

Over the past three decades, countries across Europe and its near neighbours have witnessed waves of Islamist-inspired radicalisation, making it a top policy issue on national and European political agendas. Muslim citizens of European countries have travelled to conflict zones in the Middle East and Northern Africa to join Islamist organisations and fight on their behalf. Salafist preachers and Jihadi networks have travelled in the opposite direction to disseminate the radical Islamist cause. 'Home grown' radical Islamist networks have emerged, comprising local youth willing to disrupt and attack targets in Europe to express their commitment to that cause. Internet-inspired individuals have conducted disruptive attacks to draw attention to the radical Islamist cause. Citizens from across Europe have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the effort to establish an Islamic state; a number of them have returned to carry out massive and deadly terrorist attacks.

To study Islamist radicalisation as it has unfolded across Europe over the past decades, the DARE consortium has further developed a milieu perspective on radicalisation. Central to this milieu approach is the idea that insight into Islamist radicalisation can be advanced by studying the social environment where radical messages are encountered, from the perspective of the people within this social environment who have been exposed to such radical messaging.

From late 2017 until early 2020, field research was conducted in 10 countries across Europe and its bordering countries. The study focused on young people in social environments where they encountered radical Islamist messaging and included interviews with just under 200 individuals. In Greece, we studied illegal prayer houses where Muslims, often with an immigrant background, come together. In France, we studied young Muslim men in prison, a third of whom had been convicted for terrorism related offences. In Turkey, we studied civil society organisations that increasingly have carried an Islamist overtone and played a role in engendering support for Islamist parties in the civil war in Syria. In many of the Northern European countries, the focus has been on neighbourhoods associated with Islamist activism, a significant presence of migrants from Muslim majority countries, social problems including unemployment, poverty, and crime, and the burden of stigma. In Russia, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, the ethnographic research focused on the lives of young people from such neighbourhoods, where they had also encountered Islamist radical messages. The Tunisian field research focused on neighbourhoods with similar characteristics and a significant Islamist presence. The Norwegian study centred on young people in the vicinity of two virtual Islamist networks that eventually became real world advocacy groups.

A clear understanding of what drives individual trajectories of radicalisation, but also what constrains and prevents young people in radical milieus crossing the threshold to violent extremism is essential for developing effective prevention and counter extremism policy and practice.

To elucidate the nature of radicalisation as it is unfolding across Europe and neighbouring countries, below we outline findings in relation to five key questions:

- How do milieu actors understand 'radicalism', 'extremism' and 'terrorism'?
- How and where are radical(ising) messages encountered in the milieus studied?
- How do milieu actors understand (in)equality and its role in radicalisation?
- How do milieu actors recount their trajectories towards and away from extremism?
- What do milieu actors want to change in society and how do they envisage achieving change?

# DARE FINDINGS

## Understandings of 'radicalism', 'radicalisation', 'extremism' and 'terrorism'

- Many respondents struggled or hesitated to express their understanding of these concepts, suggesting that 'radicalisation', 'extremism' and 'terrorism' are not salient aspects of their lived experience and questioning the links often assumed to exist between Islamism and radicalism or extremism.
- Respondents who did respond, stressed the relational nature of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. The application of the label 'radicalism', and to a lesser extent 'extremism' and 'terrorism', is considered to signal a specific relation between the subject who applies the labels and the behaviour, person or group, to which it is applied.
- The media and some politicians were considered by respondents to intentionally overstate the prevalence of Islamist radicalisation to portray an image of Muslims as a threat to European nations. Across our fieldwork sites, respondents believed that the labels of 'radical' and 'extremist' are deployed by the state and anti-Islamic factions out of animosity towards Muslims and to advance their own political interest.
- Across all fieldwork sites, we found that 'extremism' carries a negative connotation. 'Radicalism' is mainly viewed negatively also, although some respondents associate it with commitment, discipline and passion and see its potential to bring about fundamental, constructive change.
- Respondents view the use of indiscriminate and illegitimate violence to be 'radical' or 'extremist'. Using violence may be viewed as justifiable, for example, in self-defence.

## Encounters with radical(ising) messages

- In most of the non-Muslim majority countries studied, a significant number of respondents reported experiences with anti-Muslim messaging in their social life, in public spaces, at school, at work and in media and politics.
- The 'neighbourhood' was found to provide a sense of belonging and brotherhood, to cope with adversity, and in doing so, it provides a position of stability and 'rooting' from which radicalising messages can be more critically conceived.
- Mosques are reported to have an active role in providing an environment and education that fosters religious identity. Mosques are also seen to bolster resilience against radical messages by offering a grounded perspective on Islamic practice and belief.
- Other social groups were said to contribute to the formation of social identity. Sports clubs, as observed in Russia, Turkey and the UK, often focused on martial arts and bring together likeminded young Muslims. Endorsement of religious institutions and civil society organisations by (sports) celebrities inspire and guide youngsters.
- Respondents had encountered messages promoting radicalisation from preachers but online communication is the primary source of radical messaging. Internet/social media assisted self-radicalisation is observed as a critical phenomenon in all milieus studied. Radical preachers were reported as facilitating access to radical content and networks.
- Radical Islamist messages were found when searching the internet for religious content that could not be obtained at home or at mosques. For some, the internet is a point of access to networks of likeminded others, enabling the formation of a 'new family' and mobilising around humanitarian causes.

### **The role of (in)equality in radicalisation**

- Perceived inequality has multiple dimensions and may involve comparisons of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in relation to Muslims and non-Muslims, but also perceived inequalities based on generations, ethnic background and neighbourhood residence.
- ‘Relational inequality’ represents a critical factor in the lives of research participants. The experience of relational inequality is characterised by a sense of being different (horizontal inequality), and of being subjected (vertical inequality) to an authority perceived as inadequate, unworthy or illegitimate. Relational inequality was experienced in relationships with parents, with teachers and supervisors, with the police and with the state.
- Continued confrontations with inequalities and injustice in relationships at many different levels may lead to the accumulation of frustration and the ‘angst’ that one is controlled by malevolent authorities. Exposure to a radical Islamist narrative may bring about a ‘cathartic’, purifying experience of profound insight in one’s own contentious relations in terms of a global struggle between the true Islam and the unbelievers and the prospect of making a meaningful contribution to this struggle.

### **Trajectories towards and away from extremism**

- Respondents report their (non-)radicalisation trajectories as comprising a complex and dynamic interplay of factors that exist on multiple levels, including experiences during childhood, school failure and unemployment, honour culture, experience with violence, involvement in delinquency, crisis events during adolescence, identity development in a social context of anomie and rejection, state repression, narratives of collective annihilation and networks facilitating the spreading of radical Islamist messaging and access to battle grounds. None of these factors can explain radicalisation by themselves, but all contribute to anxiety and dread to which radical Islamist messaging speaks.
- The search for identity is a critical phenomenon in the understanding of radicalisation trajectories. This search is a fundamental element of adolescent development, but, as reported by respondents, it is intensified because of (traumatic) life events.
- Respondents in virtually all countries indicate that in the absence of a supportive social and religious environment, the internet becomes the primary resource in one’s search for identity. The outcome of the search for identity, the adoption of religious identity, in some cases as a strengthening of pre-existing faith and in others as a religious conversion, is largely based on information taken from the internet.
- Respondents often mention the social reception of the newly found religious identity as a key trigger in the radicalisation process. A sense of rejection by one’s immediate social surrounding, but predominantly by an anti-Islamic and secular society, and a repressive state, sets in motion a further distancing and isolation and immersion in internet fora.
- Digital Islam predominantly aims to address a global community and covers issues that concern Muslims from across the world. Humiliation and injustices committed towards Muslims are a common theme, contributing to vicarious trauma, a sense of collective annihilation, resonating with individual experiences of rejection, conflict and repression. This renders ‘being a Muslim’ an effective interpretative frame for understanding one’s own dejection while the purification of Islam from corrupt influences and the defence of a pure Islam against its enemies worldwide appears as a path to redemption.

### **Achieving change**

- Most of the respondents, regardless of their location, hold pessimistic views on future global developments, and fear for the position of Muslims in society.
- Many seek happiness by investing in social connections with family and friends.

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY AND DECISION MAKERS

- 1. Consider radicalisation as the outcome of a complex relational process.** Avoid understandings of Islamist radicalisation in terms of psychological, group or ideological dispositions. Thinking about (Islamist) radicalisation as something that only resides in ‘them’ fails to take into account the complex relational dynamics of radicalisation.
- 2. Start with considering one’s own role in the onset and perpetuation of radicalisation leading to violent extremism.** To the extent that radicalisation is the outcome of a complex relational dynamic, it is imperative to take into account the role of the multiple actors involved in this dynamic, including one’s own.
- 3. Address the issue of power asymmetry when addressing extremism.** To the extent that much of the resentment contributing to extremism originates from a sense of relational inequality, authoritarian responses to extremism are likely to aggravate matters.
- 4. Provide balanced and evidence-based assessments of the prevalence of Islamist radicalisation,** especially in public context (such as media and parliament), as overrepresentation of the threat of Islamist radicalisation constitutes a persistent grievance among a significant proportion of the Muslim population across Europe.
- 5. Differentiate between radicalisation and extremism and provide clear descriptions of both.** Radicalisation may not always lead to extremism. Whereas violent extremists may have undergone a radicalisation process that does not suggest that all those who are radicalising will eventually become extremists. Treating radicalism simply as a precursor to extremism may contribute to extremism.
- 6. Place youth radicalisation in the context of adolescent identity development.** Our research underscores the central place of the complexities of identity development in the development of radical and extremist ideas. A proper recognition of the role of identity development and identity crisis will facilitate an appropriate response and prevent escalation into extremism.
- 7. Recognise the constructive role that subcultural (and countercultural) identification may play in addressing radicalisation.** Our observations suggest that sub and countercultural identification may play a constructive role in identity formation and development. In this sense, this identification may contribute to the solution rather than to the problem.
- 8. Consider the internet as the primary channel through which extremist messages** are sent and received. Across the fieldwork sites we found the internet to play a crucial role in the development of extremist ideas and action. Islamist extremism can to a considerable extent be considered an internet phenomenon.
- 9. Consider establishing (social) connection to be a key to a successful approach to address violent extremism.** The longing for connection was found to be a central impetus for many of the respondents to join extremist groups, and many hinted towards connection as a future ideal. One may wonder whether any attempt to *counter* either extremism or extremist narratives, will be instrumental in establishing social connection.

# THE DARE RESEARCH

This Policy Brief was informed by findings from the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. The project focuses on young people (loosely defined as those aged 15 to 30 years) and on two strands of extremism, which we refer to as 'Islamist' extremism (ISE) and 'right-wing' extremism (RWE).

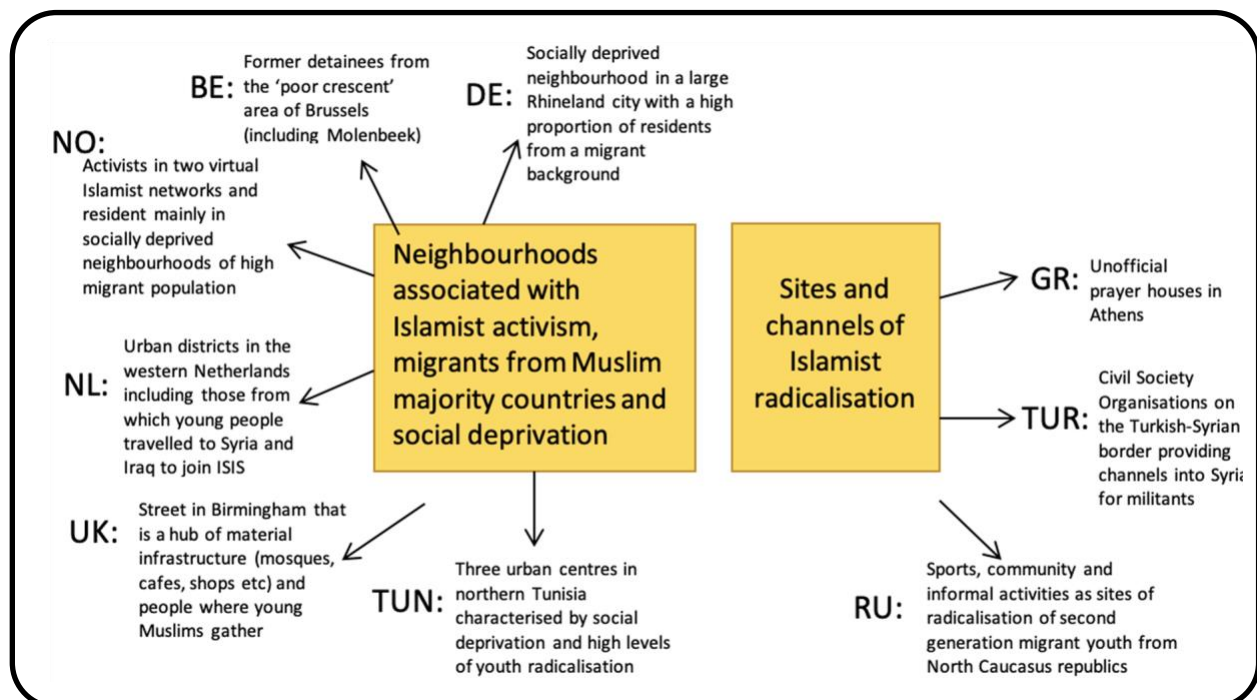
The DARE project uses a mixed-methods approach and has multiple research strands. This Policy Brief draws primarily from qualitative data collected and analysed in the course of conducting ten milieu-based ethnographic case studies of young people's trajectories through radical(ising) milieus.

- These milieus were located in: France, Germany, Greece, Norway, The Netherlands, the UK, Belgium, Turkey, Russia, and Tunisia.
- In total 185 young people took part and 199 semi-structured interviews were recorded.

## DARE DEFINITIONS

- ❖ **Milieus** are understood as physical and virtual (usually both), ideological and emotional spaces providing opportunities for voicing anger at perceived injustice, identifying 'like minds' or shared hurts and giving meaning to, and making sense of, life. They are also sites where important bonds are forged with others.
- ❖ **Islamist radicalisation** is the tendency to increasingly embrace an Islamist worldview such that Islam is not only seen as the guiding force for personal, social, and political life but alternative worldviews and ways of being are conceived of as threats that must be addressed through hostility and aggression.

### Overview of the milieus studied



# PROJECT IDENTITY

**Project Name** DARE : Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality

**Coordinator** Professor Hilary Pilkington, University of Manchester, UK

**Consortium**

- The University of Manchester, UNITED KINGDOM
- Oslo Metropolitan University, NORWAY
- École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, FRANCE
- Anadolu University, TURKEY
- German Institute for Radicalization and Deradicalization Studies, GERMANY
- Leiden University, THE NETHERLANDS
- Hochschule Düsseldorf – University of Applied Sciences, GERMANY
- Teesside University, UNITED KINGDOM
- Collegium Civitas University, POLAND
- Panteion University of Social and Political Science of Athens, GREECE
- Higher School of Economics, RUSSIA
- The Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, CROATIA
- European Network Against Racism, BELGIUM
- The People for Change Foundation, MALTA
- Sfax University, TUNISIA
- The University of Oslo, NORWAY

**Countries** Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Greece, France, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom.

**Funding Scheme** This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 725349.

**Duration and Budget** 4.5 years. Start 01/05/2017 - End 31/10/2021. Budget: €5 million.

**Vision** DARE proposes a new approach to radicalisation research as an alternative to traditional terrorism research that focuses primarily on acts and agents of terrorism. By understanding radicalisation as a *social* phenomenon, and through evidence-based research, DARE aims to broaden the understanding of radicalisation and non-radicalisation paths; demonstrate that it is not located in any one religion or community; and understand better the long-term origins, causes and psychological, emotional and social dynamics of radicalisation.

**Goals**

1. Understand radicalisation trends in historical, spatial and political context including their interaction and potential for cumulative effect.
2. Identify new trends in receptivity to radicalisation especially in relation to youth and gender and extend the field to the study of non-radicalisation trajectories.
3. Investigate the interaction of structure and agency in radicalisation through the intersection of societal (macro), group (meso) and individual (micro) factors in individual trajectories.
4. Enhance understanding of the role of inequality and perceived injustice in radicalisation.
5. Understand the relative significance of religion, ideology and extra-ideological (affective) dimensions of radicalisation, and how they are interwoven.
6. Develop new evaluation and intervention toolkits to counter radicalisation and maximise their impact through active collaboration with policy maker and civil society organisation stakeholders.

**Website and more information** The cross-national synthesis report on young people's trajectories through right-wing extremist milieus as well as the nine country level reports on which it is based can be found on the project website: <http://www.dare-h2020.org>



*This publication reflects only the views of the author(s); the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains*