



CONFRONTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH CREATIVE MULTIMEDIA

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Today, we are encountering an increasingly growing threat of extremism rampant in the real and virtual world across our communities, from rhetoric all the way to practices. The current COVID-19 pandemic and the global political situation have deepened structural inequalities, which brought about more division and vulnerability. Against a background of uncertainty, recruiting individuals across borders has become a normal trend. Research reveals that extremism has not snowballed into reality overnight; rather, it is a growing process that develops over time, and thus requires various prevention methods and counter-approaches.

The political actors, both official and unofficial, broadcast dangerous discourse locally and regionally, which notoriously complicates the task of those entrusted and tasked with combating fundamentalism and violent extremism, especially those who work outside institutional environments, where traditional measures are taken to combat violent extremism.

Many previous research studies have addressed the impact of international organizations, governments, and non-governmental bodies in preventing conflicts, by reaching a consensus formula among themselves for optimal cooperation, despite the disagreements regarding the nature of institutional work and understand such problems, and conflict of agendas. We still do not have methodical, consensual tools to combat fundamentalism and violent extremism. Approaches often tend to adopt Western viewpoints, and are concerned with work programs without establishing a clear and comparative assessment of their performance and success.

ROLE OF EDUCATION

Education plays an important constructive and preventive role in countering violent extremism, through the official curricula in schools, rehabilitation programs in prisons, or educational programs for private, non-governmental actors. This includes teaching

concepts and inclusive education to nurture communities that fight fundamentalism and violent extremism, and enhance media practice. These methods have been adopted in the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands.

Communities are making a great effort on several levels to confront violent extremism. There are many telling experiences in this regard around the world, and they can be shared to other communities where needed to better benefit from such wide-ranging methods and measures, involving multiple actors and tools. However, some of such measures have been criticized for targeting minority communities or for causing loss of confidence when undertaking community control measures.

The Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC), established in 2011, has focused on disseminating a culture and practice of peace and rejection of violence, developing modern curricula for teaching peace-driven principles, post-conflict research, human rights and social justice, making unremitting efforts to enhance the resilience of local communities, especially in the Western Balkans, where communities are experiencing a transitional phase after a bitterly internecine conflict. Many of the PCRC programs and initiatives are concerned with youth to counter the current polarization and prevent future wars as post-conflict conditions impose a reality of acute fragmentation and polarization.

The goals of the center promote healthy communities and educating them about the threats of divisions and extremism fueled by various actors, from within and outside such communities. The impact of the center has been greatly appreciated; it has worked closely with its partners for about a decade, and has been rewarded for its excellence at the national, regional and international levels.

CREATIVE INITIATIVES

Among the PCRC best initiatives in countering violent extremism are three programs that have employed creative multimedia to spread a culture and practice of peace, preventing extremism and training on practical skills that develop new generations to confront violent extremism. These programs feature the feasibility of using creative multimedia in providing a comprehensive platform for sharing thoughts and discussions, grooming new generations, while providing them with tools to better counter violent extremism.

The PCRC has successfully developed a curriculum to combat violent extremism to put into action in conjunction with the International Organization for Migration (IOM),

providing training for youth, through dozens of social media campaigns concerned with promoting the discourse against violent extremism. Over the course of two months, the mentorship program participants not only worked on training, but also developed a competitive content to apply the knowledge gained from the programs to all the communities to which they belong in Bosnia and Herzegovina; their social media campaigns resonated across the country. Such campaign placed a special attention to specific conditions in the local communities, and gave priority to vulnerable groups to voice their opinions, including young men, war veterans and women. Such campaigns enjoyed follow-up and popularity, by placing a hashtag for each, and sharing them on various communication websites, such as Facebook, Instagram and blogs.

One of the campaigns raised awareness of the peculiarities of different environments across the country, warning of fundamentalism and the spread of violent extremism. For example, one of the campaigns promoted positive stories of youth success, despite difficult financial conditions, unemployment and exclusion, selecting participants from different backgrounds, taking into account race, religion, gender, geography, demographic distribution and other differences between the population to better show the image of society as a whole in the face of violent extremism.

The PCRC launched a new regional program targeting Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Kosovo. Ten leaders of civil society and non-governmental organizations will receive training on countering violent extremism, aimed at enabling the said participants to launch campaigns on social media and build more mutually supportive, peaceful and sustainable communities. It is expected that each campaign will produce audio-visual materials to be shared on different platforms. Among other key objectives, the program seeks to ensure national cooperation to combat fundamentalism and violent extremism according to the available resources as we are living in globalized communities.

The third program “Marginalized Roma” is not primarily aimed at combating extremism; rather, it produces narratives that oppose the widespread discrimination that the Roma people suffer from in the Balkans, and provides the best means that provide adequate knowledge for employment in combating violent extremism. The said program published a telling book that documented personal testimonies and story images of Roma, including prejudice and exclusion, fallacious stereotyping, compared with common patterns and misconceptions about Roma across the region. It also

reveals the rich experiences of Roma of individual success stories in combating existing stereotypes.

The PCRC experience so far indicates that addressing current stereotypes and demonstrating their direct impact using audiovisual and storytelling techniques may have positive results, as they directly affect individuals and encourage positive change. In the future, similar programs may benefit from raising awareness of individuals and groups who have wanted and turned away from extremism.

In conclusion, the PCRC action plan does not aim at prevention only; rather, it entirely targets the timeline and agenda related to combating violent extremism, and makes a significant contribution in various stages to ensure greater participation in combating violent extremism, in such a manner that does not contradict the goal of inclusive societies. In the long term, creative multimedia approaches employing counter-narrative can be used as a means of prevention and a source for building future projects.