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Recognizing youth radicalization in schools: Slovenian ‘frontline’ school workers in search of a compass

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Abstract

International research shows that youth is one of the groups that are the most vulnerable and most susceptible to radicalization. Some of the research findings show school workers’ lack of academic knowledge and practical experience with radicalized youth. As a result, they correlate general criminality with radicalization. The purpose of this study was to identify school workers’ readiness for detecting radicalization and taking preventive measures before the youth step on the path of radicalization. The authors applied a qualitative approach and conducted interviews and focus groups with 22 experts from the Slovenian educational system (i.e. top-down from the ministerial level and bottom-up from the primary and secondary school level). The results revealed that school workers can recognize vulnerable youth and are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and experience in terms of how to respond to different types of violence, but not radicalization. Even the elements that could be recognized as first steps in the radicalization process are reduced to deviant behaviour or simply peer violence. Bearing in mind this critical finding, school workers nevertheless are able to recognize certain types of deviant behaviour and know how to address them. By recognizing the problem and taking appropriate action, school workers can actually (unintentionally) prevent the continuation of the radicalization process.

Keywords

Education, frontline workers, radicalization, school workers, violence, youth

Introduction

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2005) makes prevention of terrorism an important goal. The aim is to prevent people from turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes that can lead to radicalization and recruitment. The majority will not succumb to

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radicalization and will not accept extremist ideologies, but there is a vulnerable minority that could be influenced by extremist propaganda and start justifying violence and even carrying out acts of violence. Trends in Europe regarding right-wing and Islamic radicalization are troubling and youth represents the most vulnerable part of our societies. Schools can play an important role in identifying radicalization and extremism among minors, but need to have a clear compass to guide them.

The complexity of youth radicalization determines the complexity of monitoring and early warning in the case of radicalization towards the use of violence. The question is how radicalization is perceived and monitored by the responsible educational authorities in European countries that have not yet had a terrorist attack on their soil. The predominant focus in the literature is on the countries with the highest threat, such as the UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, etc. This article focuses on Slovenia, a country that has not yet experienced a terrorist attack and does not have a recognized terrorist group. Such EU member states could be less prepared and could actually represent the weakest link in the preventive chain of measures. The past level of terrorist threat in Slovenia has fortunately been minimal.¹ It is logical to conclude that authorities in such countries are not treating the prevention and early warning of radicalization as a priority. On the other hand, Slovenia has been very successful in terms of keeping general levels of violence low.² This can be attributed to its long-standing policy of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law and a culture of peace and non-violence (see Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019).

Van de Weert and Eijkman (2019) emphasize that there is *very little awareness of the tense dynamic between the social and security domains*, both in terms of policymaking and at the level of implementing the policy. Furthermore, they claim that the lack of academic knowledge and practical experience results in educational and other expert school workers offering 'folk-psychological' explanations and correlating general criminality with radicalization. This is troubling given the school workers' crucial role in the adolescents' lives. The latter are at a high risk for radicalization due to the fact that they are subjected to several push and pull factors at this important stage of forming their identities.

The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss the preparedness of the education system of a small EU member state for identifying and dealing with radicalization among youth as one of the social groups most vulnerable to radicalization. The article provides answers to two fundamental questions: (1) How do the policy makers and school workers perceive the intertwining of security and society in terms of understanding radicalization and the role of the education system in its prevention? (2) How do school workers recognize radicalization in situations where they have been provided with clear guidance on recognizing certain types of youth violence but not with a common definition of radicalization, the indicators, the guidelines on recognizing radicalization, or the training.

Radicalization is a broader concept than violence among youth, and teachers could identify it if properly informed and instructed. Our thesis is that *the overall lack of awareness among school workers regarding youth radicalization risks not recognizing the early signs and responding properly in order to prevent further radicalization*.

For the purposes of this article, we understand radicalization as a process of changing individuals' values and motivations towards the use of illegal violence for the achievement

of political, ideological, religious, etc. goals (see Mazer, 2012; Prezelj et al., 2018; Sageman, 2008: viii). The final stages of radicalization are extremism and terrorism. Radicalization reflects the polarization of our societies.

The relevance of our research lies in pointing out poor understanding of the dynamic between the social and the security domains³ in the education system, which could ultimately affect not only one country, but Europe as a whole. This article will reveal that European countries are asymmetrically prepared for preventing radicalization.⁴ The countries that have not faced terrorism and radicalization on a larger scale are less prepared and could be the Achilles' heel of a comprehensive EU approach.

Youth as a group vulnerable to radicalization

Reid and Valasik (2018) emphasize a series of risk factors that may motivate a young person to join a street gang (e.g. poor neighbourhood safety, familial poverty, low academic achievements, low school attachment, delinquent peers). These factors cannot be directly and necessarily connected to radicalization, however they can play a decisive role in the process. The common thread in these factors is marginalization. As the empirical analysis reveals and as we will cover in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs, in Slovenia, the perception of radicalization correlates with different types of violence among youth.

