

Supporting FLPs in the Online Sphere: Towards the Prevention of Polarization and Radicalization through Cyber-solutions

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Abstract

The increasing rate of polarization and radicalization has been a growing concern across Europe, both on-the-ground and more recently in the online sphere. Within Central and Eastern Europe in particular, first-line practitioners (FLPs) face an additional set of challenges, including working in a region with an unstable democracy, significant minority groups who continue to be oppressed, including Roma and Travelers, or a surge in right-wing populist parties. In recent years, ideological groups including right-wing, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic groups have taken full advantage of the internet and social media, broadening their reach and their impact as never before. FLPs are often alone, receive little support, and do not have established networks to be able to seek advice from. Indeed, there is a wealth of information available online, but scattered across different websites and requires significant time and effort to sift through. It is clear that working toward prevention requires not only (i) a multi-faceted approach, not only taking traditional securitized P/CVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism) tactics but specifically developing innovative strategies that address the specific issues of the region as well as joint, cross-institutional action by all stakeholders involved. This paper presents a newly-developed online platform developed specifically for FLPs, based on their needs. It is divided into three specific sections which work in an independent but complementary manner, and together provide FLPs with different tools as well as a collaboration platform to support them in their day to day work.⁴²

Introduction

Growing ideological, economic, and religious divisions within Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have become increasingly clear. In the past decade, extremist incidents and populist rhetoric have increased, resulting in political wins such as Viktor Orban securing of a third term in office with a landslide victory in the 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections; the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) entering German federal parliament for the first time in 2017 and later on in October 2019

⁴² The online platform described in this article was conceptualized and launched under the European Commission's Internal Security Fund - Police CHAMPIONS Project (Grant Agreement 823705). Learn more on the official project website: <https://www.championsproject.eu/>.

coming ahead of Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) in the eastern state of Thuringia; also in 2019, the re-election of Andrzej Duda from the Law and Justice (PiS) party to the Polish presidency. It is clear that ideological divisions have developed into major sources of conflict, intensified by the European financial crisis in 2008 which did not spare Central and Eastern Europe (Dutkiewicz/Gorzela 2013). This was followed shortly by the so-called "Migration Crisis" in 2015, which for the region of Central and Eastern Europe — where nationhood is rooted in ethnic and cultural homogeneity — was a particular point of contention (Rupnik 2016). Taken together, these crises have created ideal political conditions for far-right and populist rhetoric to appeal to voters — only underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 which has aggravated xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiment across the board (Reny/Baretto 2020; Chuang 2020).

At the same time, society has rapidly settled into the digital era. As internet access becomes increasingly accessible and as more and more people embrace new technologies, opportunities for ideological groups and for those wishing to use it for radicalization and the dissemination of extreme viewpoints, have grown. Through websites and social media, the online sphere has become a playground for those who are able to exploit it for their own purposes — whether it be for communication, spreading of disinformation — including state-sponsored disinformation, or recruitment. The benefit, however of the internet is the fact that it is a level playing field and can also be maximized for the benefit of FLPs' working in the P/CVE field.

Within the CHAMPIONS Project, the core output is an innovative, tailored digital platform developed specifically as a result of in-depth consultation with FLPs in Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Germany that provides tools to improve local level multi-agency collaboration and improved information sharing for the detection and improved response at grass-roots levels to polarization and radicalization. The platform is divided into three distinct segments, which will be presented in more detail later:

- **ALERT**, an online system which provides FLPs with specific tools and resources for a reported problem;
- **ARENA**, an online discussion platform for complex cases reported within ALERT; and,
- **TRAINING YARD**, a customized collection of training tools, resources and courses.

All three work in an independent but complementary manner, and together provide FLPs with different tools as well as a collaboration platform.

How digital solutions can help in the everyday work of FLPs

To follow up on the previous discussion, there are diverse problems linked to the emergence of situations of polarization and radicalization, and they all originate in or are influenced by the social context in which individuals live but also their online presence and community. Digital space thus becomes an important field in the fight against polarisation and radicalisation. This, in turn, leads to a need for innovative tools based on the use of information technologies are of fundamental importance for FLPs to support prevention and combat the spread of polarisation and radicalisation (Tundis/Böck/Staniiescu, a.o. 2020; Tundis/Mukherjee/Mühlhäuser 2020).

Indeed, the advantages of developing digital solutions for FLPs, with special consideration for how online tools can be helpful for FLPs working in the field of prevention of radicalization and polarization, rely on:

- *Content availability:* it is well-known that a variety of tools linked to the mentioned phenomena already exist in one form or another. However, for a practitioner, it is not easy to identify the best materials for each problem and find it, as materials are spread across different websites and platforms. Therefore, having a tool capable of supporting their collection in a structured way and therefore the grouping of such contents by meaningful categories, in order to support the FLPs in their identification or to even allow their automatic search, would simplify their usage.
- *FLPs' interaction:* on the ground, there are diverse FLPs working in the P/CVE field, each of them an expert in a particular domain of interest, with their own skills and experiences. A tool that allows not only to make best use of such qualities, but that allows less experienced FLPs to get in touch with them directly, establishing discussion groups on a certain topic with users with complementary skills in order to solve a problem, would help to strengthen their inter-institutional interaction and cooperation.
- *Online training:* it is imperative for FLPs to continually grow their knowledge base and improve their skills to become more effective in the field, thus, the possibility of learning by participating in online courses, guided lessons and interactive examples, which are accessible anywhere and at any time, represent a further strength of the digital era.
- *Easier communication:* in general, digital technology simplifies communication and information sharing, by reducing or even breaking down the physical constraints related to time and space, so as to enable a real-time engagement from anywhere in the world.

Firstlinepractitioners.com - the central platform for knowledge and collegial exchange

The elements of the CHAMPIONS project – ALERT, ARENA and TRAINING YARD – have been integrated into the existing website <http://www.firstlinepractitioners.com>, thus contributing to the continuous development of this central, collaborative and cross-project platform.

This platform aims to establish a European hub aiming to create a network of contacts, cooperation and synergies among researchers, professionals, security experts, and law enforcement agencies, with different skills on various social-cultural aspects related to the phenomena of radicalization, violent extremism, organized crime, terrorist networks and so on. The platform offers FLPs different services: on the one hand, knowledge about the above-mentioned phenomena and assistance in how to deal with them. In addition, one can get in contact with other FLPs and experts, and last but not least, search for digital solutions.

As language plays an important role in the user-friendliness of the site and its contents, such as practical guides or exchange with each other, the platform takes the approach of offering materials in several languages and on various topics.

A closer look at ALERT, ARENA and TRAINING YARD

As explained above, the ALERT, ARENA and TRAINING YARD have been defined and proposed to support FLPs in the online sphere within the fields of polarization and radicalization. They work hand in hand (see Figure 1), although their functions can also be performed independently.

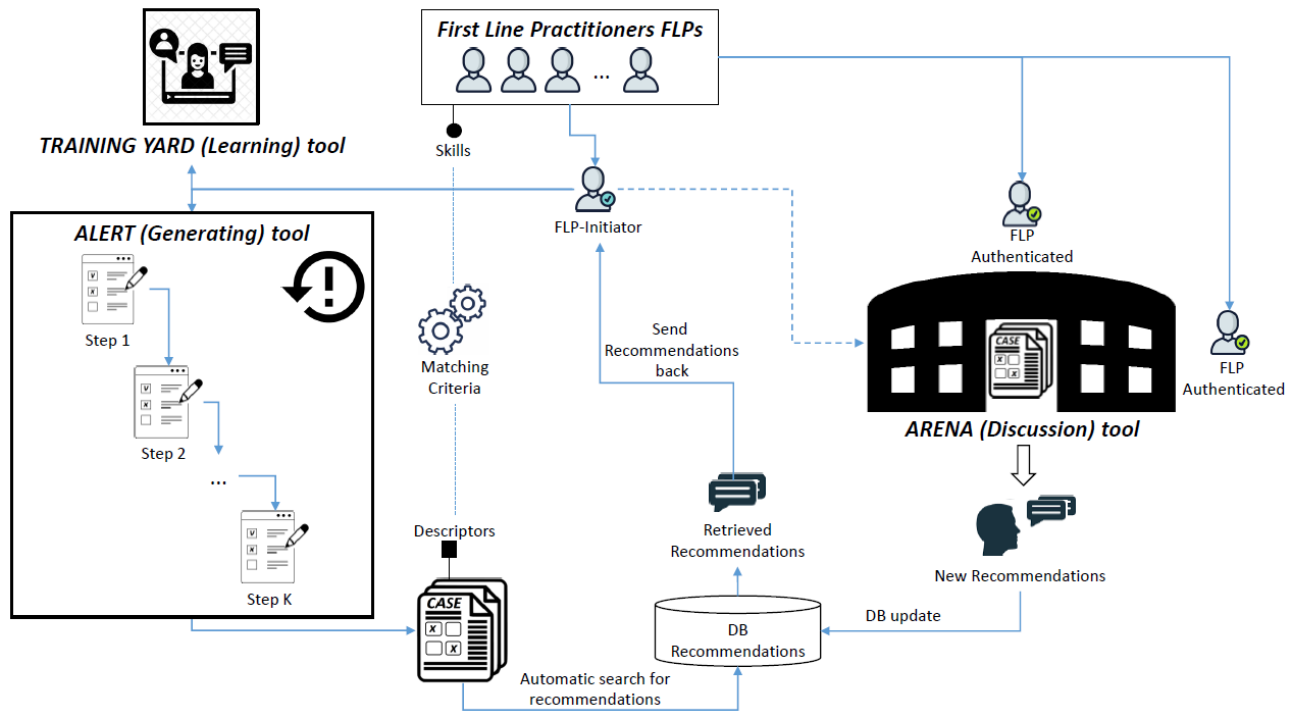


Figure 1 Conceptual model of ALERT, ARENA and TRAINING YARD

ALERT: Case-specific query of supporting materials and tools in the database

The ALERT module aims to support FLPs in generating ad-hoc and structured requests related to specific topics of interest in the context of polarization and radicalization. A questionnaire-based approach has been adopted for its implementation, where the user is asked to answer a set of predefined questions as well as to provide free text in order to produce a semi-structured report. By compiling a case, at the end of the process, a list of recommendations (if available) is automatically retrieved to the FLP-user, on the basis of previous cases related to similar topics. These can be links to websites, video tutorials, handbooks, simulations and other resources. If the resulting recommendations do not fully satisfy the user's needs, then a further option is possible by requesting a more in-depth study of the case which in turn triggers the involvement of other FLPs and experts. This will launch the ARENA segment, as described below.

ARENA: Case advice from colleagues and experts

The ARENA module is a software tool which enables the management of the communication and cooperation among FLPs and experts by facilitating their collaboration, the sharing of recommendations, as well as the joint decision-making related to more complex polarization and radicalization cases. It allows the creation of (virtual) discussion groups, by exploiting an automatic selection mechanism of the participants based, for example, on their expertise, their language skills, the place where the event happened, and so on. As its usage is subordinated to a registration, the FLP's identity needs to be checked and validated from a control authority before granting him/her access to the platform.

TRAINING YARD

While ARENA and ALERT represent tools to support the identification of specific solutions in order to actively respond to specific existing problems, the TRAINING YARD plays a preventive role and therefore provides functions aimed at learning within a certain domain of interest. Furthermore, the TRAINING YARD is to be understood as a wide-ranging collection of teaching material for FLPs on various facets of combating and preventing polarisation and radicalisation. This includes, for example, materials on victim support after racist attacks, hate speech on the Internet, simulations of typical work cases, e.g. in the school and youth work environment, as well as guidelines for dealing with events and activities of extremist groups.

In order to make the Training Yard user-friendly and more attractive to the FLPs, additional facilities have been considered. First of all, it is multilingual. Further diversifications are provided by distinguishing and structuring the content and its search for specific targets, national and regional peculiarities, thematic diversity (including the distinction between victim/offender focus, and prevention/intervention) and desired media type.

The TRAINING YARD can be used by any FLP without registration and is conceived as a digital learning portal for FLPs from various disciplines which can be used both among FLPs for roundtables, workshops and offline trainings, as well as for self-training without offline meetings.

Conclusion

The strategies employed by extremist and other radical groups are rapidly evolving and first line practitioners must keep up. With the advent of a digitized world, cyber solutions are a necessary next step. This article focused on how, in Central and Eastern Europe Internet Communication and Technology (ICT) has spread, by highlighting the advantages of a cyber-solution to support P/CVE. From this, the paper presented a set of concrete digital tools — ALERT, ARENA, and TRAINING YARD

— to support the online sphere of FLPs, in order to prevent polarization and radicalization through cyber technology. Each of the software modules was outlined with its functions. It is clear that the online sphere is one that gives many opportunities — to extremist groups, but also to FLPs who are actively working to address polarization and radicalization. It is up to us to develop novel technologies and continually expand our scope for collaboration, both on-site and in cyberspace.

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