceptual Issues (Definitions, Typologies and Theories)', in A.P. Schmid (ed.), [Handbook of terrorism prevention and preparedness](#), ICCT, 2020, p. 24.

³⁹ In practice, the terms such as 'rehabilitation', 'reintegration', 'deradicalisation', 'disengagement', and 'exit strategies' are often used interchangeably. However, RAN experts stress the need to draw a clear distinction between them. See Radicalisation Awareness Network, [Rehabilitation Manual: Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first line practitioners](#), 2020, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁰ Cf. J. Burchett, A. Weyembergh, in collaboration with G. Theodorakakaou, [Counterterrorism policies, measures and tools in the EU](#), Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, March 2022, pp. 71-72.

⁴¹ Council of the European Union, [Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), 2008, p. 6.

⁴² European Commission, [Communication supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism](#), COM (2016) 0379 final, 2016, p. 2.

States, which see it as an attempt by the EU to sideline them and expand its remit. The concerns they have voiced over time have strongly influenced the reflection process undertaken by the High Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R), leading to the evolution of new EU coordination mechanisms. The RAN has also been closely followed by the CoR, whose interactions with the Commissions in this area have been characterised as inter-'institutional battles'.⁴³

Overall, EU action related to preventing radicalisation is essentially non-legislative and is limited to supporting Member States by coordinating their activities and facilitating cooperation, which includes information sharing and the exchange of best practices. The EU has also provided financial support to projects on radicalisation, including for research, the findings of which are disseminated through EU channels.

However, despite the above constraints, the EU has been very active in addressing radicalisation. This is illustrated by the host of coordination bodies and policy documents (such as agendas, strategies and action plans) focusing on the issue as well as the sizeable funding allocated for a range of projects on radicalisation and extremism. Moreover, EU policy has influenced directly and indirectly the policies of some Member States, if not more, which has led to the adoption of national strategies and action plans.

3.2. The main players

3.2.1. EU institutions and agencies

As is the case for counter-terrorism in general, the broad lines of EU counter-radicalisation policies are agreed on by the Member States and laid down in the European Council and Council conclusions. The Working Party on Terrorism (TWP) managing the Council's counter-terrorism agenda deals, among other things, with radicalisation and terrorism recruitment-related issues. The TWP cooperates in this regard with the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator – a position created in the aftermath of the 2004 Madrid attacks – whose somewhat undefined remit covers making policy recommendations and proposing priority areas for action to the Council. The Coordinator has produced numerous reports on radicalisation and related issues.

The European Parliament has addressed radicalisation in numerous resolutions,⁴⁴ and the issue figured prominently in the final recommendations of its Special Committee on Terrorism.⁴⁵ Whereas the Parliament's impact on policymaking in this area has been limited, it co-legislated on regulation 2021/784, a recent major piece of legislation addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online.⁴⁶

Considering the strong regional and local dimension of radicalisation, the CoR plays an indispensable role in the EU's preventive action. In the fulfilment of this role, the Committee's relations with the Commission have not been without inter-institutional tensions.

⁴³ F. Melhuish and Ch. Heath-Kelly, '[Fighting terrorism at the local level: the European Union, radicalisation prevention and the negotiation of subsidiarity](#)', *European Security*, Vol. 31(2), 2021, p. 327.

⁴⁴ Including the [resolution](#) of 25 November 2015 on the prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisations ([2015/2063\(INI\)](#)).

⁴⁵ [Resolution](#) of 12 December 2018 on findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism ([2018/2044\(INI\)](#)).

⁴⁶ [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/784](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online.

The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) – and in particular its European Counter Terrorism Centre – is yet another key player. Not only does it facilitate information exchange between national agencies and collect intelligence but it also has specific tasks regarding terrorist content removal (flagging and referring such content for voluntary removal by online platforms). The European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) produces a 'terrorism convictions monitor', i.e. an internal report providing an overview of concluded court proceedings, upcoming and ongoing trials, as well as an update on relevant legal developments. Since 2019, it has also hosted the European Judicial Counter-Terrorism Register, recording ongoing investigations of and proceedings against individuals suspected or accused of terrorism.

Yet, given the non-legislative and multi-stakeholder nature of the EU counter-radicalisation action, the European Commission is the institution that plays the central role in shaping EU policy and in overseeing its application by a range of stakeholders. The role of oversight entails the continuous coordination of the activities of all parties involved, mostly handled by the Prevention of Radicalisation Unit in the Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs. However, due to the broad scope of EU counter-radicalisation activities, many other Commission departments are also involved.

3.2.2. Commission advisory groups

Ever since the Commission embarked on its counter-radicalisation mission, it has sought the expertise of researchers and practitioners to support its work. Successive advisory groups, operating on a temporary basis, have thus been set up to this end.

In April 2006, the Commission set up the Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation by force of a decision it adopted.⁴⁷ The group, composed of 12 renowned experts from various disciplines, delivered in May 2008 a synthesis report on the state of play of research in the area. The group was succeeded by the European Network of Experts on Radicalisation (ENER). The work of these two bodies could be seen as a build-up to the creation of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), established in 2011.

Following a series of terrorist attacks across the EU, in 2017 the Commission established the High Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R), composed of experts from the Member States, a number of EU agencies and institutions, and the RAN. The group built on the comprehensive assessment of EU security policies performed in 2017. Its tasks included advising the Commission on issues such as improving cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders, and, most importantly, the Member States, as well as 'exploring options for future more structured cooperation mechanisms'. In its thorough final report,⁴⁸ the group made a range of recommendations for various priority areas (e.g. radicalisation in prisons, communication and countering online propaganda) and regarding new cooperation mechanisms.

3.2.3. Radicalisation Awareness Network

Created in 2011 – initially as a partnership between the Commission and the CoR – the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) is an umbrella network connecting first-line practitioners from across the EU, whose job involves dealing with radicalised individuals and persons vulnerable to radicalisation.

⁴⁷ [Commission Decision of 19 April 2006 setting up a group of experts to provide policy advice to the Commission on fighting violent radicalisation](#), 2006/299/EC.

⁴⁸ High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R), [Final Report](#), 2018.

This network of networks, which is funded by the Internal Security Fund, was initially set up for four years but has had mandate renewed three times. Since its inception, it has continuously grown, assuming a leading role in the EU's counter-radicalisation work.

The RAN participants include civil society representatives, social workers, youth workers, teachers, healthcare professionals, local authority representatives, and police and prison officers. The network seeks to facilitate both internal and external communication, including with EU institutions, and the sharing of the expertise and good practices it collects and disseminates. In this vein, the RAN has produced a plethora of thematic papers, handbooks and guidelines and maintained a 'Collection of Approaches and Practices', which may serve as inspiration for practitioners and policy-makers.⁴⁹ As a work in progress, the collection is continuously upgraded and enriched with new practices. Furthermore, the network provides support and training to national, regional and local authorities and increasingly to third countries. It also organises events, including a biennial high-level conference on radicalisation.

The RAN's overall approach to tackling radicalisation (the 'RAN DNA') is informed by four key overarching principles, namely: involving and training first-line practitioners, prevention, a multi-agency approach and tailor-made interventions adapted to local circumstances.

The network is structured around nine thematic working groups dealing with specific aspects of radicalisation, including Communication and Narratives (RAN C&N); Youth, Families and Communities (RAN YF&C), and Prison and Probation (RAN P&P). It is managed by a steering committee, chaired by the Commission and composed of all working group leaders and the RAN Centre of Excellence. The latter was set up in 2015 to coordinate and support the network's activities, functioning as a hub disseminating expertise gathered through the RAN (e.g. by publishing issue- and policy papers) and offering tailored support to Member States. The centre is currently run by a consortium led by RadarEurope.

Critical reflection on the activities carried out by the RAN – undertaken notably by the HLCEG – has led to some restructuring of the network. Consequently, the RAN Policy Support was launched in January 2021, as a new strand of the RAN that now operates alongside RAN Practitioners. The idea is to involve national authorities in a network (so far primarily composed of practitioners) and bridge the gap between policy-making and research, connecting the public and private sectors, think tanks, academia and civil society organisations.

3.2.4. Other cooperation forums

As the Member States have increasingly insisted on having a greater say in defining the priorities in the EU counter-radicalisation policies, some additional cooperation structures have been put in place to ensure their participation. This is also in line with the recommendations of the High-Level Commission Expert Group on radicalisation, which called, in its final report, for setting up an EU cooperation mechanism to improve coordination among the stakeholders and increase the Member States' involvement.

A Steering Board for Union actions on preventing and countering radicalisation was set up in 2018, as part of the mechanism. Its full-fledged members are high-level representatives of the Member States' competent authorities; experts from the European External Action Service and the EU

⁴⁹ [Collection of inspiring practices](#), European Commission website, consulted on 30 September 2022.

Counter-Terrorism Coordinator act as observers. It contributes to the drafting of the annual 'strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation' and helps the Commission to identify gaps and scope for improvement in preventing and countering radicalisation. These 'strategic orientations' draw primarily on input from the Member States as expressed in the framework of the Network of Prevent Policy Makers and Project-Based Collaborations.

The reformed Network of Prevent Policy Makers is another element of the EU cooperation mechanism as envisaged by the Commission. This network is now tasked with complementing and preparing the discussions within the Steering Board, by providing input for the strategic orientations and facilitating their implementation. Project-Based Collaborations are a new collaborative format whereby like-minded Member States, supported by the Commission, exchange information and expertise on priority radicalisation-related topics.⁵⁰

3.3. Addressing online terrorist propaganda

Extremist groups have long recognised the power of the internet as a tool to disseminate propaganda, reach potential recruits and facilitate attacks. Whereas the exact impact of their online activities on radicalisation processes is unknown,⁵¹ their online presence has dramatically increased over the past two decades, prompting responses from governments in Europe and elsewhere. The EU response to the problem has developed into a somewhat distinct strand of its counter-radicalisation policy, involving collaboration with a range of stakeholders such as online platforms and civil society. EU activities have focused on the one hand on the removal of terrorist online content, and, on the other, on supporting the creation of counter- and alternative narratives. The EU Internet Forum – launched in 2015 as a platform connecting industry, civil society and the EU institutions and agencies – is active in both these areas. Regarding illegal online content, it collaborates with the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU), based at Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC). The EU IRU is tasked with flagging terrorist and violent extremist content and referring it for (voluntary) removal by online service providers as per their respective terms and conditions. The Internet Forum runs a 'database of hashes' to prevent illegal content from being uploaded again on another platform.

⁵⁰ [Project Based Collaborations](#), European Commission website, consulted on 30 September 2022.

⁵¹ S. Aerts, [op. cit.](#), p. 9.

Another strand of the forum's activities consists in increasing the impact of counter-messaging campaigns developed by civil society organisations that may lack the capacity and resources to produce and effectively disseminate their output online. The Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP), set up to this end, connects such organisations with social media platforms and supports the former in developing counter- and alternative narratives. The CSEP database lists organisations interested in working on counter-messaging campaigns, thus facilitating partnerships between stakeholders.⁵²

Regulation on the dissemination of terrorist content online

When regulating online platforms, the EU has at its disposal instruments that are much stronger than the 'soft tools' used for preventing radicalisation offline. Based on Article 114 TFEU – which allows for adopting directly applicable rules to protect the internal market – **Regulation (EU) 2021/784** addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online was adopted in 2021 to complement the existing voluntary referral-based system involving the EU Internet Forum and the EU IRU. Under the regulation, the competent authority of each Member State has the power to issue a removal order requiring any hosting service provider offering services in the EU to remove or disable access to terrorist content in all Member States within one hour following the receipt of such an order. The regulation is part of a broader action that is taking shape at the EU level regarding illegal content online, which also includes child sexual abuse materials, hate speech and infringements of intellectual property rights. However, its adoption has raised concerns among civil society organisations and academics due to potential issues with fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression.

Cooperation on countering terrorist propaganda is also undertaken through the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN); funded by the Commission, this network serves as a platform for EU Member States interested in sharing good practices and ideas on the use of strategic communications. Set up in 2016 as a follow-up to the Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team (SSCAT), the network operates as a password-protected members-only platform, which explains the dearth of information on its activities.

4. Policy developments

4.1. Successive EU strategies

The EU's counter-radicalisation policy has been shaped by broader policy instruments devoted to EU security and counter-terrorism, and by strategies specifically targeting radicalisation, complemented by Commission communications presenting concrete activities to be undertaken. These successive instruments and strategies reflect the evolution of the terrorism threat faced by the EU as identified by EU policy-makers.

In line with the approach that has become the predominant one after 9/11, the European security strategy⁵³ of 2003 considered the terrorism threat global and essentially external to the EU. However, it also stressed that the EU was not only a target but also a base for terrorism and pointed to the factors behind terrorist acts, such as 'the pressures of modernisation, cultural, social and political crises, and the alienation of young people living in foreign societies'.

⁵² [CSEP Network](#), European Commission website, consulted on 30 September 2022.

⁵³ Council of the European Union, [European Security Strategy. A secure Europe in a better world](#), 2009, p. 27.

As already mentioned, the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, followed by the London attacks of 2005, brought about a shift in the EU approach to terrorism. Adopted in their wake, the 2005 European counter-terrorism strategy fully recognised the importance of preventing individuals from 'turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment, in Europe and internationally'.⁵⁴ The strategy, modelled after the UK CONTEST strategy, defined four strategic objectives for EU action in this field: 'prevent', 'protect', 'pursue' and 'respond'. Radicalisation was addressed under the 'prevent' strand. The strategy focused on radicalisation and recruitment by al-Qaeda and the groups it inspired, considering this type of terrorism the main threat to the EU. It noted that certain conditions in society that were conducive to radicalisation might be present in 'individual segments of the population' within the EU.

Unlike previous strategies, this broad-based one was complemented by a targeted EU strategy for combating radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism.⁵⁵ The two were published simultaneously and their wording is partially identical. The targeted strategy identified three priorities for the EU, namely '[disrupting] the activities of the networks and individuals who draw people into terrorism'; '[ensuring] that voices of mainstream opinion prevail over those of extremism'; and [promoting] yet more vigorously security, justice, democracy and opportunity for all'.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, the counter-terrorism strategy focused as well on al-Qaeda and the terrorists this organisation inspired, and stressed the need to 'empower moderate voices by engaging with Muslim organisations and faith groups that reject the distorted version of Islam put forward by [al-Qaeda]'.⁵⁷ Whereas the strategy did not provide a definition of radicalisation, the 2005 Commission communication,⁵⁸ which came out shortly before the strategy, did.

The strategy was revised in 2008 and 2014. Whilst the first revision did not substantially differ from the original text, it highlighted 'Europe's desire to combat all forms of terrorism, whoever the perpetrators may be', departing from the exclusive focus on jihadism.⁵⁹ The 2014 revision marked a significant change in the perception of the terrorism threat: as the conflict in Syria and Iraq unfolded and the 'Islamic State' gained prominence, many EU citizens – 'foreign fighters' – were travelling to conflict zones and there were fears of these individuals returning to Europe and carrying out terrorist attacks. The strategy, redrafted to take these developments into account, is largely different from its previous versions.

First, the document does not include a single reference to jihadism and warns against stigmatising any particular group of people, considering full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as a foundation of counter-radicalisation work. Second, it emphasises the added value of the EU action in supporting national and local counter-radicalisation efforts, pointing in particular to the need of collaborating with communities, civil society and the private sector. Third, it stresses the importance of a 'balanced approach between security-related measures and efforts to tackle those factors that may create an environment conducive to radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism'.

⁵⁴ European Council, [The European Union Counter-terrorism Strategy](#), November 2005.

⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, [The European Union Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), 2005.

⁵⁶ [ibid.](#), p. 3.

⁵⁷ [ibid.](#), p. 4.

⁵⁸ European Commission, [Communication concerning Terrorist recruitment: addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation](#), COM (2005) 313 final, 2005, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Council of the European Union, [Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), 2008.

Moreover, the revised strategy includes a definition of 'disengagement' as a process 'through which a radicalised individual can come to renounce violence, leave a group or movement, or even reject a worldview supporting or promoting an extremist ideology linked to terrorism.'⁶⁰

As envisaged under the strategy, the Council's Terrorism Working Party elaborated guidelines on how to implement it; these guidelines were reviewed in 2017 to take stock of the evolving threat landscape. First, fears of foreign fighters returning to Europe to commit crime materialised with the 2015 attacks in France (the perpetrators had travelled abroad to fight or to receive terrorist training). Then, the 2016 attacks – the first in Nice and the second at the Christmas market in Berlin – bore witness to a rise of the 'lone wolf' ('lone actor') phenomenon and the weaponisation of ordinary life (the use of commonly accessible objects to commit attacks), signalling a need for a shift in counter-terrorism approaches. Returning foreign fighters, including women and children, were thus seen as a growing challenge alongside lone actors and small cells, the use of social media for radicalisation and recruitment, as well as the rise of right-wing extremism and risks of polarisation.⁶¹

Whereas since 2017 the number of terrorist attacks in the EU has decreased,⁶² the above threats have persisted, with those related to the online sphere exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Against this backdrop, a new EU counter-terrorism agenda⁶³ was published in December 2020, as a key component of the security union strategy.⁶⁴ It has four strands: 'anticipate', 'prevent', 'protect' and 'respond'. As in the 2005 European counter-terrorism strategy, the prevention of radicalisation falls under the 'prevent' strand.

The agenda puts emphasis on countering extremist ideologies online and the voluntary and mandatory mechanisms the EU is developing to address them. Moreover, it advocates for a bottom-up approach of engaging with communities – albeit 'in close coordination with Member States' – as well as stressing the need to reinforce the EU action in 'three key areas': prisons, rehabilitation and reintegration. The agenda also provides for consolidating knowledge and support through a two-step process whereby national networks and centres of expertise would be supported as a first line of action, and then the Commission would propose setting up an EU knowledge hub on prevention of radicalisation. The latter's tasks would include disseminating knowledge and expertise, promoting the full use of EU funding possibilities, evaluating interventions, and certifying best practices.

4.2. The current focus

When reading recent policy documents, reports and assessments, one realises how much the EU terrorism threat landscape has changed since the advent of the EU's counter-radicalisation policies. Whereas jihadism still represents a threat – though a more dissipated one, with most recent attacks

⁶⁰ Council of the European Union, [Revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), 2014, p. 5.

⁶¹ Council of the European Union, [Review of the Guidelines for the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorism](#), 2017.

⁶² Council of the European Union, *Terrorist attacks in the EU by type (2010-2021)* in [Terrorism in the EU: facts and figures](#), infographic, 2022.

⁶³ European Commission, [Communication – A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond](#), COM (2020) 795 final, 2020.

⁶⁴ European Commission, [Communication on the EU Security Union Strategy](#), COM/2020/605 final, 2020.

committed by lone wolves and small cells – the initial exclusive focus on jihadist terrorism has given way to a broader approach targeting various forms of extremism.

Recent years have thus witnessed a growing interest among both national and EU policy-makers in right-wing extremism, as illustrated by discussions in the Council⁶⁵ and the fact that eight Member States chose to work on this priority area under a dedicated project-based collaboration and agreed on a non-legally binding working definition of violent right-wing extremism.⁶⁶ The coronavirus pandemic enabled right-wing extremist groups to reach broader audiences through social media campaigns and active participation in mass protests, a development noted and addressed in the work of RAN Practitioners.⁶⁷

Overall, extremist groups of various ideological backgrounds have incorporated COVID-19 into their narratives, and the pandemic may have contributed to the emergence of ideologies going beyond 'traditional' extremist views and having a potential impact on radicalisation and violence. The strategic orientations for 2022-2023 stress the need to better understand and define such ideologies.⁶⁸ With the pandemic-boosted use of the internet, the increased online presence of extremists seems particularly problematic, as it may further exacerbate the already increasing polarisation of opinions. The EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator points to the role played in this context by the recommendation algorithms used by online platforms. In his extensive report⁶⁹ – referenced in the June 2022 Council conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism⁷⁰ – the Coordinator describes how in the platforms' business model based on watch time, the most engaging content – that is, the most violent and divisive one – is amplified by algorithms. Such '[a]utomated amplification of extreme fringe content may facilitate radicalisation (by driving extremists towards more extremist opinions and making people in the mainstream more likely to support extremist ideas and legitimise violent extremism) and exacerbate polarisation in society'.⁷¹

Whereas the functioning of social media platforms is a broadly debated and increasingly regulated issue, the link between the online gaming environment and extremism has only started being discussed beyond expert circles. The two most recent Europol EU Terrorism Situation and Trend (TE-SAT) reports note a growing trend among right-wing extremists to use video games to

⁶⁵ Council of the European Union, [Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism](#), 2019; Council of the European Union, [Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism in the European Union: discussion paper](#), EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2019. In 2021, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator initiated a similar discussion on left-wing extremism: Council of the European Union, [EU action to counter left-wing and anarchist violent extremism and terrorism: Discussion paper](#), Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2021. For general information on this poorly studied phenomenon, see: F. Farinelli and L. Marinone, [Contemporary Violent Leftwing and Anarchist Extremism \(VLWAE\) in the EU: Analysing Threats and Potential for P/CVE](#), RAN Practitioners, 2021.

⁶⁶ European Commission, [Project Based Collaboration \(PBC\) on Violent Right-Wing Extremism \(VRWE\)](#), 2021.

⁶⁷ M. Mareš, [Capitalising on Crises How VRWEs Exploit the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lessons for P/CVE](#), RAN Practitioners, 2021.

⁶⁸ Steering Board for Union actions on preventing and countering radicalisation, [Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2022-2023](#).

⁶⁹ Council of the European Union, [The role of algorithmic amplification in promoting violent and extremist content and its dissemination on platforms and social media](#), EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020.

⁷⁰ Council of the European Union, [Council Conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism, including the impact on CT and CVE authorities and their activities](#), 2021.

