Framework and Standards for Successful Online Prevention

Extremism, in all its forms, is present in the digital space. To implement prevention programmes where the target group's everyday life takes place, several online programmes have been created to complement established offline formats.

As National Committee on Religously Motivated Extremism or BAG RelEx (abbreviation of the German term "Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus"), we always strive to further develop methods together and fill existing gaps through the introduction of new programmes. The publication *Framework and Standards for Successful Online Prevention* closes one of these gaps by providing an insight into the different approaches and methods of preventing violent extremism (PVE) in the digital space. The text is a result of intensive debate among the staff of online projects within the membership of BAG RelEx and offers insights into various approaches and methods. This publication complements the *Standards for Civil Society Engagement in Countering Religiously Motivated Extremism* published in 2019.

Extremist actors online – radicalisation processes in the digital world

Extremist actors are frequently characterised as pioneers or *early adopters* of new communication formats. This implies that they adeptly incorporate cutting-edge technologies and effectively utilise the benefits provided by social media. In their communication, also on social media, relevant groups address both the *external* and the *internal* audience. Their goals include deterrence, recruitment, and strengthening ties with sympathisers. In doing so, they take advantage of the benefits of social media in several ways. Firstly, they can directly reach their target audience, which allows them more control over what and how they share,

as compared to how they may be presented in the press. In addition, they may achieve a greater reach of audience and they take advantage of the increasing professionalisation in the preparation of content. Moreover, the algorithms and platform functions favour incidental exposure. The content is presented in a manner suitable for young people and caters to their viewing preferences. In certain instances, the underlying ideological stance may not be immediately discernible, as everyday topics such as lifestyle, fashion, and gender roles are also discussed. The content has a relatable quality, making it more accessible to the audience.

Recently, the online Islamist extremist community in Germany has become increasingly diverse, with a multitude of actors offering various formats that cater to the diverse needs of young people.

On the internet and via social media, young people can easily access extremist content. Due to the high usage of digital services by young people, the digital space plays a pivotal role in radicalisation processes. *Online radicalisation*, where a person is solely radicalised by digital content without any additional contact to extremist influence offline, is very rare. Nevertheless, digital influences also contribute to existing key radicalisation factors. There are *push factors* that may make individuals more prone to radicalisation, such as the search for personal identity, disruption in their life story, facing excessive demands, rebellion or discrimination. *Pull factors* relate to the extremist proposition, such as the promise of camaraderie, provision of clear guidelines or opportunities for

upward social mobility. The online space has created a new platform where these factors have an impact and young people can encounter or be targeted by extremist groups' content. The interplay between online content and their personal lives, attitudes, and experiences holds great importance. It is worth noting that the mere exposure of extremist content does not necessarily lead to radicalisation.

Online prevention and its framework

Prevention programmes in the digital space are – like offline programmes – diverse and cover a wide range of approaches and methods. Accordingly, the term "online prevention" encompasses online-only services (e.g. online counselling or digital streetwork), as well as hybrid projects that complement their offline services with online components or operate at the intersection between online and offline (e.g. social media or the provision of online counselling as an addition to offline services).

In essence, the range of prevention efforts in the digital space, similar to those in the offline context, is based on the standards that apply to their respective professions. This implies that the principles of social work, education or political education are core features and have always defined the field of promoting democracy and P/CVE in general. The principles of the profession entail a mindset and attitude towards the target group and society that transformation/change is possible, radicalisation is not a dead end, and individual needs of the target group are always taken into consideration.

Digital PVE encounters several additional challenges compared to offline work. These include the working hours for employees (since young people use social media primarily during the evenings and at night) and the extensive requirements for content conception and preparation (which necessitate abilities in digital communication or video editing, as well as a comprehensive understanding of numerous topics). This relatively young field of work has great potential to develop and test new methods to reach the target groups and adapt to the dynamic developments on the internet. Good collaboration with funding institutions and ideally positive relationships with major tech companies are vital for the successful implementation of projects.

In our view, preventing religiously motivated extremism involves improving and reinforcing democratic and human rights-based skills, embracing ambiguity, managing diversity, and nurturing social and emotional abilities. This growth and reinforcement promotes resilience against anti-democratic modes of thought and behaviour and empowers individuals to tackle the challenges of adolescence and personal and social crises. As a consequence, prevention entails averting the development of individual and collective mindsets and behaviours in those who reject constitutional, democratic, and humanitarian values and principles, and who may even consider violence against other individuals and institutions as legitimate means.

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Online presence and addressing target groups

The various online platforms are essential for digital prevention projects to effectively reach their diverse target groups. Newsletters and websites are commonly used to address multipliers, while profiles on TikTok or Instagram serve to engage with young people. Depending on the target group, the focus of the various online presences differs accordingly.

The workings of platforms and the non-transparent nature of algorithms present challenges for projects. Consequently, flexibility is needed to test what works on specific platforms. The same post may not be suitable for all platforms. Collaborating with peers, especially young people familiar with current trends can support the project team when addressing the target audience.

Authentic and transparent communication is vital to building a trustful relationship with the predominantly young target audience. To maintain this trust, project accounts must always be identifiable as such and not give the impression of private initiatives. Furthermore, the project team should decide whether to use individual employee accounts or team accounts.

When it comes to the concept of a specific project, it is crucial to consider and avoid the risk of reproducing stereotypes and any resulting stigmatisation regarding the target audience. In the case of social media profiles, for example, it would be advisable to review the account name, profile picture and short introduction taking these aspects into consideration.

Reaching and retaining target groups presents challenges; marketing tools can assist in addressing these. Meanwhile, changes in platform regulations and the dynamic landscape pose challenges, as well as the unique requirements associated with state funding if targeting solely local groups. Evaluation of the target group approach must consider project objectives and not solely quantitative parameters.

Identifying successful online prevention – internal and external evaluation

Through (platform-specific) evaluation tools, social media offers quantitative figures (likes, clicks) that can be used to evaluate the success of such initiatives. However, a lack of transparency and regular adjustments to the basis of these figures by the platforms can make it

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difficult for projects to establish reliable objectives in consultation with funding organisations. It is crucial for the initiatives to interpret figures in relation to project objectives and not be driven exclusively by numbers. It is key to preserve the primary goal of promoting democracy and PVE, not losing sight of the fact that quality is more important than quantity. The number of likes a post on online counselling receives will not determine whether someone starts questioning their closed worldview. However, to accomplish their primary objectives in education, counselling, or social work, the projects are tied to the platforms. This dependency is reflected by the necessity to apply particular logics to receive attention by the target group. For instance, since achieving a wide audience on certain platforms is vital for appearing in the target audience's feed via algorithms, additional steps may be added in online work depending on the approach, such as creating and conceptualising captivating content, leading to more personnel resources being utilised. Furthermore, it is important to consider that different platforms are utilised for varying objectives and target groups.

As with offline projects, external evaluation offers opportunities as well as being a prerequisite: Conducting an evaluation throughout the project's duration is preferable to an evaluation after its completion. A joint evaluation methodology and a mutual grasp of the project's objectives are crucial for a valuable evaluation.

Implications and demands for successful online prevention

The set framework and standards have numerous implications, from which we as BAG RelEx derive a set of demands. These demands are necessary, as the effectiveness of prevention work depends not only on those active in the field, but also on the existing framework.

These demands include:

Prevention work in the digital space is essential and should be acknowledged as a distinct field. It is not a "hobby" and can neither be pursued on the side nor exclusively by young professionals.

In essence, and regardless of whether the work takes place offline or in the digital space, civil society engagement and the diverse professions operating in this domain should be acknowledged. At a societal and political level, social work, education, and political education must be recognised as vital parts of society and as counterparts to security-led approaches in the fight against extremism. They should be acknowledged on an equal footing.

Recognising that evaluating successful prevention work is complex – how does one show the events that did not occur as a result of successful P/CVE? This paradox must not lead to a situation where prevention measures are not considered necessary, especially if they have proven successful.

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We require a civil society landscape that does not rely on funding cycles or specific events, enabling us to address anti-democratic behaviour as it arises and not, as is unfortunately still too often the case, "having to put out a fire".

The work environment demands an culture of failure to allow projects to experiment with different approaches and improve them if necessary. Openly addressing both successes and failures, among other things, allows colleagues from different projects to learn from each other and add to the continued evolution and professionalisation of the field.

Short funding periods present challenges to digital prevention projects as they require time to establish themselves before making an impact. Extended periods of inactivity or project redesigns, due to funding expirations, can result in losing touch with the target audience and effectively starting from square one. It is therefore crucial that these initiatives are established on a solid foundation.

Tech companies also need to take a closer look at what happens on their platforms (e.g. extremist content or hate speech), potentially facilitated by the logic and architecture of these platforms.

Finally, it is crucial for every individual as well as society as a whole to uphold democratic values in the digital space, as well as offline, and to combat hate and discrimination. Criminal offences committed online must be reported, and demonstrating solidarity and civil courage holds the same significance online as it does in the offline context.

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