Almost two decades ago, Sageman (2004) found that those experiencing a lack of opportunity and future prospects in a given social environment are the most susceptible to the messages of terrorist groups. It is important to note, however, that a very low GDP is not necessarily linked to the risk of radicalization and terrorism. Stern (2016) correlates education and favourable socio-economic conditions with a low risk of radicalization and terrorism (in other words, high GDP and a favourable standard of living make it difficult to radicalize individuals, let alone convince them to commit terrorist acts). When socio-economic conditions are less favourable, however, low education presents a risk. Social marginalization and discrimination thus exhibit a positive correlation with radicalization. Similar conclusions are drawn by Jenkins (2011), i.e. that radicalization particularly threatens those who are alienated from their social environment. This confirms the assumption about individuals at the margins of the society who feel excluded (be it in terms of income, religion, ideology, ethnicity, etc.) but nevertheless depend on the society in which they live. They feel trapped.

Bizina and Gray (2014: 73) find that young men from Western Europe and North America are responding to terrorist groups and joining them in unprecedented numbers. The rise of so-called home-grown terrorists is characterized by two features. First, the reasons for radicalization can be traced back to the social environment from which these men originate. Second, their social environment is excluding these young men, pushing them away from its core and thus forcing them to look for other social networks where they will be accepted and with which they will be able to identify. The roots of radicalization most probably arise from young men not internalizing common values and the culture (Baker et al., 2007). In the case of immigrants and their second- and third-generation offspring, the problem lies in the fact that the state has proved unsuccessful in the assimilation process, meaning that the young people live in ghettos, practise own traditions,

live the culture of their state of origin and do not share the values of the society they live (and were born) in. Baker et al. (2007) name this phenomenon the *parallel society*, encompassing young people (predominantly men) who are at the development stage of searching for identity and seeking external validation, as Danish research confirms (Precht, 2007).

Bizina and Gray (2014: 74) find that historically speaking, Europeans have never been in favour of welcoming strangers in their social circles. Individual states have shaped and implemented policies of assimilation and integration of the workforce that in fact built postwar Europe; nevertheless, second- and third-generation children born in Europe are not accepted in the social class of white (Caucasian) Europeans. Sageman (2004) emphasizes the *importance of close social networks representing an entry point in the radicalization process*. An issue in this regard is the *individualistic nature of modern societies remaining disinterested in the situation of youth in the community* and in the process of them becoming adults.

Baker et al.'s (2007) parallel society thus gives rise to ideal conditions in which young Muslims (and probably other social groups feeling excluded) closely connect to their culture and faith of origin and identify neither with the country they live in nor with their culture and country of origin (Stern, 2016), instead seeking their own place in society, as well their own identity. Such conditions are favourable to shaping and raising young Muslims at the identity-seeking stage into extremists, particularly if the person assuming the leadership role is charismatic (Leiken, 2005).

It is important to note that not all immigrants tend towards radicalization, but that this requires the fulfilment of various conditions, most likely a combination of several of them. Jenkins (2011) finds that both radicalization and terrorism (as the potential outcome of radicalization) are individual processes including a combination of external and personal factors and circumstances. He also claims that radicalization is triggered by a combination of individual events.

Maclean's magazine (2013) emphasizes that the group particularly susceptible to radicalization are the young wishing to take initiative and assume an active role, but who view the world as black and white. Krueger (2007) goes as far as to compare terrorism to elections, as both encompass the wish to influence politics and bring about change. Jenkins (2011) further correlates the escalation of radicalization into violence and terrorism with the desire of the individuals to prove themselves as warriors.

On the other hand, Reitman (2013) looks for the causes in the *personal trauma and suffering the young project onto the society, i.e. the broader social environment, blaming it for their own personal distress* (one such example are the brothers behind the Boston Marathon attacks). Based on a longitudinal study of Somalian refugees in the US and Canada, Stern (2016) agrees with this proposition.

Bizina and Gray (2014: 74) summarize some key causes of radicalization: (1) identity crisis; (2) social passivity – empty space at the time of identity formation of youth, filled by a charismatic personality with the intent to radicalize; (3) personal trauma and guilt projection onto the social environment; (4) social isolation, marginalization, discrimination, segregation, alienation; (5) misleading information on Islam as a violent religion and on Western politics towards Islam; (6) desire for political influence and achieving change.

Risk radicalization factors on three levels: Biological, social and psychological

The causes of youth vulnerability can be used as a starting point to determine risk factors for youth radicalization. These risk factors can be classified as *biological* (gender, age), *social* (external) and *personal* (internal).

Biological risk factors

Andrew Silk (2008: 105) finds that the most important biological factors that can be linked to radicalization (and joining terrorist groups) are gender and age. Persons joining terrorist groups are predominantly young males (defined as teenagers and males in their early twenties). To substantiate his argument, the author cites data provided by Budd et al. (2005), claiming that in all cultural environments, the perpetrators of the majority of criminal acts are men between 15 and 25 years of age. Farrington (2003) finds that the critical age when men are most ready to offend against others and exhibit delinquent behaviour is between 15 and 18 years.