⁷¹ Council of the European Union, [op. cit.](#) EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, p. 8.

communicate and spread their propaganda, in particular among young people.⁷² This has also been the case for jihadists, albeit to a lesser extent.⁷³ According to the RAN, means used to this end include:

- producing and modifying video games;
- grooming vulnerable users through in-game chats (popular platforms offer encrypted text, audio and video chats);
- using 'adjacent communication platforms', initially established for the gaming community but having become popular among extremists who have been pushed off major social media);
- using gaming cultural references;
- 'gamification' (the use of design elements of existing games in a non-gaming context).⁷⁴

To address these issues, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has recommended engaging with 'gaming platforms, video game live-streaming services and gaming apps' in the EU Internet Forum.⁷⁵

Contrary to the above (mostly emerging) issues, dealing with radicalisation in prisons has long been a priority for the EU. As terrorist offenders have been gradually released in recent years – their convictions dating back to the period when departures and returns of foreign terrorist fighters were at their peak – the need for action in this field is believed to have reached a new level of urgency.⁷⁶ The current focus is on developing rehabilitation programmes to reintegrate into society both those convicts and 'regular' offenders who were radicalised in prison. Ensuring the continuity and consistency between the activities conducted before and after release is one challenging aspect of these efforts.⁷⁷

5. EU funding

The EU has funded a wide variety of projects on radicalisation under diverse budgetary lines spread across the EU budget. However, the total amount of EU spending on radicalisation and counter-terrorism in general cannot be estimated with precision.⁷⁸

Under the previous multiannual financial framework (**MF 2014–2020**), the 'police' strand of the **Internal Security Fund** (ISF-Police) was the primary source of funding in this domain. The European Strategic Communications Network and the RAN Centre of Excellence (allocated €25 million) were among the flagship initiatives supported by this fund. Multiple projects on counter- and alternative

⁷² Europol, [European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021 \(TE-SAT\)](#) and [EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report 2022 \(TE-SAT\)](#).

⁷³ Council of the European Union, [Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism](#), EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, July 2020, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Radicalisation Awareness Network, [Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives](#), conclusions paper, 2020, p. 3; see also L. Schlegel, [Extremists' use of gaming \(adjacent\) platforms – Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures](#), RAN Practitioners, 2021.

⁷⁵ Council of the European Union, [op. cit.](#), EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Council of the European Union, [Council Conclusions on preventing and combating radicalisation in prisons and on dealing with terrorist and violent extremist offenders after release](#), 2019, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Steering Board for Union actions on preventing and countering radicalisation, [Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2022-2023](#), p. 3.

⁷⁸ S. Voronova, [Understanding EU counter-terrorism policy](#), briefing, EPRS, European Parliament, 2021, p. 9.

narratives were also funded under the ISF-Police.⁷⁹ The **justice programme** provided funding for training of prison and probation staff, judges and prosecutors, for instance, on how to deal with radicalised individuals; other funding under this programme went for projects developing risk assessment tools to gauge the level of threat posed by terrorist suspects. The **Erasmus+** programme has supported counter-radicalisation projects in the education sector. Following the adoption of the 2015 Paris Declaration⁸⁰ – which promoted enhancing critical thinking among children and youth when using the internet and social media – Erasmus + has funded various initiatives on extremist propaganda online, as well as projects on radicalisation in prisons. In 2016 alone, around €200 million was allocated to Erasmus+ projects implementing the objectives of the Paris Declaration.⁸¹ The **European Social Fund** has served as a source of financing for the reintegration of radicalised individuals.

In addition, substantial funding was provided for security-related research under the **Horizon 2020** framework programme for research and innovation in 2014–2020. For example, €135 million was allocated to initiatives targeting crime and terrorism over 2018-2020. These initiatives included projects seeking to establish methodologies to assess the effectiveness of the counter-radicalisation measures. DARE, MINDb4ACT, PERICLES, PRACTICIES, PROTON and TRIVALENT are some Horizon 2020-funded projects the results of which have already been published.⁸² These projects attest to the fact that increasing emphasis is being placed on impact and the practical implementation of policy and programme evaluation.⁸³

Radicalisation-related initiatives continue to benefit from EU-funding under the **MFF 2021-2027** as well. Supporting efforts to strengthen capabilities to combat and prevent crime, terrorism and radicalisation is one of the three specific objectives of the new **Internal Security Fund**. In October 2021, an ISF-related call for proposals was published for 'projects supporting small companies in implementing the regulation to address the dissemination of terrorist content online'.⁸⁴

Regarding research, **Horizon Europe** – which replaced Horizon 2020 – has a civil security for society cluster covering a range of policies including counter-terrorism, with an allocated €1.6 billion. Horizon Europe's work programme 2021-2022 provides for addressing the under-researched issue of the abuse of online gaming culture by violent extremists. The expected outcomes of the projects eligible for funding were defined as:

- enhancing knowledge on the use of online gaming culture by violent extremists and on their modus operandi in recruitment through video game chatrooms;
- better, innovative tools and training curricula for police to tackle violent radicalisation through online gaming culture;
- increased awareness of citizens about online radicalisation through this culture;

⁷⁹ European Commission, [CSEP](#) and [Civil Society Empowerment Programme](#), Internal Security Fund Police, Funding & tender opportunities portal.

⁸⁰ [Declaration](#) on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education, adopted by the European Commission and the EU Ministers for Education, 2015.

⁸¹ European Commission, Tackling radicalisation through education and youth action, factsheet, 2018.

⁸² A database of EU-funded past and present research and innovation projects is available at the website of the Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS): <https://cordis.europa.eu>.

⁸³ S. Aerts, [op. cit.](#), p. 25.

⁸⁴ European Commission, [Internal Security Fund](#), Funding & tender opportunities portal.

- enhanced protection of youth in the gaming environment against 'recruitment into violent radicalisation' (the latter formulation illustrating the lack of conceptual clarity around the term).⁸⁵

Another interesting call for proposals on 'Evolution of political extremism and its influence on contemporary social and political dialogue' was published in January 2022. The projects eligible for financing under Horizon Europe should 'contribute to both of the following expected outcomes:

- in-depth understanding of the major factors contributing to the present rise of extremist narratives and of their influence on mainstream worldviews, discourses and policies across European countries in their local and global context;
- formulation of multi-level policy recommendations to help counter these extremist narratives while limiting their spread and impact'.⁸⁶

6. Policy assessment and evaluation

Whereas over the past 20 years the EU has been prolific in producing counter-terrorism measures – both legislative and non-legislative – these have not been systematically reviewed and evaluated. Only recently have the EU institutions made the first attempts to address this deficiency. The exercise has been challenging, given the scope of the EU action and the multitude of stakeholders involved (counter-radicalisation efforts being a prime example). The problems are compounded by the intrinsic difficulties in assessing causality between (often general) policies and crime not being committed. Even the first step of identifying all relevant instruments and their status (implemented or not, in force or outdated) has been a demanding task.

In 2013, a catalogue of EU counter-terrorism instruments was compiled as part of the EU-funded research project SECILE (Securing Europe through Counter-terrorism: Impact, Legitimacy, and Effectiveness).⁸⁷ The project identified 239 such instruments adopted between the autumn of 2001 and the summer of 2013, among them some aimed at preventing and countering radicalisation.⁸⁸ As part of the exercise, Statewatch – a civil liberties organisation that was part of the SECILE consortium – published a 'report on how the EU assesses the impact, legitimacy and effectiveness of its counter-terrorism law'.⁸⁹ Whereas the paper focused on hard law (EU binding legislation), the authors also made some general remarks on how EU counter-terrorism policies are made and evaluated, pointing to the fact that the Council and the Commission played the key role in this respect while being 'largely shielded from public view'. At the same time, the European Parliament was 'denied a meaningful role in the EU decision-making process', with as much as over 90% of EU counter-terrorism policy being developed without any substantive input from this institution.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ European Commission, [Horizon Europe Work Programme 2021-2022](#), pp. 56-58. See also *Enhanced fight against the abuse of online gaming culture by extremists*, [Horizon Europe](#), Funding & tender opportunities portal.

⁸⁶ European Commission, [Horizon Europe](#), Funding & tender opportunities portal.

⁸⁷ [Securing Europe through Counter-Terrorism—Impact, Legitimacy and Effectiveness](#), CORDIS website consulted on 30 September 2022.

⁸⁸ [SECILE: Does counter-terrorism just counter terrorism?](#), Statewatch website consulted on 30 September 2022.

⁸⁹ B. Hayes and Ch. Jones, [Report on how the EU assesses the impact, legitimacy and effectiveness of its counter-terrorism laws](#), Statewatch, p. 28.

⁹⁰ Whereas it may still hold true for the Parliament's role in policy making in the field of counter-terrorism, the ratio has certainly changed with respect to legislation, as with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009, the Parliament became a fully-fledged co-legislator, on a par with the Council.

The European Parliament has repeatedly stressed the need to evaluate EU action to combat terrorism. As early as 2011, it adopted a resolution stating that 'a proper evaluation of 10 years of counter-terrorism policies should focus on examining whether the measures taken to prevent and combat terrorism in the EU have been evidence-based (and not based on assumptions), needs-driven, coherent and part of a comprehensive EU counter-terrorism strategy'.⁹¹ Another resolution⁹² – adopted in the aftermath of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attack – called for a comprehensive evaluation of EU counter-terrorism and related measures, in particular as regards their implementation. Parliament proposed that this evaluation process should be introduced as part of the European agenda on security.

The above efforts and calls prepared the ground for the Commission's first comprehensive assessment of EU security policy;⁹³ carried out in 2017, the assessment reviewed policies and instruments developed over the past 15 years. Its scope reflected the three priorities of the European agenda on security for 2015-2020: tackling terrorism and preventing radicalisation, disrupting organised crime and fighting cybercrime.

The Commission gave an overall positive assessment of EU efforts to prevent radicalisation, stressing, however, that there was room to improve existing instruments in terms of coordination, outreach and impact. Regarding coordination, it recommended enhancing the complementarity and synergies of the initiatives, funding and research across a variety of relevant areas, such as education, criminal justice, social inclusion and integration. As for outreach, it stressed the need to involve all relevant stakeholders (which in the context of the EU Internet Forum, for instance, would entail involving smaller companies). Regarding impact, the assessment encouraged more investment in 'targeted research supporting the development of evidence based actions' and more systematic evaluation mechanisms.

The Commission also made specific recommendations on the RAN. It saw a need to improve the dissemination of the network's findings to reach a higher number of practitioners and recommended including new categories of participant such as judges and prosecutors. It also advocated placing greater emphasis on measuring the effectiveness and impact of RAN deliverables. In the Commission's view, the impact of the RAN Centre of Excellence would be enhanced by establishing similar practitioner networks at Member State level, while national policy-makers should in general be more involved in the RAN's work. The Commission also argued that the non-permanent and virtual nature of the RAN Centre of Excellence affected the continuity and visibility of the RAN's expertise.

A 2020 Commission report on the implementation of home affairs legislation in the field of internal security took stock of EU action relevant to addressing radicalisation. Building on the findings of the 2017 assessment, it presented the Commission's achievements in terms of improving the coordination, outreach, and impact of its actions.⁹⁴

⁹¹ European Parliament, [Resolution](#) of 14 December 2011 on the EU Counter-Terrorism Policy: main achievements and future challenges [2010/2311(INI)]

⁹² European Parliament, [Resolution](#) of 11 February 2015 on anti-terrorism measures [2015/2530(RSP)].

⁹³ European Commission, [Comprehensive Assessment of EU Security Policy Accompanying the document Communication: Ninth progress report towards an effective and genuine Security Union](#), SWD (2017) 0278 final, 2017.

⁹⁴ European Commission, [Implementation of Home Affairs legislation in the field of internal security – 2017-2020](#), SWD(2020)135, 2020; see part 1: pp. 27-30.

Two years earlier, in 2018, the Commission's actions on radicalisation were subject to an audit by the **European Court of Auditors (ECA)**, devoted specifically to this field.⁹⁵ The ECA assessed whether the Commission's policy objectives and actions were designed in a way that reflected Member States' needs, whether the actions financed by the different EU funds were coordinated to create maximum synergies and whether the Commission had put in place a framework to assess the effectiveness and value for money of its support. It concluded that while the Commission did address the needs of Member States, there were some shortfalls regarding both coordination and evaluation. In terms of coordination, the ECA concluded that the RAN was not used to its full potential (for instance, the results of successful EU-funded projects were not systematically disseminated through the RAN and the participants interviewed for the audit felt that their bottom-up communication with policy-makers, such as the Commission, was inadequate). As for the framework for assessing the effectiveness of the Commission's support, it was not sufficiently developed, among other things because the Commission had not broken down the overall policy objectives into more specific ones. Moreover, in many cases, the achievement of specific actions was measured in terms of volume of activity rather than effectiveness. Furthermore, the funds were not accompanied by indicators or targets to measure success in addressing radicalisation.

Based on these findings, the ECA recommended that the Commission should:

- improve the framework for overall coordination of actions addressing radicalisation (for instance by including major actions funded by the EU but managed by Member States in the list of EU-funded radicalisation actions, which, according to the ECA, was not the case);
- increase practical support for practitioners and policy-makers in Member States (for instance by structuring their exchanges), and
- improve the framework for assessing results.

The need for better coordination and engagement with various categories of stakeholder, and for more systematic evaluation, are thus recurrent themes in the analysis of EU action on radicalisation.

⁹⁵ [Special report n°13/2018: Tackling radicalisation that leads to terrorism: the Commission addressed the needs of Member States, but with some shortfalls in coordination and evaluation](#), European Court of Auditors, 2018.

The questions of why terrorism occurs and how to stop it have haunted European citizens ever since the series of terrorist attacks across the EU that started in the early 2000s. The idea that someone might become a terrorist by going through a 'radicalisation' process seemed like a plausible explanation and therefore quickly gained ground among EU policy-makers. Even though experts still disagree over what radicalisation is and whether focusing on it has really advanced the understanding of terrorism, the idea of the close linkages between the two phenomena has endured for better or for worse. Although the terrorism threat the EU faces has evolved, measures to prevent radicalisation are still a key component of EU counter-terrorism efforts as the radicalisation debate goes on.

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