THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND HOW TO COUNTER IT

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The 8th Euromed Survey conducted by the European Institute of the Mediterranean touches upon a number of important and complex issues related to violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region, including the question of the context and drivers through which violent extremism can prosper. Echoing some of the results, this article looks into propaganda as a tool of extremist ideologies and how to counter it.

What is Propaganda?

Propaganda, as a tool of extremist ideologies, aims to generate and promote a world view that reduces the complexity of life to a simple black and white picture. This structured attempt to reform the cognitive (and emotional) perceptions of a target audience to initiate an action in the interest of the propagandist has probably been a part of every political or religious conflict (Jowett, 2012).

In 1622, when the Catholic Church professionalised its missionary work to counter the progress of the Protestants, the body responsible for this important endeavour was called "Sacra Congregatio de propaganda fide", which gave the name to what since then has been called propaganda. Over the conflict of what true Christianity is, Catholics regarded propaganda as something positive, while Protestants saw it as a tool of the enemy (Bussmer, 2013).

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Propaganda, in the form of recruitment messaging, generally follows the pattern of diagnosis (what is wrong), prognosis (what needs to be done) and rationale (who should do it and why) (Wilson, 1973). The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS/Daesh), for example, follows the same principle: diagnosis (Islam/Sunni Muslims are under attack), prognosis (fight/create the Caliphate) and rationale (help however you can).

The IS then uses sub-narratives for every target group they want to reach (Neumann, 2015). Adventure-seeking young men were promised a future as heroes who are fighting for a just cause and who would be rewarded, amongst other things, with wives and sex slaves. Medical doctors and engineers were lured in by the call to helping fellow Sunni Muslims in need and to being part of the creation of the perfect Islamic utopian society, the Caliphate. Young women were promised an important role by becoming the wives of the "lions of the Caliphate" and securing its future by raising their "cubs" (Winter, 2015).

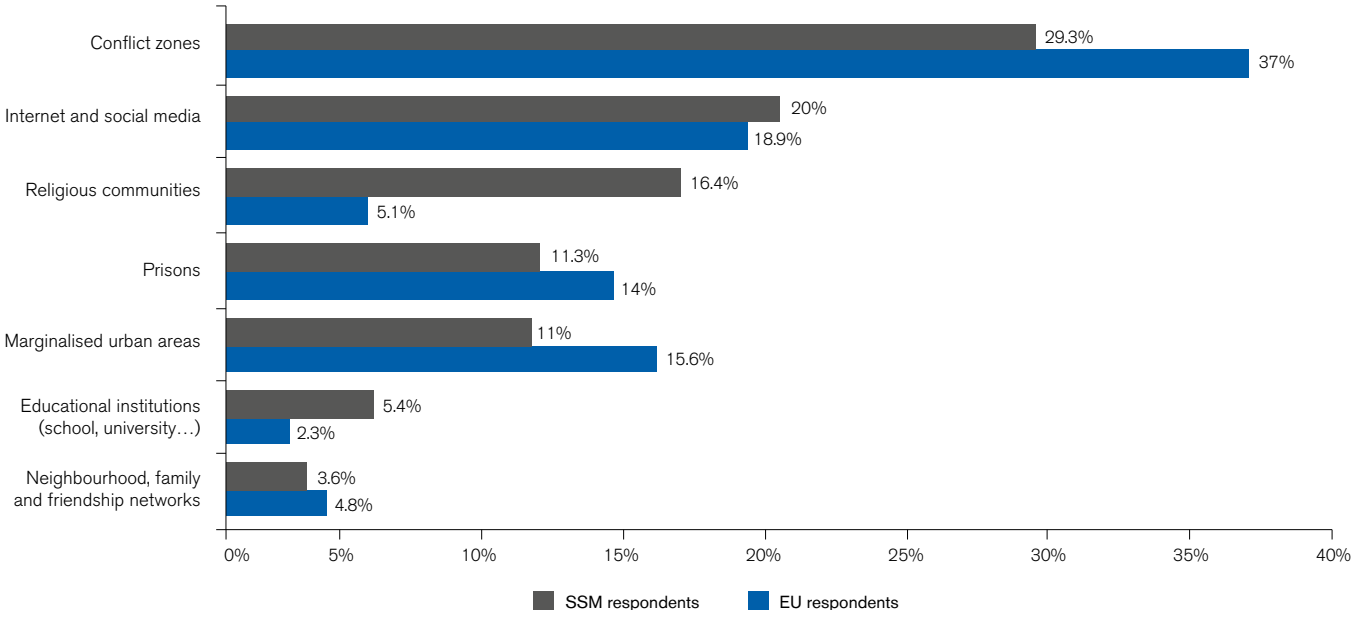
How Does Propaganda Work?

Extremist propaganda often has clear-cut messages that promise clarity, relevance and meaning in addition to emotional and social benefits, such as belonging to a new family or brotherhood/sisterhood. For propaganda to increase its chances of success, it needs to be close to

an already existing (perceived) truth of the targeted audience. 180-degree conversions happen but very rarely. Most of the time, a radicalisation process takes place gradually in accordance with political crises or conflicts, like the war in Iraq and Syria or the influx of refugees and migrants into Europe. These real-life events are then being manipulated to fit into the ideology of the extremists (Schmid, 2013).

The 8th Euromed Survey respondents support this finding. Most respondents selected "Conflict zones" as the most enabling environment for extremist recruitment. The Survey also shows that "Internet and social media" are being seen as the second most enabling factor for extremist recruitment (Euromed Survey, 2017a).

Graph 1: In which environments and contexts are recruiters more likely to successfully turn an individual into a violent extremist?
(results show the first choice out of three)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

The online world allows for easy one-to-one interaction. If someone comments on, likes or shares content hosted by extremists, they will very likely receive a reaction by a recruiter. He or she will act as a sort of social worker who can give simple answers and solutions for complex situations and problems. In the case of Islamism, they will also promise a safe path away from the eternal pains of hell. Recruiters then target those who appear to have a cognitive opening, are in an emotional crisis, who seek help, a new beginning or who are simply curious (RAN, 2016).

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It is very likely, however, that the role of the social media in radicalisation is overstated. The fact that today's extremists use social media for propaganda and recruitment does not mean that there is a causal connection between this technology and the impact of extremist ideologies. Prior generations of propagandists and recruiters mostly used schools, universities, radio stations and TV shows, or simply gave semi-public speeches and were able to enlist hundreds of thousands into violent national-socialist or communist movements, for example. The following open comment from an Algerian respondent to the 8th Euromed Survey illustrates this reality.

> The extremists also used mosques and fitness and sports clubs to spread their propaganda for joining a violent extremist group. Fitness and martial arts clubs were also used for propaganda, offering the young a boosted self-valorising image. Of course, school, marginalised urban areas, internet and social media are also fertile ground for recruitment.
>
> Algerian respondent

The Muslim Brotherhood, at times a violent extremist organisation, was founded in 1928 and had tens of thousands of members before today's technologies arrived. In the 1980s, an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters followed the offline call for "Jihad" to Afghanistan (Hegghammer, 2013). Al-Qaeda recruiters used to tour the world with VHS video cassettes as their technological tool to spread their propaganda. Simply put, recruiters go where their target audiences are.

Limiting the ability of extremists to abuse social media and the internet, on the other hand, is key (see section "How to Counter Propaganda and Promote Alternatives"). The ongoing struggle between security concerns, freedom of speech and business interests shows that this is easier said than done.

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While much propaganda distribution happens online nowadays, very few people radicalise all by themselves. In most cases, a trusted person provides the necessary "credibility" that makes it easier for the individual to accept the manipulated information. This "trusted messenger" could be a family member, a friend or a charismatic recruiter (Vidino, 2017, & Sagemann, 2008).

> One has to take into account the specific context of the radicalisation process where internet and social media, religious communities and family and friendship networks can play a critical role, as what is being offered in the first place is a feeling of belonging that holds very strong appeal to individuals confronted with an identity crisis and systematic exclusion.
>
> German respondent

For example, the vast majority of IS recruits in Europe have been drawn in through Salafi networks that operated online as well as offline (Heinke, 2017). Yet, their significance was underestimated by governments and civil society alike. "Sharia for Belgium", the "Read" campaign in Germany and other similar Salafist groups in the UK, the Netherlands and France, etc., undertook their grooming of European youth in plain sight. Since these activities were often not illegal in the beginning, there was little governments could do directly. In many cases, extremist propaganda and recruiters remained unchallenged (European Foundation for Democracy, 2017).

The Role of Ideology in Propaganda

Ideology is a set of narratives and values that creates a coherent world view. As shown particularly clearly by the IS, ideology is also the very glue that binds the engineer to the petty criminal, the mentally ill to the small businessman, the female honours student to the bus driver. Extremist ideology is generally based on a simplistic binary perspective of victimhood (us, the in-group) and aggressors (them, the out-group). This categorisation plays a key role in legitimising the actions of extremists, which would otherwise simply be seen as ordinary criminal acts. Ideology has two functions in the radicalisation process: a) as described above, it can try to pull someone into extremism through manipulation and propaganda; and b), it is a tool of self-empowerment that gives someone the feeling of being in charge of their life by submitting to a higher cause and of having a clear purpose.

In conclusion, for propaganda to be successful, three factors need to be at play: 1) an ideology; 2) a cognitive opening of the propaganda recipient; and 3) a trusted messenger who serves as a bridge between message and receiver.

The Limits of Propaganda

Tens of millions of Europeans have heard of the deeds and demands of the IS through the media and millions have seen its online propaganda, which is regarded as state of the art by many experts in the field of communications. To date, 5,000 to 7,000 Europeans followed the call to migrate to the so-called Caliphate. Why so many? That is an important question many research projects are focusing on. But the equally important question is why so few?

Neuroscience and cognitive science show that adults live in "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers", making them largely immune to external information that challenges their existing world views. This is not a reference to the ongoing debate about the role of social media, in particular Facebook, in this context, but about subconscious cognitive processes of the human brain (Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2016).

Our confirmation bias preselects information that confirms our beliefs over conflicting input. Cognitive dissonance makes sure contradictory information is framed in such a way that we can easily disqualify it (British Psychological Society, 2016). This not only means that it is hard for us to fundamentally change our opinions or beliefs but it is even harder for someone else to do this against our will.

So how can propaganda overcome this natural defence mechanism? It often needs, at least in the beginning, the cooperation of the targeted individual. For adults to adopt an extremist ideology, a cognitive opening, a desire to change oneself, is necessary. This desire to change is often caused by a personal crisis. Young people, who are in a developmental phase, curious and looking for answers and a place in society, can be more open to manipulation. Their "filter bubble" is not yet fully developed.

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Since 99% of adults and youths do not become violent extremists, no matter their personal circumstances or grievances, the limitations of propaganda are obvious (Horgan, 2014). Unfortunately, the same mechanisms also limit the effectiveness of counter-measures.

How to Counter Propaganda and Promote Alternatives

There are four ways to reduce the effectiveness of extremist propaganda:

1. Prepare: Critical media literacy of the population should be increased, particularly by educating youths in schools on how to evaluate and qualify the sources of information. This should be seen as a part of "democracy training", with the concept of critical thinking applied in daily life.

2. Disrupt: Extremist propaganda can be taken off online media by using technology like eGLYPH, which can automatically detect and delete content that has previously been red flagged. To protect free speech, the application of algorithms needs to be transparent and limited to the worst of the worst, focusing on clearly illegal content (Waddell, 2015).

3. Empower: Alternative narratives, which aim to promote positive messages, universal values, role models or other kinds of information relevant to a specific part of the population. These campaigns are supposed to strengthen the "immune system" of individuals or communities against extremist propaganda.

4. Challenge: Counter-narratives, which aim at exposing lies and flaws of extremist organisations, need to be directed at a well-researched and narrowly-targeted audience that is either already curious about extremist content or in doubt of the currently adopted extremist world view.

As with any kind of intervention, serious consideration needs be put into how to "do no harm" while trying to help. Studies have shown that making people, and youths in particular, aware of something that authorities consider to be bad for them may arouse interest in the issue in the first place (Hornik, Jacobsohn, Orwin, Piesse & Kalton, 2008). While this is less of a concern when communicating alternative messages, highlighting how bad and dangerous specific extremist or terrorist groups are can prove to be counter-productive.

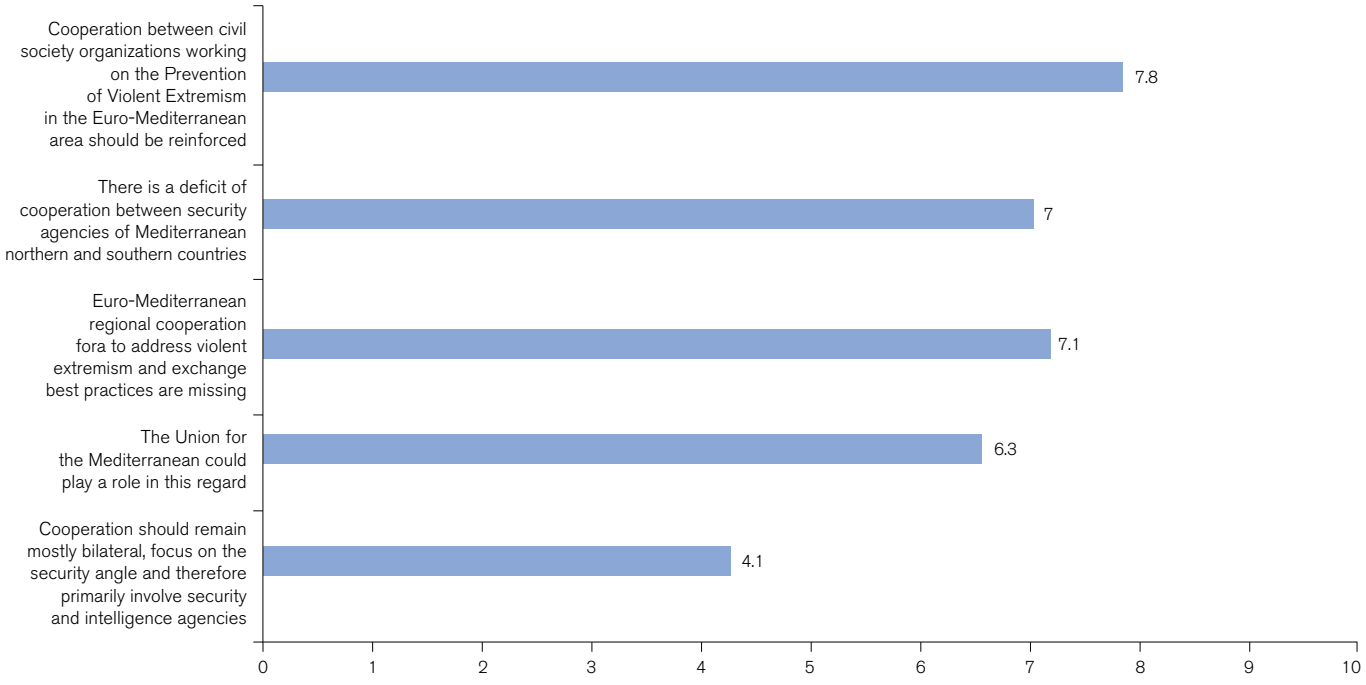
Many who sympathise with extremist ideologies feel the need to act. Narrative campaigns that are designed as monologues and tell people only what not to do will therefore likely miss the needs of an audience that is upset or outraged about a real or perceived injustice. Campaigns should offer a "call to action", a set of alternative things one can do to help those who want to become involved and the possibility to have a sustained dialogue with those who like to engage (RAN, 2016).

Selecting the Right Partners for Preventing and Countering Extremist Propaganda

Civil society is seen as a key factor in adressing violent extremism. The key question now is how to do this in an effective way.

The respondents of the Euromed Survey rank the promotion of civil society and local actors as their top priority in addressing violent extremism (see Graph 2). The key question now is how to do this in an effective way. As shown, ideology is a key element in propaganda and recruitment of extremists. A transparent due diligence and vetting process on who to work with, who to support or to fund is therefore essential. Some suggest working with non-violent Salafists or Muslim Brotherhood organisations. They argue that Islamists might have credibility for at risk individuals or violent extremists and might be able to convince them not to use violence.

Graph 2: Do you agree with the following statements regarding Euro-Mediterranean cooperation?



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

Interestingly, no one suggests working with, or funding, non-violent neo-Nazi groups to convince violent ones to stop the violence. This is not to say that right-wing extremists and Islamist groups are the same. But both seek to overcome liberal and pluralistic democracies and to replace them with totalitarian Fuehrer-states or Caliphates. The non-violent extremists and the violent ones do not disagree much on what their final utopia should look like but on how to build it. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, has an evolutionary strategy, aimed at the gradual manipulation of Muslims and society as a whole, while the IS, as a revolutionary force, wants its Caliphate now.

It is important to select partners that authentically promote values such as pluralism, tolerance and liberal democracy and live up to those values within their own organisations. This will determine the credibility and long-term success of any preventive or counter-extremism action.

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To strengthen the local immune system against extremist ideologies, propaganda and recruiting, the already existing resilient actors and alternative narratives in communities and neighbourhoods should be empowered. To achieve this, credible local voices need to be identified and supported, in particular through capacity-building training, networking and media contacts.

These male and female "good guys" could be shopkeepers, sports coaches, teachers or religious leaders, basically anyone who is promoting an inclusive, equal and pluralistic community and wants to speak out against extremism. Civil society organisations should be put in the driver's seat here. Governments can help create, support and maintain these activities but should avoid driving and steering. In particular, individuals who are curious about extremist content will not listen to government-labelled messages. And, even more importantly, the credibility of civil society is at risk if regarded as the state's mouthpiece.

Empowering the "good guys" from within communities and neighbourhoods, giving them a voice to tell their alternative narratives and providing alternative courses of action for those who want to act against injustice will be key in the ongoing struggle of preventing and countering violent extremism.

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From 2001 to 2006 Alexander was a member of the Berlin State Parliament, overseeing the state police and intelligence agency, focusing on homeland security and data protection issues. He received his Master's Degree in Political Science from the Free University Berlin in 2000.

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