

New models for countering polarization and Group-Focused Enmity

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In the course of their everyday work, first-line practitioners (FLPs) all over Europe have recognized a rise in group hatred and enmity, as well as radicalization, often resulting in physical violence. They often find themselves helpless in facing these negative trends, feeling, to a growing extent, the need for tools, models and effective responses to address both this specific challenge and its long-term effects.

The FLPs dealing with the prevention of radicalization in Europe have also observed during their daily activities that Central and Eastern European countries, unlike the states in Western Europe, face a higher level of populism, accompanied by a rise of extremism, while the institutional framework to react to radicalization and polarization is mostly lacking in this region. This justifies the concerns over whether FLPs in this region need additional empowerment for addressing these challenges.

Accordingly, the CHAMPIONS project, funded by the European Commission and launched in 2019, seeks to provide support for FLPs by offering tools and knowledge to counter the growing risks and facilitate interactions between professionals across sectors in Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The desk research carried out in the first couple of months of the project's lifetime looked into the current trends of radicalization, polarization and group-focused enmity. The results confirmed that although identity-motivated enmity and hatred is on the rise in all countries, professionals working with people vulnerable to radicalization, lack the necessary capacities. This greatly lessens the chances of a successful intervention.

As a flagship event of the project, the CHAMPIONS consortium recently convened decision-makers and first-line practitioners from the project's implementing countries, as well as Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria. The **Central and Eastern European Cities for Preventing Radicalisation International Policy-makers Roundtable** offered an opportunity to city and institutional participants to exchange views in a virtual meeting on the CHAMPIONS' project's contribution to their daily work and the possibilities for further enhancing interactions with new partners.

When it comes to questions concerning the radicalization of youth and the polarization of societies, the participants' experiences seemed to be very similar in all countries. FLPs agreed that despite the differing nature and extent of threats, the conditions for countering the threats are similar in many terms: they often face a shortage of capacities, tools and networks to effectively react to the risks. Many of them claimed that the institution they work with does not provide any support and, on

numerous occasions, they cannot even turn to their colleagues for help as they seem to share the same extreme or exclusionary views. Another remarkably similar feature in all countries was the near-complete lack of both horizontal and vertical connections and collaboration. The participants also expressed concerns over the lack of trust between institutions and the shortfall of initiatives aimed at the coordination of multi-agency collaborations.

Cooperation, as practiced in CHAMPIONS, improves the daily work of the FLPs

Compared to their daily experience, the participants of the series of roundtables organized at the community level as an organic part of the project, particularly appreciated the benefits of the initiative. It was underlined that the roundtables offered a forum and safe space for discussions; promoted the set-up of multi-agency networks; and helped create trust and a mid and long-term vision necessary for prevention. During the international roundtable, the FLPs stressed the need to ensure regularity and sufficient time for completing the build-up of networks, creating institutional buy-in capacities and shaping the forms of collaboration. According to the experience of some experts, such efforts may lead to tangible results after two years at least.

On top of this, the CHAMPIONS consortium used the international event for presenting some new tools developed by the members during the project and called the attention to models of cooperation of cities, which may better meet the needs and expectations expressed by the participants.

Three new online tools (ARENA, ALERT and TRAINING YARD) were presented. The ALERT system enables professionals to remain vigilant to key issues to be raised within their local community. That allows all users to inform other professionals about crimes committed that involve racist ideologies, discrimination against minorities, bullying, and other hate-fueled incidents. The reporting user will be provided with the necessary material and local contact points to empower them for handling the problem. The ARENA is designed as a communication and cooperation mechanism that enables direct communication and instantaneous exchange of information either privately, between collaborating professionals, or publicly through sharing best practices, as well as highlighting strengths and weaknesses of certain actions. The TRAINING YARD constitutes a capacity-building resource center, which FLPs can use either individually or as a group. Here, they can find learning materials, video-tutorials, good practice guidelines or handbooks and case study simulation exercises developed throughout the project's activities. All three pillars of the system will be open to the public soon and available initially in English, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian.

In the course of the meeting, the networks “European Forum for Urban Security” and the “Nordic Safe Cities” were presented as models for cooperation at a city level, which help create synergies at a regional level to counter the alarming phenomena and trends toward radicalization.

Greater networking at all levels is desirable for the future

Based on the presentations and ensuing discussions during the international roundtable, the participants of the meeting found it useful to sustain the activities beyond the lifetime of the project, disseminate the tools developed during CHAMPIONS, and transform the expertise gained at the community level to the level of cities. It would also be useful to develop a safe network for cities in Central and Eastern Europe and launch cooperation between the existing networks of Western and Northern European cities and the Central and Eastern City Group.

Both FLPs and decision-makers participating in the event were convinced that multi-agency and multilateral initiatives need a strong coordinating and driving force and financial resources to design and implement capacity-building, training, and collaboration efforts for preventing and countering radicalization and polarization.

The members of the CHAMPIONS consortium agreed on the objective to make efforts to disengage extremists and radicals and help their exit from structures generating and fueling radical and extremist ideas in Central and Eastern Europe. They found it necessary to create a conducive environment and safe space for the exchange of views and develop a dialogue aimed to explore the core concerns of populations, including the young generation, which fuel discrimination and intolerance. On top of this, it was deemed vital to find solutions and enhance the rule of law in that context.

The methodology of narrative dialogue in education, particularly in high schools, was mentioned as a tool for exploring the core and background of divergence, enhancing tolerance and mutual respect and preventing engagement with radicals and extremists. It was stressed that capacity building of teachers in this field is key.

The author of this article expresses the hope that the ideas and new tools mentioned above would merit further discussions and joint reflections by those dedicated to the prevention of divisions and extremism in Europe.

About the Author

Dr. Gyorgy Tatar is a career diplomat, between 1997-2004 served in various positions in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Hungary. In the years 2004-2010 he was in charge of the Task Force for Horizontal Security Issues/Conflict Prevention in the Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. After the establishment of the Foundation for International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities registered in Budapest in 2010, he was invited to assume the role of the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Foundation/Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention.