



Recommendations from Western European Youth on Preventing Violent Extremism

On 4 October 2016, Austria, as Chair of the OSCE Mediterranean Contact Group and incoming OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office, brought together in Vienna a group of youth from Western Europe to discuss the prevention of violent extremism and formulate recommendations for policy-makers. The event was similar in format to a roundtable convened by Austria and Tunisia on 3 May 2016 in Tunis for youth from North Africa, and took place under the umbrella of the OSCE "United in Countering Violent Extremism" (#UnitedCVE) campaign.

The group consisted of youth representatives, activists, volunteers, and young professionals from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Many of them are involved at the local level in efforts to engage their peers and/or their communities, raise awareness, facilitate dialogue and provide support in relation to preventing terrorist radicalization and countering the spread of violent extremism.

This is a summary of the most important recommendations that the group identified from their experience, and entrusted one of them to share with OSCE participating States and Partners for Co-operation during the 2016 OSCE Mediterranean Conference that took place on 5-6 October 2016 in Vienna.

Understanding the challenge we face

- Violent extremism and terrorist radicalization primarily affect young people, some as young as 12-13 years old, other in their early thirties. These are often impressionable or otherwise vulnerable individuals, but first and foremost these are human beings. Policies and measures to prevent and counter violent extremism should therefore be human-centered and uphold human rights.
- People attracted to violent extremism come from different backgrounds. The factors that can possibly shape and drive violent radicalization in each case are varied. They can include but are not limited to issues of identity, belonging, trauma, injustices, exclusion, discrimination, social status.
- The spread of violent extremism often results from and feeds on increasing polarization in our societies. Importantly, it is not limited to one type of extremism only.
- Understanding the ideologies and narratives at play is essential to counter the appeal of violent extremism and terrorism. The appropriation of religious and other concepts by violent extremists should be deconstructed and challenged.





Four pitfalls governments should avoid . . .

- Overreaction plays into the hands of violent extremists by fueling polarization and grievances, driving marginalization and alienation.
- Violating human rights and the rule of law undermines efforts to prevent violent extremism sustainably.
- Stigmatizing particular groups, including religious and ethnic groups, is wrong and counter-productive.
- Validating extremist narratives by accepting and reinforcing their use of terminology (e.g., "caliphate", "Islamic state", "flood of refugees").

To move forward with young people governments should . . .

- Strike the right balance between prevention and repression that is sustainable over time; more emphasis today should be put on prevention.
- Match words with actions when it comes to youth participation and empowerment.
- Be ready to engage with, discuss, and address issues important to youth – even if these prove to be difficult topics.
- Invest in both short-term interventions and long-term solutions such as infrastructure for social cohesion, education (e.g. critical thinking, media literacy), empowering people on the front line (parents, teachers, social workers).
- Prioritize and enable local-level community initiatives, by providing recognition, resources, and a flexible policy framework that allows customized responses to the context and individual cases.
- Acknowledge diversity in society and ensure equal rights and opportunities for all in terms of, e.g., education, jobs, leisure activities, and participation in public life.
- Engage, support and work with youth as positive agents, leaders, role models and not only as potential victims or perpetrators.
- Support capacity building for youth to enable youth-led initiatives, including leadership, confidence, communication, resilience and entrepreneurship.
- Raise awareness of the media about their impact and role in covering/informing about terrorism and violent extremism.