Social risk factors

Social risks are related to a passivity within society, leading to disinterest and poor recognition of certain phenomena in the closer social environment. Some of the social risk factors are the following:

- Social status, socio-economic standing, education (e.g. lack of opportunities for personal and professional development and improving one's position on the social ladder, dependency on the social environment);
- Marginalization regarding the social environment, isolation, discrimination, segregation;
- Challenges in the formation of social identity, unsuccessful integration and socialization in the case of subsequent generations of immigrants (e.g. lack of common values and lack of identification with the society and culture);
- Feelings of personal and social uselessness;
- Friends (e.g. rejection by the group, delinquency among friends) and group dynamics – taking on roles.

Personal risk factors

Personal risk factors encompass various factors affecting the individual's psychological state and susceptibility to radical ideas at a given moment and in given circumstances. It is important to note that it is a combination of events and situations that can trigger such a response. Some of the personal factors are as follows:

- Individualism;
- Personal identity: (1) rebellion against parents; (2) identity formation in adolescence; (3) identity gap (the individual belongs neither to Europe nor to the country of origin);

- Labile personality (influence of a charismatic person even if it carries morally dubious messages – resocialization);
- Moral imperative (e.g. permissive upbringing; feeling the constant need to fulfil personal needs and never feeling satisfied with the outcomes; narcissist personality types);
- Perceived unfairness and injustice;
- Perverse desire for active political engagement and participation (while uncritically perceiving the world as black and white);
- Proving oneself (e.g. as a warrior);
- Education (in combination with certain other factors);
- Personal trauma, distress, suffering;
- Psychological issues (e.g. hyperactivity, impulsiveness, aggression, antisocial behaviours (Farrington, 2003)).

Polič (1988) finds that the radicalization process also encompasses a gradual withdrawal from the social environment, which in its extreme instance can lead to completely severed ties with the primary environment and the internalization of different norms and values and formation of a strong sense of belonging to a group. Polič emphasizes that emotionally intense identification with a group is characteristic of adolescence; the continuation of this phenomenon into the individual's twenties points towards a lack of socialization in incomplete families and unresolved familial conflicts.

As supported by scientific findings (Silk, 2008: 106), young men exhibit a greater degree of impulsiveness, higher confidence, tendency to engage in risky behaviours and the desire to achieve a certain status (acceptance by peers or by a particular group).

In combination with social factors (socio-economic standing, peer pressure, lack of future prospects) and personal factors (identity crisis, lability, need to prove oneself, personal issues, lack of a strong family core and lack of role models), the biological factors of gender and age can be used as early warning indicators for youth radicalization. Low economic standing, a lack of the feeling of belonging and a charismatic person offering a common goal, idea and inclusiveness may be one of the combinations appealing to young men in search of identity.

Radicalization risk factors may encompass the personal, social or biological level; however, key in this regard are the intertwining and interrelations between various factors at different eco-social levels triggering the process of youth radicalization (see Figure 1). *The connections between the aforementioned three groups of factors are thus key for determining youth radicalization indicators.* Identity formation and standing in the social structure, for example, are carried out precisely in the teenage years identified as carrying the largest risk for deviant behaviour in men.

The picture represents the various risk factors on different eco-social levels.

1. Individual level: psychological issues, personal trauma, distress and suffering, upbringing, lability, identity crisis, moral imperative, wish to prove oneself, gender, age.
2. Micro level: (1) strong ties deterring or causing radicalization, sign recognition; (2) friends: deterring or welcoming factor, ghettoization; (3) religion: strong

Figure 1. Intertwining of risk factors for radicalization among youth on various levels.⁵
Sources: Own model.

charismatic religious figure filling the space at the stage of personality/identity formation.

3. Meso level: (1) groups/organizations: joining due to interest, ideas, sense of belonging, role play, group dynamics, assuming group identity, proving oneself; (2) broader social environment: lack of opportunities and future prospects, exclusion from the social environment, isolation, discrimination, segregation, dependency on the social environment, unsuccessful socialization (lack of common values and culture), unsuccessful assimilation (both by the receiving country and population and by migrants themselves), media.
4. Macro level: institutional framework, culture, historic context, legislation, integration and assimilation programmes, social inclusion, GDP, socio-economic standing.

Recognizing radicalization among youth

We find that there are *three social levels* key in recognizing and preventing radicalization among youth, namely *school workers, family and friends*.

It is necessary to start to build public resilience and awareness in the process of secondary, perhaps even primary socialization, meaning the school system plays an important role in achieving this goal. This goes to underline the importance of *the school system* and the performance of each individual teacher. The school system can be understood as one of the more powerful tools of the state in preventing the take-up of radical views and the radicalization process among youth, consequently also reducing the probability of the individual becoming radicalized later in life. The school system is the one imparting culture, including security culture, to the youth in the socialization process and also reinforces the desired system of values. It serves to strengthen collectivism, developing social responsibility and social resilience. Mattson et al. (2016) find that the education system should pursue the following goals: (1) explain and prevent stereotyping and discrimination; (2) impart knowledge of democracy, norms and values; (3) promote active citizenship and awareness of violent extremism; (4) promote discussion and raise awareness of terrorism.

Another primary factor in recognizing youth radicalization is the *family*. When radical tendencies have been identified in youth, this necessitates the treatment of the family as a whole and not just the individual in question (Lenos and Haanstra, 2017). The family is important in the process of identifying radicalization, as it is well-placed to note any changes of behaviour due to everyday interaction with the young person in question. The family can also be a source of intervention, dissuading the individual from violent radicalization and terrorism (Jenkins, 2011; Stern, 2016). In the process of socialization, the family builds and later on represents the pillar of the youth's resilience, reinforcing family relationships, the attachment type in the parent-child relationship, upbringing, expression of emotions, etc. (Lenos and Haanstra, 2017). In researching influences, it is important to go beyond just the nuclear family, as some findings show the important role of the extended, multi-generational family in the formation of the youth's personality (Vogt, 2019). Members of the extended family take on roles at different ages, with the environment and cultural specifics also playing an important role. In Slovenia the

three-generational family model (strong network ties) is well embedded in the society (see e.g. Kuhar, 2011; Švab, 2010) and therefore an extended family presents a potential for preventing or recognizing the radicalization among youth. Vogt (2019) also finds that in the transition into adulthood, members of the extended family (e.g. uncles and aunts) are very important, as they can serve as role models to the young person.

The family represents the foundation of the individual's resilience, which the latter develops during the course of becoming an adult in relation to family relationships, attachment type, expression of affection, etc. (Lenos and Haanstra, 2017). In the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) report, the authors define the family members as key in recognizing and preventing radicalization, which is why state institutions should treat the family as a partner in identifying radicalization among youth. Stern (2016) further finds that strong family ties may prevent the process of radicalization.

A similar role is assumed by the *primary social groups and friends*, who can, in addition to the negative role mentioned above, also have a positive role in terms of identification of radicalization and taking appropriate action. Individual radicalization is relatively rare and many psychological group factors play an important role in the process of radicalization. Group identification, group dynamics and related tendencies to share perceptions can affect individuals' radicalization (see McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011). Past examples of radicalization show that cutting ties with old friends in combination with the search for new, more radical friends can play an important role. Individuals might also start mentioning new role models or ideological leaders (see *Monitoring Radicalisation*, 2017), which will be observed by their closest friends. The decision to join a radical and underground organization is very rarely an individual one. In most cases it involves cliques of friends. This means that social networks and interpersonal relationships provide critical connections for recruitment into radical and even terrorist organizations (Borum, 2004: 57).

Methodological approach

Jenkins (2011) highlights the role of state and society in preventing the causes and formation of favourable conditions for radicalization among youth. The state can offer several tools to do that, e.g. policies (such as via the education system), internal connections and participation, as well as in other ways. The role of the school workers is even more important as they play an important role in the adolescents' everyday life; they can act as role models and promptly detect changes in behaviour.

Given that Slovenia has not yet developed a model for early detection of radicalization among youth nor preventive measures on the national level, we have focused on the following: (1) the so-called top-down policy-making level (i.e. Ministry of Education, Science and Sports with its National Educational Institute, Office for Youth, Ministry of Interior), because policy makers are expected to set a frame for recognizing and preventing radicalization among youth; (2) the bottom-up implementation or institutional level (e.g. primary and high school teachers, social workers and other experts, NGOs).⁶

In Slovenia, the concept of zero tolerance towards any type of violence (physical, verbal, etc.) is prevalent and consequently, there are well-developed strategies for

addressing youth violence at schools, in which experts will participate in solving the issue and how to approach the violent individual and the victim. A great deal of training has been organized in this field and the materials include a publicly available didactical handbook for school workers, developed within the framework of the National Educational Institute. The weakest link in the response chain is non-physical violence, which is more difficult to recognize than its physical manifestation. In such cases, it is also more difficult to identify the victims and the offenders. Various research projects and platforms for identifying and reporting cyber-violence have been established (e.g. Odklikni.si, Spletno oko), but they all struggle with numerous challenges. Left-wing, right-wing or Islamic radicalization has not been discussed directly.

There is a lack of understanding as to why radicalization is not merely a security issue, but that there is also a lack of normative acts that would enable preventive measures related to the radicalization. Consequently, the awareness about the close link between society and security in the field of radicalization is very poor among implementers and policy makers in the field of education.

To analyse the situation in the field of recognizing and preventing radicalization of the vulnerable group of youth in Slovenia, we applied a qualitative methodology and carried out nine interviews and three focus groups with a total of 22 Slovenian experts face-to-face, while one was conducted via email (see Table 1). The study encompassed primary and secondary schools, residential treatment facilities, a non-governmental organization, the Slovenian Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Education Institute of Slovenia, the Office for Youth and individual experts in the field of youth radicalization.

A combination of a top-down and bottom-up approach to the analysis was implemented. We conducted interviews with representatives and heads of institutions responsible for the educational policy and systems as well as with the ones implementing them (Table 1). We also interviewed representatives, heads and expert staff at selected schools that carry out this policy and represent the foundation of the education system in Slovenia, as well as heads of residential and counselling centres, residential groups and correctional facilities, who have valuable experience with various types of deviant behaviours among youth.

The purpose of the interviews was to answer the following questions: (1) What is the perception of radicalization, its recognition and response in the education system of the Republic of Slovenia, both in terms of school policy makers and implementers in direct contact with youth? (2) Which youth groups in Slovenia are the most vulnerable and how well-equipped are the actors within the school system (in terms of knowledge, funding, legal bases, etc.) to recognize them and take appropriate action? (3) Is it possible to identify forms of cooperation and action that are the most appropriate for Slovenia?

The qualitative interviews were carried out face-to-face, whereby the interviewer was solely responsible for data management in the entire research process, i.e. the interview itself, the transcript and analysis. This approach enabled us to keep the level of lost data and information – a common occurrence when data are processed by several researchers – to a minimum. All interviewees received a briefing in the research subject and agreed to participate by signing a consent form.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

			Number of interviewed experts
Focus groups	Bottom-up	Headmasters of residential and counselling centres, residential groups and correctional facilities across Slovenia.	7
		School workers from Primary School Simon Jenko Kranj and Primary School Naklo (psychologist and special pedagogics expert).	2
		Correctional facility Kranj (director and expert school workers).	4
Interviews	Bottom-up	Headmaster of an anonymized primary school.	1
		Gymnasium (general high school) Velenje.	1 (e-response)
		Headmaster and expert school worker at the Velenje high school centre.	2
		Institute for non-violent communication.	1
		OECD expert.	1
	Top-down	Ministry of Interior.	1
		Director of the National Office for Youth.	1
		National Educational Institute (national coordinator of school social workers).	1
		National Educational Institute (expert on violence prevention).	1

Empirical analysis of recognizing and preventing radicalization among youth in the Slovenian education system

The findings gathered in the qualitative interviews with school workers and policy makers are narratively interpreted on the following pages and synthesized in Table 2.

The role of the educational system in monitoring and preventing radicalization

In the Slovenian education system, radicalization is relatively poorly recognized at the policy level. As many as 53% of the interviewees evaluated their familiarity with the field of violent radicalization by indicating the mid point on the scale;⁷ 33% of respondents felt that they have a poor understanding of the field (grade 2), while only two of them felt that their knowledge of the subject is good or very good. A desire was stated by 86% of respondents to know more about the subject, i.e. receive more training; only one respondent did not feel that need and one remained undecided. We also encountered cases where candidates did not wish to participate in the interviews, stating that they have never had to deal with radicalization and did not feel competent to discuss this topic.

Table 2. Synthesis of expert interviews: key findings.

	School workers (bottom-up)	Policy makers (top-down)
Perception of radicalization, its recognition and response in the education system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-evaluation of familiarity with the radicalization process and its characteristics: average (53%) and poor (33%). - Self-evaluated need for more awareness and additional training in the field of radicalization (86%). - They recognize physical and verbal violence. Cyber-violence is harder to detect. They are almost never searching for causes of violence (e.g. radicalized views). - Possessive or degrading attitude towards women is related to radical views and violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - See potential for increasing anti-immigrant violence due to migration. - Rarely see the connection between root causes for violence (which might be political religious, gender based, etc.) and violence as a visible manifestation of radical opinions.
The most vulnerable youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth with the identity issues; - Emotionally unstable persons; - Minorities, foreigners and persons deprived due to poor command of language; - Socially excluded youth and youth with poor education outcomes; - Persons with low self-esteem; - Persons with a low family social status (parents' education, unemployment of one or both parents); - Youth living in radicalized family environments. 	
Recognizing potential radicalization within the educational system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limitations based on legislation. - They believe that radicalization should be dealt with by the police, not school. - So far they haven't been provided with an operational definition or indicators to help them recognize radicalization. - They respond to violence (i.e. physical, verbal) but don't seek causes for it (radical views on religion, politics, nationality, gender, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No guidelines as to how to recognize or respond to radicalization among youth (however there are guidelines for violence). - Willingness to prepare such guidelines, but there is currently lack of awareness and knowledge on that issue among policy makers.
What should be done in the future (i.e. forms of cooperation and action that are the most appropriate for Slovenia)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination meetings among headmasters. - Sharing good practices at Radicalization Awareness Network Slovenia (RAN) meetings. - Attending trainings and educational seminars about recognizing and acting upon detected radicalization among youth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparing guidelines with indicators for recognizing radicalization. - Establishing formal procedures for school workers (how to respond to detected radicalization among youth). - Stimulate community cooperation (i.e. school, youth organizations, parents, municipality, etc.). - Adopting legal acts enabling school workers to act in case of detected radicalization among youth.

Interviews with policy makers and school workers show that the education system does not recognize radicalization as a problem. It however recognized youth violence as such and has found adequate legal and preventive mechanisms. Hate speech and cyber-violence (violence mediated by the internet) are also been garnering increasing attention.

Policy makers do recognize that the level of prejudice and intolerance has been increasing in the past years. This is especially true along the lines of ethnic differences between Slovenians and non-Slovenians (division between 'us' and 'them'). Due to increasing numbers of Albanian immigrants (predominantly from Kosovo), some assessments predict that the division between Slovenians and Albanians will increase (if they are not properly included in the society). Some respondents also observed that certain political parties are gradually inciting feelings of insecurity among the Slovenian population, with immigrants and foreigners presented as threats. One policy maker stressed that political radicalization is not perceived in the educational system and found explanation in the fact that Slovenian youth are generally not really interested in politics.⁸ Interviewees also noted that violence predominantly has less complex causes (such as disregard for rules, delinquency, rejection of authority, drugs, etc.) than left, right-wing or Islamic radicalization, but simultaneously also emphasized their fear of increasing anti-immigrant violence.

Some policy makers have, however, perceived family radicalization. This refers to the transfer of radical views from parents to children. In residential treatment facilities, there is a view that the occasional release of the youngsters home might not be beneficial to their treatment because some of them might return with renewed radical views. Educational and correctional systems have no control over what happens within families.

The education system has developed very specific protocols and guidelines for violence by minors. These acts of violence are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but generally speaking, the teachers represent the first line, the school counsellors deal with more problematic cases and in the most problematic cases, parents, social work centres, medical centres and police are involved. In specific and complex cases, an interinstitutional team can be set up. But it is very difficult to synchronize institutional schedules in times when all institutions are overburdened. There is no higher-level coordination on the subject of radicalization in the education system. Coordination meetings among headmasters could deal with this and exchange information between schools (see Table 2). There are no protocols or guidelines for radicalization and there is no single person responsible for the problem of radicalization in educational institutions. For such a case, the protocol for responding to youth violence would be used. There is a clear legal basis for dealing with youth violence, especially once the person is 14 years old, but no legal basis for radicalization (see Table 2).

Additionally, education seminars on youth violence and hate speech are organized yearly, but there is no seminar on radicalization. This is why police organized an own-initiative seminar for schools on radicalization. One policy maker noted that such training for recognizing and dealing with violence among youth indirectly also contributes to preventing youth radicalization. There are no indicators to help school workers identify radicalization. Schools have limited financial resources and prioritize their activities. Therefore, they are limited in focusing more on problematic individuals. Furthermore,

there are also legal limitations on measures they can take. In fact, schools and most residential treatment facilities can only use pedagogical methods in dealing with violence and radicalization. Additionally, schools can pay greater attention to individual minors only if the parents grant permission, which is not always the case. Last but not least, there are no special financial resources allocated to the problem of radicalization in the education system.

Policy makers from the police commented on the situation by stressing that there is political and religious radicalization in schools, but that these schools do not want to recognize the issue and assume responsibility. When acts of violence occur, the causes are not dealt with and it is consequently impossible to determine whether the violence was caused by radicalization or not. If the police can detect such radicalization, schools are even better positioned to detect it much earlier. The problem is that police cannot share intelligence obtained on problematic radicalization cases, except for the most serious ones.

In our research, we detected a very important and informative grey area. We spotted a tendency of the education system to pass on more complex problems of (potentially) violent individuals to the police (see Table 2). However, it frequently occurs that the police cannot find any proof of illegal activities and are thus unable to act and make arrests. The issue is then passed on to the social work centres, which are also often criticized for being unable to provide solutions to complex issues. It is our impression that such horizontal interagency cooperation is only partially successful.

Early detection of radicalization among policy makers and school workers

In the process of our research, we introduced the following operational working definition of radicalization to the interviewed school workers and policy makers:

Radicalization is the process of drastic change or transformation of perceptions, attitudes, values and behaviour of an individual or group towards political opinions and behaviour patterns that legitimize the use of undemocratic means and/or illegal violence to achieve own political, ideological, religious etc. goals. Radicalization can be milder or severe, with violent extremism and terrorism being possible extreme ends of the radicalization process.

Radicalization is characteristic for societies with a high degree of political polarization (both in a local and a global context) that leads to or is a result of polarizing opinions in society in general, among social groups and at an individual level.

In carrying out their work, our interviewees do not think about radicalization and do not recognize it; the latter is also being made difficult by the existing understanding. However, when radicalization is clearly defined, it is quickly correlated with youth violence (not only peer violence, but also violence by and towards older individuals). When the respondents place radicalization within the context of such violence, it is easier for them to identify vulnerable groups and indicators for early detection of radicalization.

By expanding the understanding of radicalization (which leads to extreme violence) in the context of peer violence, we were able to encourage the respondents to recognize certain vulnerable groups (see Table 2).

Using the lens of peer violence, the following vulnerable youth groups were recognized:

1. Youth with identification/identity issues;
2. Emotionally unstable persons;
3. Minorities (including migrants and refugees), foreigners and persons deprived due to poor command of language;
4. Socially excluded youth (e.g. in residential treatment facilities) and youth with poor education outcomes;
5. Persons with low self-esteem;
6. Persons with a low family social status (parents' education, unemployment by one or both parents⁹);
7. Youth living in radicalized family environments (regardless of the systemic deradicalization attempts, the youth are again radicalized when in contact with their families).

It needs to be stressed that school workers defined the groups potentially vulnerable to radicalization by mentally recalling vulnerability factors for youth violence.

In relation to this, school workers most commonly emphasize three types of violence – *physical*, *verbal* and *online* violence. The first form is more common among young men, and the second among young women. The third form is relatively new and very difficult to recognize. Both radicalization and violence online happen away from the eyes of adults, but at the same time reach a much wider audience and are thus much more stressful (and possibly dangerous) than the so-called traditional physical violence. Discourse on social networks is one of the sources of radicalization, exacerbated by the use of internet and available media. Online, young people are susceptible to different types of negative influence, including peer violence, abuse, dissemination of radical ideas and recruiting.

The most skilled and frequent internet users are precisely young people, the group most susceptible to radical ideas if we take into account the findings stated above. Jenkins (2011) however stresses that the internet also shapes and importantly affects the type of fight. It is therefore not only a tool for relaying messages, but also an active creator of radicalization and terrorism.

The past experience in the Slovenian school system is predominantly tied to physical violence, showing that (both physical and verbal) violence sometimes occurs based on *nationality*. Another aspect that needs to be highlighted is *gender*. The director of a non-governmental organization specialized in dealing with violent individuals notes that the majority of their male clients exhibit a specific *attitude towards women*, perceiving them as *property*. One of the indicators of radicalization could thus be an attitude towards women characterized by a *sense of ownership*.

Here we can thus observe signs of radicalization on an ethnic or national basis or on the basis of gender, whereby it should be stressed that the interviewees did not perceive or treat these examples as examples of radical behaviour. It is interesting to note that certain other examples of expressing negative attitudes related to religion (e.g. against Jews or Muslims) or gender (e.g. online) are also not perceived as signs of radicalization.

The above indicates the lack of a clear definition of radicalization in the Slovenian education system. If a phenomenon is not defined, it is impossible to recognize it, let alone address and take appropriate measures.

It is not possible to provide measures for early detection and prevention of radicalization that would be applicable to every country and all social environments. The key causes of radicalization can be found on various levels and can be caused by a combination of several factors (e.g. social, individual and even biological). A single preventive approach can therefore not even be applied within one country. However, the approaches applied within one or more countries that have proven to be effective could be proclaimed as good practice and adapted to social environments of other countries. We have observed that in the Slovenian case, the welfare state, with low social and income differences, a good public educational system and a wide network of extracurricular activities available to the majority of youth, youth organizations, etc. are leaving less space for radicalization and might be understood as good preventive practices. We will explain some of the further suggestions in the conclusion.

Conclusion

We find that at the level of internal affairs, experts are aware of the hierarchy of approach towards the radicalization of youth. Police experts in the field of radicalization state that family, friends, the school and the local community are key actors at the first stage of recognizing radicalization. The role of police in addressing radicalization is above all curative, as they can be involved in the process only when the first crime is committed. Before that point, they are excluded from the process by the legal framework. At all stages of radicalization up until a crime is committed, the law does not provide for measures. Society understands security as *two-dimensional*, consisting of an unproblematic state where all is normal, and the stage after a crime is committed and police, the prosecutor's office and other competent bodies get involved.

In Slovenian society, understanding of the issue of radicalization is reduced to a security issue and all security issues are reduced as pertaining to the armed forces and, as is the case here, the police. The police prepare lectures and training for teachers, but only if the teachers express interest. We find that this interest is pronounced when peer violence is concerned, but lacking for the issue of radicalization. This can be traced back to the fact that radicalization is not perceived as a problem; due to a lack of awareness, even apparent signs – changes in an individual's dress, diet, etc. – are rarely recognized as the first steps in the radicalization process.

In the current situation, more serious security risks related to radicalization are prevented by a set of factors that are not by any means linked to planning early detection and prevention of radicalization, but nevertheless have the same effect.

One such example is *social individualism and a lack of social engagement among youth*, which may act as prevention, as young people do not have strong beliefs and are unwilling to take a stand. Another preventative factor in the Republic of Slovenia is also a high-quality and very *accessible public education system* available to all, as a prerequisite for a decent job in the future. In Slovenia, the *class differences are among the least significant* in Europe, with a strong social state providing various forms of aid to prevent

individuals and families from slipping from the social margins into poverty. Poverty prevention is thus also a factor for preventing radicalization. The fourth factor is a highly developed *system of a wide array of extracurricular activities* that are available to young people from all social groups, bringing them together and enabling their social inclusion. The latter is of key importance in adolescence, when young people are in the process of forming their identities and are seeking the feeling of belonging to a community.

In this context, it is important that the local communities (at the borough level in urban environments) assume their role and provide young people, including those of a socially disadvantaged background, with spaces and activities where they can socialize and spend their free time. The family, local community and school, including friends,¹⁰ are also the first to recognize changes in an individual's behaviour and may prevent the escalation of the radicalization process.

In terms of difficulties in identifying the issue, the early stages of the radicalization process can be compared to virtual violence. The distinctions are blurry and both happen well away from the eyes of adults, as well as friends. Recognizing radicalization would therefore require the development of new tools and approaches that are, paradoxically, if we consider the virtual computer environment, personal and include the community. At this point, both radicalization and events in the virtual world can be most easily recognized by close and genuine personal relationships, by knowing and observing the individual and by close social connections – the opposite of the current self-centred and individualized society in which individuals, including young people, only have value as consumers.

The thesis that we have posed, i.e. that *the overall lack of awareness among school workers regarding youth radicalization risks not recognizing the early signs and responding properly in order to prevent further radicalization*, has been partially confirmed.

In Slovenia, radicalization has been present to a relatively small degree, and the stakeholders are accordingly poorly equipped to recognize it. Even the elements that could be recognized as first steps in the radicalization process are reduced to deviant behaviour or simply peer violence. With the latter, solving the problem does not, as a rule, touch on the causes of violence, which could be based on religion, nationality, gender, etc., as our research shows. Were we to take a closer look at the causes of peer violence, we might establish that Slovenian society is not exempt from radicalization.

Bearing in mind this critical finding, we can nevertheless state that school workers are able to recognize certain types of deviant behaviour and know how to address them, as they have been trained in the context of a different issue – youth violence. By recognizing the problem and taking appropriate action, school workers can actually prevent the continuation of the radicalization process. Measures to address youth violence are well-developed and multi-layered, including the individual in question, his or her family, teachers, psychologists and other experts. Here, we see the potential for further strengthening of the process of recognizing radicalization and taking appropriate action, based on the model of measures to be taken when dealing with youth violence. In addition, after the indicators of radicalization have been defined, the education system could and should absorb and integrate them into the existing protocol for identifying and preventing youth violence, or create a new protocol for early detection and measures in the case of radicalization. This protocol should foresee steps to be taken by school workers and other

community actors when radicalized views or actions are detected among youth. Since radicalization is fairly rare in Slovenian society, it is possible to apply a custom-made approach and decide which profile of school workers as well as other experts should be included in the process to ensure the best possible outcome on a case-by-case basis. In the end, we believe that policy makers should adopt normative acts that would: (1) offer the legal foundation for systematically strengthening awareness among school workers of various expertise, and (2) provide regular trainings for them. Both would help them recognize the first steps on the path of radicalization among youth and give them solid background knowledge and experience to prevent further steps. That way, school workers would indeed become frontline workers for the society as a whole.

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Notes

1. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that the official terrorist threat level in Slovenia has always been low and that annual terrorism trend reports by EUROPOL rank Slovenia among countries with the lowest terrorist threat (mostly rated zero). Two reports do not even mention it at all (see Prezelj and Kocjancic, 2020; see all TE-SAT reports by EUROPOL at www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report#fndtn-tabs-0-bottom-2).
2. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that Slovenia has not been involved in any external armed conflict since its independence in 1991 (if the reader checks all issues of the CIA World Factbook for the variable »disputes - international«, they will see no information on armed clashes; for the latest example see CIA World Factbook, 2020) and also in its comparatively low general crime rates. According to a EUROSTAT report, Slovenia has one of the lowest intentional homicide rates in the EU in the period from 2008 and 2017; this rate is lower only in Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus (see Crime Statistics, 2020). Slovenia also has one of the lowest major assault rates and rather low rape and kidnapping rates in the EU (see Heiskanen, 2010).
3. The educational system is one of the pillars of every society. Recognizing and preventing deviant, including radical behaviour, should be seen as one of its functions. If we understand radicalization only as a matter of security, we are incapable of early detection and prevention as a society. The state can recognize and prevent radicalization with the help of school workers, as they are first line workers in early detection and prevention. Hence, they should be well-equipped with the knowledge and formal procedures for performing this important task.
4. Slovenia adopted its first National Strategy for Preventing Terrorism and Violent Extremism only in 2019, while several other European countries (e.g. United Kingdom, Netherlands,

Austria, Finland, France, Spain, Italy) have, due to their higher threat levels, long since adopted a broad spectrum of national mechanisms, policies, strategies and other tools to fight radicalization and terrorism.

5. The model is based on Bronfenbrenner's eco-social theory.
6. All interviews and focus groups are listed in the literature section.
7. A 5-level scale was used, whereby 1 signifies that the interviewee is completely unfamiliar with the field, and 5 signifies that the interviewee knows the field very well.
8. A low level of active citizenship can be related to the individualism and lack of connections within the community.
9. This is supposed to particularly hold true for conservative families where the father is the main breadwinner. In the case of unemployment, this gives rise to socio-economic problems, as well as a perceived loss of social standing. Such individuals could be particularly vulnerable, including their children.
10. One of the interviewees emphasized that at its earliest stage, radicalization is perceived by friends and schoolmates, and not by teachers.

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List of focus groups and interviews

Focus group 1. Correctional facility Kranj. Conducted 7 May 2019. Kranj.

Focus group 2. Primary School Simon Jenko Kranj and Primary School Naklo. Conducted 16 May 2019. Kranj.

Focus group 3. Heads of residential and counselling centres, residential groups and correctional facilities. Conducted 23 May 2019. Radeče.

Interview 1. Anonymized primary school OŠ29032019. Conducted 29 March 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 2. School centre Velenje (Šolski center Velenje). Gimnazija. E-interview. Ljubljana

Interview 3. School centre Velenje (Šolski center Velenje). Head of the centre and an expert school worker. Conducted 17 April 2019. Velenje.

Interview 4. National Educational Institute 1 (Zavod RS za šolstvo). Conducted 3 April 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 5. National Educational Institute 2 (Zavod RS za šolstvo). Conducted 16 April 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 6. National office for Youth (Urad za mladino). Conducted 16 April 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 7. Peter Debeljak, expert OECD. Conducted 10 April 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 8. Institute for non-violent communication (Društvo za nenasilno komunikacijo). Conducted 27 March 2019. Ljubljana.

Interview 9. Ministry of Interior (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve). Conducted 25 April 2019. Ljubljana.

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