

First-line practitioners at the forefront of radicalisation prevention and intervention: experiences, difficulties, and needs

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Abstract

Through a survey completed by 238 participants supplemented by in-depth interviews, this research paper presents our examination of first-line practitioners'³⁷ perception of polarisation and right-wing radicalisation, their experience, difficulties, and needs regarding intervention and prevention efforts, and their experiences, difficulties, and needs with regards to online and on-site tools, training materials and resources in Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Europe has been witness to a worryingly high level of societal polarisation and right-wing radicalisation which is particularly felt across the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This increase among those who identify with radical and polarising beliefs and ideas affects all walks of life: it does not only have an impact on how politics in a given country are perceived, but its effects are even being felt by groups within society that are not associated with politics in general. Preventing, detecting, and challenging radicalisation within different layers of society heavily depends on the work of professionals who directly engage with individuals and groups vulnerable to radicalisation – teachers, youth workers, community police officers, child protection workers, social and (mental) healthcare workers, as well as community leaders, among other groups. These so-called first-line practitioners – further referred to as FLPs – can play a leading role in various radicalisation prevention efforts, given their direct engagement. However, thorough and substantial research is needed to understand their experiences, difficulties, and most importantly, their needs to enable us to be at the forefront of challenging these issues. This paper is intended to gain an extensive insight into the world of FLPs – from their understanding of radicalisation in a broader context within their respective communities, to their experience in efforts to intervene in or prevent polarisation, as well as to their own belief in successfully moving forward.

³⁷ First-line practitioners as a term refers to professionals working directly with individuals and groups vulnerable to radicalisation, such as teachers, youth workers, community police officers, child protection workers, social and (mental) health care workers, community leaders and others professionals working directly with individuals and groups.

This research feeds into the aims of the CHAMPIONS project³⁸, which is implemented in Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The research was carried out in these four Central and Eastern European countries, with the collaboration of the project partners from the respective countries.

Methodology

For research purposes, pre-survey interviews were conducted with FLPs in each country in order to get an overview of the general understanding and perceptions of these issues and to receive suggestions on how to approach the research. Following these suggestions, a quantitative survey and qualitative post-survey interviews were conducted. The focus of the survey as well as the post-survey interviews was on the main issues and challenges, faced by FLPs regarding political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation; suggestions for improvement of interventions and prevention; support needed for their work; experiences with collaboration; and with online platforms and tools.

Interviewees were recruited based on the criteria that they are directly involved in prevention and intervention programmes within the scope of political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation or have substantial expertise in the field. Each national partner sought out potential participants using their existing professional networks in their respective countries. Altogether 58 interviews were conducted in the four project countries, which includes 14 German, 14 Hungarian, 15 Polish and 15 Romanian pre- and post-survey interviews. Fourteen of these interviews were pre-survey interviews, which were conducted in May 2019. The 44 post-survey interviews with a different batch of interviewees were held in the months of July and August 2019. In terms of profession, a broad range of FLPs are represented, as seen below:

	Germany	Hungary	Poland	Romania
Child rights advocate	-	1	-	-
Communication advisor/spokesperson	1	-	1	-
Community organizer	-	2	-	-
Environmental activist	-	-	-	1

³⁸ The main objective of the CHAMPIONS project is to develop offline collaboration models to establish working groups between first-line practitioners. The offline approach is complemented and supported by a centrally developed platform tool and service package. This project was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police, Grant Agreement #823705. You can learn more about CHAMPIONS through the website: <https://www.championsproject.eu/>.

Former Internal Security Agent	-	-	2	-
Freelancer in the field of media education	1	-	-	-
Journalist	-	-	1	-
NGO staff/NGO leader	5	5		3
Police officer	1	-	-	-
Politician	-	-	-	1
Psychologist	-	-	1	1
Public servant	2	1	2	3
Researcher/academic	2	-	5	3
Social project manager	-	-	1	-
Social worker	1	2	-	-
Teacher	1	3	2	1
Women's rights activists	-	-	-	2
Overall	14	14	15	15

Table 1 Distribution of interviewees per profession

The research included a number of questions divided into different sections about:

- the FLPs' general perception of political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation;
- (2) their stance on preventing and avoiding radicalisation;
- (3) their collaboration efforts to prevent and react to polarisation;
- (4) potential suggestions in a general context; and,
- (5) their demographic background.

In addition, during the summer of 2019, survey data was collected from 238 respondents across the four project countries, which includes 77 Hungarian, 70 German, 53 Polish, and 38 Romanian respondents. Due to the low number of responses from Romania, findings from this country should be applied with extra caution. It must also be noted that the research is not in any way representative and cannot be generalized to the larger population of FLPs.

Demographic characteristics of survey respondents

While the composition of survey respondents in terms of gender was almost balanced, the age group of 26-45 was overrepresented in most countries.³⁹ In terms of geographical distribution, the regions of the capital cities of Poland and Hungary are overrepresented, however, in the German sample, while there is still a prevalence of South-Western states, there was data collected of participants from fifteen out of sixteen states. In terms of profession and occupation, Germany is also an outlier since in all other countries' data was collected mostly from NGO workers, experts, researchers, academics, and teachers, while the main professional category of German respondents was the public sector on a municipal, state, and federal level. Correspondingly, in relation to organisational affiliation, most participants from Romania, Poland, and Hungary work in the NGO sector, in academia, in research institutions, or in schools.

Key findings

According to the results, polarisation is deeply felt in all the four countries participating in the research.

The interview and survey research conducted provided an insight into the way in which political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation is perceived by first-line practitioners. In all four countries, political polarisation⁴⁰ is perceived to be significantly more widespread than right-wing radicalisation⁴¹. When it comes to the perception based on personal proximity, both phenomena were rated to be the most widespread country-wise and nearly as widespread in the participants' locality. However, in their more intimate contexts, such as their workplace and personal environments, both issues were significantly less widespread. It is also worth noting that political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation in all four contexts are perceived to be most widespread in Hungary and in nearly all contexts, the least widespread in Germany.

³⁹ In the Polish and Romanian samples women were slightly overrepresented, while in Hungary the age group of 46-65 was most prominent.

⁴⁰ Political polarisation is the process of societies drifting apart politically and ideologically, "based on assumptions of 'us' and 'them' identities." According to the definition of Bart Brandsma, adopted by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (2010: 3), polarisation is a thought construct, in the process of which "the dominant and active narrative is about the perceived (and often exaggerated) differences and simplistic narratives about the others. (...) Polarisation therefore shows itself in negative thoughts and attitudes towards other groups, which could result in growing hostility and segregation."

⁴¹ Radicalisation is defined by the European Union as "a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence (...) to reach a specific political or ideological purpose." Right-wing radicalisation differs from other forms of radicalisation in that its ideology is based on nationalism, racism and xenophobia.

Political polarisation is widespread in Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Romania

When it comes to the signs of political polarisation, a large majority from all countries

(from 73% to 97%) come across them often or very often in each country. 79% of Hungarians and 69% of Poles, while nearly half (47%) of Romanians and 39% in Germany perceive it often or very often in their localities. In contrast, approximately half of Hungarians and a slight majority in Romania and Poland (from 46% to 58%) do not come across political polarisation at all or only rarely at their workplace. This is also true for a large majority (71%) of Germans. In a similar manner, political polarisation is less prevalent in the close, personal environment of respondents, as approximately half of Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian nearly two-thirds of German respondents (from 45% to 64%) never or rarely meet the signs of polarisation in this context.

These trends can also be observed in the case of right-wing radicalisation. Country-wise, this phenomenon is observed most in Hungary and Poland (by 90% and 80%, respectively), followed by Romania (66%) and Germany (63%). More than half (with 58% and 55%, respectively) of Hungarians and Poles also observe it often or very often in their locality, however, 45% of Germans and 42% of Romanians come across it only sometimes. On the other hand, right-wing radicalisation does not seem to be widespread in the workplace and personal environments, with above 70% of Romanian, Polish and Hungarian respondents and above 90% of German participants never or rarely encountering signs of it.

Comparable associations with the phenomena and local differences

The associations made in relation to the two phenomena were comparable. In this way, political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation are interpreted in a similar manner. In all four countries, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and group-focused enmity were most often associated with what polarisation and radicalisation are believed to be about. However, there are differences in which social groups' intolerance, exclusion, and demonization are perceived. In Hungary and Germany, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments and racism were prevalent, while in Poland and Romania hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community was a more pressing issue. Sexism is a concern in Germany, Poland, and Romania, while Hungary can be rather described by anti-Roma and anti-Semitic attitudes. In addition, the following factors have contributed to increasing political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation:

- the decline in quality of public discourse, which is largely due to the spread of hateful speech;
- the lack of meaningful social dialogue and the role of the media in this regard;

- the spread of fake news and disinformation;
- social inequality;
- the information bubble;
- freedom of press issues and propaganda; and,
- the insufficient role of politics, governments, political parties and people in power in mainstreaming such ideas.

In Romania and Poland, the role of the Church in strengthening polarising tendencies was also highlighted, while Hungarian respondents rather brought up the declining state of democracy. What is more, according to interviewees, the issues of polarisation and radicalisation are highly politicised, especially in Hungary and Poland, at the same time as there appears to be a lack of awareness of the issue by the general population according to the insights of the FLPs. In the case of Germany, findings show that, according to FLPs, right-wing extremist attitudes, discourses and actions and incidents of right-wing violence are trivialised and everyday racism is becoming common. In Hungary, three central issues were highlighted by FLPs: government propaganda fuelling hatred, the lack of independent media, and the politicization of education. In Poland, the amplification between progressive and traditional values by political actors, the media, and the Church is often cited as a major issue, in particular referring to LGBTQ+ rights, gender politics, and multiculturalism. In Romania, topics of polarisation and radicalization are rarely discussed in the media or through education and these phenomena are mostly perceived as linked to Islamic extremism and terrorist attacks.

FLPs have a strong sense of responsibility

When it comes to reacting to political polarisation at their workplace, the majority of FLPs believe it is their duty to do so — the leader is Germany with 86%, followed by Romania, Poland, and Hungary with over 60% of respondents believing this to be their responsibility. In relation to right-wing radicalisation, this sense of responsibility appears to be stronger, with nearly all (97%) German participants, the large majority of Poles and Hungarians (88% and 86%, respectively) and the majority (71%) of Romanians considering it their duty to refute right-wing radicalisation. The respondents observed a number of different manifestations of political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation in their work environments, including prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and group-focused enmity, as well as ideological differences with a range of severity in their ways of expression. This leads to the inability to have productive discussions or even to verbal aggression and provocation. Lastly, threats of violence were also recounted by a number of participants in all countries.

FLPs have also proven to be well-equipped on the information front: the majority of participants from all four countries indicated that they have enough information on these phenomena to identify them. However, there are significant differences across the countries: while the vast majority of Hungarians and Germans (89% and 87%, respectively) agree with this statement; in Poland it is only 79% and in Romania 63%. At the same time, significantly fewer respondents (but still the majority) in all four countries said they rather or very much 'have the skills and knowledge to respond to these phenomena' (from 57% to 75%). On the other hand, when it comes to having the tools and measures to take concrete action and to having enough time for that, answers were rather divided. German respondents agreed the most with having the tools and measures with a slight majority (57%), followed by 41% of Romanians and less than a third of Hungarians and Poles (28% and 27%, respectively). Between one-third and one-fifth of respondents agreed that they have enough time to react in all four countries, with the majority indicating that they only partly have or do not have enough time at all.

When it comes to collegial support to deal with these issues and to take action, respondents have a more positive outlook. Most receive some sort of support from their employers and an even greater proportion of them can rely on their colleagues at the workplace for help and assistance. Majority of respondents (from 57% to 75%) in Romania, Poland and Germany believe that they get support from their employer. In Hungary, 48% believed it to be the case, while a third (35%) rather does not receive support or does not receive it at all. In the case of collegial support, the proportion of those who say they do get much or some support is somewhat higher, with 58% of Poles and Hungarians, 61% of Romanians and 76% of Germans indicating they get much or some support.

However, when it comes to receiving general support and counselling at the workplace in relation to responding to right-wing radicalisation, it is apparent that Hungarian and Romanian FLPs receive significantly less support than their Polish and German counterparts. More than half (53%) of Hungarians and 42% of Romanians do not receive any or receive only a little support or counselling, while 41% of Polish and 61% of German respondents receive much or very much support or counselling.

When asked to describe the sort of support received at work, various forms were described by the respondents and a key highlight is that informal means were apparently more prominent than concrete and formal measures. Dialogue, exchange of opinions, sharing information among colleagues in an informal setting, as well as moral support and reinforcement of views and values were predominantly mentioned by Polish, Hungarian and German participants. In terms of concrete and formal support received, trainings, counselling, professional and support groups, information on best practices, case discussions and other educational activities were outlined. Internal procedures to prevent discrimination (f.e. a Diversity Charter and an ombudsman/commissions where employees can turn to

in case of discrimination), support of trade unions and an action plan in case of a far-right attack on their workplace were also mentioned by the participants.

It is evident that the large majority (from 76% to 87%) of FLPs of all four countries never or rarely had bad experiences when responding to these phenomena at their workplace. However, those respondents, who have had bad experiences, described instances of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination at the workplace and hostility when they spoke up against it. Verbal aggression, online and offline hate speech, threats of physical violence were also recounted, while some have experienced direct attacks on their workplace, such as disruptions of events by far-right activists, institutional control and control exercised by people in power. Other difficulties faced by FLPs were that they believe they do not have the necessary tools and measures to take concrete action as well as they lack the time to react to these challenges.

FLPs wish for more support from their governments

Participants of the survey as well as the interviewees identified a number of possible suggestions and needs that would help their work in countering polarisation and radicalisation. One of the key needs that came up stems from the experience that projects aiming at countering polarisation and radicalisation are often designed only on a short-term basis (i.e. from a few months to two years). Follow-up and continuation are especially important to achieve real impact, and hence, a long-term perspective is paramount. Furthermore, including FLPs in the project design and implementation is also necessary to achieve best results, therefore, a bottom-up approach was suggested. The framing of the project goals is also critical in establishing a common understanding of the issues raised as well as the aims and likely outcomes. The importance of early detection coupled with the need of identifying the main target audience of such interventions being those who are threatened by radicalisation, instead of those who are already radicalised, were also voiced by the respondents. More emphasis should be put on individual family backgrounds, as low socio-economic status and unemployment could be an important factor as to why more and more young people are drawn to radical ideologies. Furthermore, all four countries' interviewees agreed that psychological factors behind radicalization should be researched to a greater extent and the current information about this should be made available to FLPs.

The scarcity of funding as a challenge was also mentioned, therefore, additional financial resources shall be made available for such projects. Change in legislation may also be needed in order for legal action to be taken against those individuals who actively engage in spreading hatred, as the respondents suggested that current laws do not stop the dissemination of exclusionary rhetoric.

Although such laws already exist in Germany and Hungary, interviewees in Germany found that the area is not regulated enough, while participants from Hungary believe legislation is too restrictive in terms of defining hate speech, and so perpetrators can get away with their actions easily. In the case of Romania, such laws do not exist at all. Furthermore, the role politicians, representatives of mainstream media, religious leaders and other influential actors play in the advancement of polarisation and radicalisation shall not be downplayed and such actors should be made aware of their responsibilities in this regard. In the case of Poland, this should be expanded to the representatives of the Church as well.

Concrete suggestions, which would help the FLPs' work, were also mentioned, showing a clear signal about country-specific deficiencies. These suggestions include awareness-raising activities tailored to national contexts and circumstances with regards to neo-Nazism in Germany, anti-Roma sentiments in Romania and Hungary, and the hatred directed at LGBTQ+ people in Poland for various target audiences, for instance, for children. Amongst much else, a larger focus on education and the development of analytical skills; more dialogue opportunities on culture and diversity; better sharing of best practices; enhanced media literacy and civic education; as well as the creation of a core expert team were also mentioned. Similarly, practical guidance such as handbooks, videos, as well as other training materials should be made available in national languages as well in addition to the standard English.

The role of teachers and specific help provided to them as important actors in prevention, detection, and intervention were also mentioned, which include outside supervision and support from professionals, specific educational materials and help with the quick implementation of prevention activities in schools. Teachers should be provided education on how not to engage with current political discourses while teaching as well as how not to spread their own political beliefs. Financial help may also be needed, as schools are often understaffed and teachers are overworked.

FLPs' experiences, difficulties, and needs with regard to using online / digital capacity-building tools & learning materials

Our research suggests that FLPs generally did not use online/digital platforms for their work; however, this might have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the interest in the potential for digital collaboration was high in all four countries. Germany recorded the highest level and Hungarian respondents signalled the lowest level of interest. At the same time, the interviewees voiced their concerns about such digital platforms. Their main difficulty was that the existing platforms are overabundant and most FLPs found them troublesome to navigate. For this reason, some

expressed concerns over a new platform being produced, as it may not be able to garner enough attention among all other competing websites.

The most preferred type of digital platform, with between 75% and 80% of respondents indicating their preference, was a website with information on polarisation and radicalisation; training materials; collection of best practices; case descriptions, etc. in all four countries. Digital platforms, individually developed for the current initiative and accessible only to selected participants, came in second with between 21% and 40% of participants of the different countries preferring this platform. Looking at the average scores of the different options, approximately one-fourth of respondents would also be interested in a smartphone application and a closed, national social media group. In this regard, the most helpful functions are a collection of best practices; a collection of tools and measures that can directly be applied in their work; education materials and information on polarisation and radicalisation; with the average score of these functions being above 50%. In addition, approximately 40% of respondents of the four countries choose organising joint actions against polarisation and radicalisation, communication with other users (practitioners and other stakeholders) and discussing real cases with other users as preferred functions. The least preferred function (with close to 30%) was alerting other users to emerging cases of polarisation and/or radicalisation.

Lastly, in the in-depth interviews, there was a need expressed for counselling services and a list of trainers, experts and possible donors, as well as the promotion and focus on media literacy and critical thinking, especially in relation to fake news.

Summary and conclusion

Political polarisation is perceived by FLPs to be significantly more widespread than radicalisation, and both challenges are deemed to be most widespread on the country level in Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The two issues are interpreted in a similar manner, as prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and group-focused enmity in all four countries. When it comes to hatred towards different groups, Hungary and Germany appear to be going hand-in-hand, while Poland and Romania also proved to be on the same path. In Hungary and Germany, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments and racism was prevalent, while in Poland and Romania hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community was a more pressing issue. Sexism is a concern in Germany, Poland, and Romania, while anti-Roma and anti-Semitic attitudes are more prominent in Hungary. Furthermore, the decline in the quality of public discourse and the role of media and the role of politics, to name a few, were also associated with the worsening state of political polarisation and right-wing radicalisation.

When it comes to reacting to political polarisation at their workplace, the majority of FLPs showed a clear sense of responsibility. The proportion of those who consider it their duty to refute right-wing radicalisation appears to be somewhat greater. Most FLPs believe they possess the necessary information, skills and knowledge to respond to polarisation and radicalisation, but lack the tools, measures, and the time. What is more, most receive some sort of support from their employers and an even greater proportion can rely on their colleagues. However, informal support was more prominent, than specific measures. Most FLPs did not have a bad experience, when reacting to these phenomena at their workplace.

In terms of what could and should be done, a number of suggestions were mentioned that would support FLPs' work in prevention and intervention. In general, a long-term perspective and focus on sustainability; additional financial resources; a bottom-up approach; the importance of early detection; as well as change in legislation were mentioned, to name a few. Practical measures were also outlined, such as awareness raising events; the development of analytical skills; debate culture; media literacy and civic education; in-depth information; and making best practices and materials available to FLPs.

In terms of online and digital capacity-building tools and learning materials, FLPs reported having only limited experience in using such platforms. The main difficulty was the overabundance of already existing platforms, which is troublesome to navigate for FLPs. Interest in collaboration with other practitioners and other stakeholders via digital platforms was generally high in all four countries, which points towards the high potential for collaboration within and beyond national borders. The most preferred type of digital platform was in the form of a website, and the most helpful functions were a collection of best practices, a collection of tools and measures that can directly be applied in their work, educational materials, and information on polarisation and radicalisation.

FLPs clearly highlighted the need for country-specific programs with the ability to address neo-Nazism in Germany, anti-Roma sentiments in Hungary and Romania, as well as anti-LGBTQ+ stances in Poland. For society in general, developing a better and more meaningful debate on culture and enhancing media literacy would be highly beneficial, similarly to strengthening the landscape of practical training materials, with younger age groups being the key targets of radicalisation prevention practices. Last but not least, special attention needs to be paid to teachers as they should be the ones best-equipped with the aforementioned materials in preventing a radical turn in the life of young people.

Literature

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