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BEFORE ACT
LESSONS LEARNED
AND BEST PRACTICES
HANDBOOK

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1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this best practices handbook is to share strategic advice and knowledge obtained in the framework of the research and consequent implementation of the European project titled “RETHINK – Alternative Narratives to Violent Extremism” implemented by a consortium comprising CESIE, Uppsala University, CAPRI, PATRIR, SVF and led by Lusófona University.

The project consisted of counternarrative campaigns aimed at primarily preventing violent radicalization through the dissemination of narratives related with human rights and democracy as well as critical thinking education.

This handbook is intended to be a reference and key resource for first-line practitioners in the field of strategic communications related with P/CVE, including campaigners, civil society organizations, researchers and even the general public. Thanks to the lessons learned throughout the project, the handbook will help campaigners’ replicate best practices, avoiding mistakes and, thus, making the project more efficient. Moreover, this handbook adds value to the Member States of the European Union since it teaches how to transfer and adjust campaign’s basic lessons teaching to countries where there is a need for countering violent extremist propaganda.

More than ever, there is a need to amplify moderate voices that prevail over those of extremism, by promoting social inclusion, fundamental rights and a pluralistic democracy against extremist propaganda. Extremist propaganda is characterized by a binary view of the world that takes advantage of social vulnerabilities and inter-group conflicts.

Therefore, CVE campaigns should support messages countering terrorism, as well as individuals building resilience by developing a set of social characteristics that influence an individual’s capacity to become resilient to indoctrination by violent extremist groups. This strategy is in line with the European Union’s strategy for the counterterrorism and the RETHINK project was able to reach that strategy, being now able to share recommendations and suggestions with first-line professionals in the field of strategic communications to prevent violent extremism.

2. PROJECT’S PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this project is primarily to prevent vulnerable audiences from starting a social process of radicalisation by offering them resilience mechanisms and critical thinking skills framed into a human rights pattern. Secondly, to convince those already engaged in radicalisation process to abandon it or preventing them from going further into that process, by providing an alternative narrative that deconstructs the extremist rhetoric.

Violent extremist groups use manipulation techniques that lead to indoctrination processes by exploiting the socio-psychological vulnerabilities of at-risk individuals. Therefore, to prevent the exploitation of these vulnerabilities, counterspeech campaigns need to create a seed of psychological resilience and scepticism against ideals disseminated by violent extremist movements through their propaganda machines. Since the digital world works as a catalyser that facilitates networking and propaganda, these campaigns need to be applied

online, aiming at reducing the risk of pull and push factors that may lead someone to become radicalised.

Consequently, the project does not aim to deradicalize individuals but to primarily reach at-risk individuals who may be attracted to propaganda disseminated by far-right groups and jihadist groups and, secondly, to engage them into human rights basic principles through specific call-to-action messages.

The project's strategy was to create positive messages that create a call-to-action movement and, thereby, create engagement with the target audience in a sustainable and constructive way. This strategy respects basic principles and best practices in the field of counternarratives, namely the *Do No Harm Principle* and the *Boomerang Effect*. With regard to the *Do No Harm Principle*, this is a term used to help practitioners understand the unintended and negative consequences of implementing a certain action or project. The principle should always be born in mind and can be condensed into the following sentence: "It may be better not to do something or even to do nothing than to risk doing more harm than good" (Community Engagement Against Radicalization, 2020).

For that purpose, the project decided to never share violent images or negative approaches. Instead, the project adopted a human rights-centred approach in order to prevent any type of polarisation views. Polarisation can be seen as a psychological process, based on binary assumptions of 'us' against 'them'. As stated in the Manual of Polarisation Management published by the RAN (2017): "recruiting for an extremist ideology is much more successful if there are susceptible groups who feel their group and identity is being insulted and even threatened". Therefore, the project decided to be particularly careful in avoiding discriminatory language, simplistic narratives and images associated with violence, in order to avoid space for polarisation.

On the other hand, the project was sensitive about the *Boomerang Effect*, which happens when the unintended consequences of an attempt to persuade someone result in the adoption of an opposing position. When implementing the campaigns, the project was careful in order to not generate a problem that did not exist or create an exaggerated reaction about these issues in the target audience.

Consequently, the expected impact of this project can be presented by the following expected long-term results:

1. Individuals that are more able to critically analyse information in order to be resilient to misinformation, manipulation and ideological indoctrination;
2. Individuals that are more resilient to online recruitment tactics;
3. Individuals that have a sense of identity, community belonging and civic purpose;
4. Individuals that identify the critical risks associated with violent extremist groups, such as violence, personal risks, traumas, etc.;
5. Communities that are more aware of radicalization, including its social myths and basic ways of prevention;
6. Communities that are more resilient to polarisation and social exclusion by promoting basic rights, tolerance and religious diversity, *i.e.* democratic values;
7. Communities that incentivize youth participation and civic engagement as ways to prevent violent extremism;

3. METHODOLOGY AND STRATEGY

The project developed 7 counterspeech campaigns, of which 3 campaigns target vulnerable audiences to Islamist extremism, 2 campaigns target vulnerable audiences to far-right extremism, and 2 campaigns target

general people vulnerable to polarisation, misinformation and extremism.

The project's strategy followed four stages: (1) definition of a general campaign strategy: research and analysis, (2) campaigns' edition and production, (3) application of campaigns, (4) offline activities, and (5) monitoring and evaluation.

With regard to stage (1), practice-oriented research was conducted to decide upon the strategic features of the campaigns, such as target audience, key-messages and content. The research had received inputs from the civil society co-partners, marketing advisors, academics and communication practitioners, in order to adjust the campaigns to different national contexts, and a communication strategy was designed to customize the campaigns to the different social contexts.

The design of the campaigns followed the GAMMMA Model proposed by the RAN Communication and Narratives Group, as well as papers and research produced by the RAN and organisations that are experts in the field.

Stage (2) consisted of the audiovisual edition and production of the campaigns, including the technical production of the videos, following the latest communication techniques, such as motion-graphics, short narratives, documentary-style, sketches and interviews.

Stage (3) consisted of campaign online dissemination on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube in which each organization that composes the consortium allocated a social media management team responsible for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the campaign in their native language. This online dissemination included the creation of tailored posts, the dissemination of the videos, images and news related to the field of P/CVE. Furthermore, the project decided to use an advertising methodology to sponsor the

videos' content in addition to the basic promotion plan for videos and key content. In order to promote the campaigns' films, the RETHINK team chose specific advertising directed to the target audience that was chosen beforehand. Each national team proposes to the advertising team content that should be promoted with extra contents being produced by the social media managers at local level.

Stage (4) was based on offline activities whose main aim was to maximise the impact of the campaigns by helping the communities to understand the campaign's message according to a vision of tolerance, multiculturalism and human rights and, therefore, turning the campaigns into a grassroots' social movement. The offline activities took place in the countries where the campaign was disseminated, more specifically in schools, religious communities and migrant communities, in order to reach more supporters for the campaigns. Moreover, these offline activities helped reach more followers for the social media channels. These sessions used non-formal education methodologies, methods from the so-called education for democracy and human rights and the Socratic method to create debate, as well as new technologies to stimulate the interest of the public.

Stage (5) consisted of quantitative and qualitative evaluation based on recommendations of counterspeech practitioners and marketing advisors. The campaigns were evaluated by quantitative indicators, such as: (1) reach, defined by the number of impressions click through rate, expressing the interest in our messages, (2) engagement, including the number of 'likes', comments and shares and (3) impact, defined as the number of sustained engagements. The campaigns were also evaluated by qualitative indicators, such as: (1) evaluation of comments, (2) shares/retweets, (3) audience segmentation through socio-demographics analytics, and (4) content analysis of the sustained engagements.

4. COUNTERNARRATIVES – A WAY TO CHALLENGE HATE SPEECH

Over the last decade, European society has faced several challenges. First of all, jihadism has increasingly recruited people and hit countries, especially the ones being more affected by social exclusion within the Muslim communities. Increased migrant flows have also put pressure on border countries and beyond, determining an additional clash of civilisation between the need to ensure human rights and the application of inhumane laws. In this scenario, far-right groups have been engaged in reinforcing them, playing on the sense of governments' inactivity and on a boasted "need" to preserve the nation and the race in order to create disorder, to become stronger and to gain momentum on the political scene. This is already a reality in some European countries, where these anti-values of intolerance and nationalism have managed to reach the official public position of governments, such as in Hungary. But even apart from politics, what is happening is that all around Europe, the democratic values that 10 years ago would seem unalienable, today are being undermined on a daily basis. The hate speech against Muslims, migrants and many other minorities or groups considered as enemies has become mainstream in European societies and accepted by common people, online and offline. With this regard, we believe that it is important, today more than ever, to engage in a **process of disruption with this rhetoric, and to halt hate speech and extremism especially online**, the "battle space" (as defined by P. W. Singer and Emerson Brooking, 2018) where these threats are particularly perceivable. With the **RETHINK project**, we explored one of the most valid **strategies designed for this purpose: the so-called counternarratives**.

Alternatively to online censorship, the idea behind *counternarratives* is to offer **positive alternatives** as opposed to the extremist ones by **challenging, deconstructing or delegitimising such ideologies**. Counternarratives propose **arguments based on human rights and democratic values, on accurate information** or information, which show **different perspectives and points of view**, as opposed to a certain social issue considered as negative (Tuck and Silverman, 2016). Counternarratives as a tool in social sciences is increasingly studied nowadays, especially in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism, which has become more important over-time. However, counternarratives have a long tradition: they can be found in the work of the Peace scholar Johan Galtung (1996) who theorized "cultural violence" seen as the use of forms of culture to legitimise direct or structural violence; and, more generally, in all human rights movements that used "positive narratives" to counter negative stereotypes and acts of violence through education (Council of Europe, 2017). Today, the **most prominent counternarratives strategies come from the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)**, established in 2011 by the European Commission, **and from the Council of Europe**. Within this framework, we could count on a solid body of knowledge on the topic **on which we have built the RETHINK project's methodology** as shown below.

We wanted to offer **resilience and critical thinking mechanisms** through the RETHINK project with the aim of preventing vulnerable audiences from starting a radicalisation process and convincing those already engaged in a radicalisation process to abandon it or stop from going further. This has been possible, online and offline, through the production and dissemination of *alternative narratives* able to deconstruct the mainstream extremist rhetoric, to challenge the online tools used by extremist groups, and to change violent behaviours. We have created **7 social media campaigns** in the online environment, which **targeted 3 main audiences:**

general people vulnerable to polarisation, misinformation and extremism; audiences vulnerable to Islamist extremism; and audiences to far-right extremism. In line with the **EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment to Terrorist**, the aim of the narratives produced was threefold:

- Ensure that voices of mainstream opinion prevail over those of extremism: we wanted to amplify moderate voices that promote social inclusion, fundamental rights and a pluralistic democracy against extremist propaganda, deconstructing the extremist propaganda's binary view of "us against them". Therefore, we used social media in order to disseminate social cohesion, human rights and resilience to indoctrination contents;
- Support messages countering terrorism: we disseminated positive messages aimed at persuading those already engaged in violent extremism to leave it, and involving the ones being sympathetic to violent extremist narratives for dissuading them;
- Support individuals and civil society to build resilience: we created contents able to develop a sense of cultural identity, social responsibility, community orientation and civic purposes, all values that we consider as key to build a person's capacity of being resilient and impervious to ideological indoctrination.

Because we consider **community engagement** as crucial for reaching vulnerable target audiences, we have also worked **offline, in school, religious and migrant communities**, in order to further disseminate our contents even aside our specific target audiences, and to ensure the educational approach on which the project has been conceived. In some cases, participants from our "offline activities" were also involved in our content creation process, because many of the interesting inputs which came out from these face-to-face activities were used to nourish the online campaigns.

4.1 Target Audience – interests and motivation

When dealing with extremism, the first question we should ask ourselves is **which kind of extremism** we want to tackle with our counternarratives campaigns. It is important to analyse the extremism ecosystems in different communities and in the specific countries where you are active – France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Sweden in the case of RETHINK - to launch targeted campaigns able to generate positive change as prevention and intervention actions. Working on the RETHINK campaign and after **defining specific, measurable and realistic objectives**, it was necessary to be sure to deeply understand the audience to be intercepted in each country. Identifying the target audience for the campaigns allowed us to optimise campaign planning work and, later, to cater for and adapt content for specific audiences. In particular, the preliminary work has foreseen **identifying which groups of people are actually affected by the type of extremist narrative we chose** in the first place and **what aspect of their relationship with this extremist narrative** are we trying to change.

We drew up the identified target audience as a target profile for each specific campaign in order to categorize and define our audience specific **lifestyle, behaviour patterns and motivations**. This semi-fictional representation of an individual in our target audience enabled us to plan an efficient strategy to determine the **message, the medium and the messenger**, as well as to **anticipate the reactions** of our target audience and implement appropriate and tailored intervention strategies. In particular, we decided to address:

1. campaigns targeting audiences vulnerable to Islamist extremism;
2. campaigns targeting audiences vulnerable to far-right extremism;
3. campaigns targeting general people vulnerable to polarisation, misinformation and extremism.

4.1.1 Far-Right extremism

Far-right extremism is a radical right ideology **associated with “nationalism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, and law and order”** (Mierina and Koroļeva, 2015). **Far-right propaganda** is strongly focused on issues related to **immigration**, as well as perceived threats from **ethnic minorities**. People from another **country, colour or religion**, as well as **LGBTQI+ communities and people with disabilities** are particularly exposed to the hostility of right-wing extremists and to racist verbal and physical attacks. Right-wing extremism is often well concealed and comes in **attractive forms for young people**, for example through **videos or songs**, but also **websites on social issues or local civic initiatives**.

Conspiracy theories

The main aim of this campaign was to **demystify social myths and conspiracy theories propagated by far-right extremism through factual arguments developed through a humorous tone** by youtubers, athletes, skaters, public figures, etc. The key actions of this campaign include developing online reactions that challenge social myths related to far-right extremism.

What it is to be part of a far-right violent group

The main aim of this campaign was to demonstrate the **personal risks and real consequences** that the far-right-related extremist violence cover-ups through **former participants and testimonies**. The key actions of this campaign include presenting featuring organisations that can help people to exit violent extremist organisations.

4.1.2 Islamist extremism

Islamist extremism involves an affiliation with groups adhering to **radical interpretations of Islam**, which have commonly come to be associated with Muslim fundamentalism, often referred to also as Islamism, ever since the 2001 attacks on North-American territory. More recently, the Islamic State has been more successful in recruiting online **disaffected young Europeans, particularly immigrants of Muslim origin**, than any other Jihadist terrorist group before, which is argued to be partly due to their use of social media or internet-based propaganda.

Narratives from Global Islam

The main aim of this campaign was to **empower Muslim communities** encouraging the sharing of stories about the experiences in Islamic communities and through specific **features of Islam, such as tolerance**

TARGET AUDIENCE	Young people aged 18-35 from Romania, Sweden, Hungary and Portugal with interests in conspiracy theories associated mainly with far right radicalization processes . The level of vulnerability of individuals to the far right ideology may vary; however, the common point is the belief in non-factual theories or social myths associated with discrimination. Even though sometimes these beliefs do not collide with the legal sphere of freedom of expression, e.g. Holocaust denial.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Stop White Genocide, Holocaust denial, Jewish lobby, George Soros Power, Aryan Brotherhood, Justice for Germans, Aryan Nations;

TARGET AUDIENCE	Young people aged 16- 35 from Romania, Sweden, Hungary and Italy with an interest in far-right ideology, such as the belief that the national territory belongs to the naturally chosen native people and that their supposed territory should be protected.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Aryan Nations, National Front, American History X, Nazi Germany, Aryan, Right Wing News, Hardcore Skinhead, White Power, Ku Klux Klan.

and solidarity, based on testimonies from Muslims.

Key actions of this campaign include **amplifying the voices of credible leaders, activists and practitioners within the Muslim community, and providing role-models** who aim to deconstruct violent extremist propaganda.

The True Face of Extremism

The main aim of this campaign was to share narratives that **identify the risks associated with Islamist extremism based on real experiences of former participants, families or friends**, in order to deconstruct idealistic views: the dangers, the consequences of violence and the traumas. The key actions of this campaign include **delegitimising the content and form of violent extremist messages** and presenting organisations that can help people to abandon violent extremist organisations.

Community Heroes

The main aim of this campaign was to **provide resilience mechanisms, such as sense of community belonging, civic purpose and identity** to vulnerable young people through **animated stories of community engagement within the Muslim community**. Key actions of this campaign include providing a call-to-action on **how to be civically engaged within the Muslim and local community** through good examples.

4.1.3 General vulnerable people

Peer2peer communication

The main aim of this campaign was to **encourage youth role-models, such as youtubers, public figures or athletes to openly deconstruct myths** associated with different violent extremist groups. The key actions of this campaign include **role-models promoting public awareness** with regard to the problem of violent extremism and how communities should address it (e.g. through non-discrimination).

TARGET AUDIENCE	Young Europeans, aged 20-40, immigrants of Muslim origin or people vulnerable to extremist rhetoric developed by Ummah and Sunni Muslims located in Portugal, Italy, France, Sweden.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Quran, hijab, burka, Al-Jhazeera, Islamic Culture, Mosque Syrian Religion Truth, Women in West for Khifah, Authentic Tauheed, Anwar al-Awlaki, Aniem Choudry, Islamic State, Ummah News, Jihad, Tafseer, Al -Qadr, Khyber

TARGET AUDIENCE	Young people, aged 20-40, adults of Muslim origin and converts to Islam who are interested or minimally involved in the Islamic propaganda nexus disseminated by groups of extremist violence located in Portugal, Italy, France, Sweden.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Syria, Religion Truth, Women in West is Khifah, Authentic Tauheed, Anwar al-Awlaki, Aniem Choudry, Islamic State, Ummah News, Jihad, Tafseer, Al-Qadr, Khyber

TARGET AUDIENCE	Young people, aged 12-16, immigrants of 2nd and 3rd generation of Muslim origin, located in France, Italy, Sweden and Portugal.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Islam, Niqāb, Hijab, Quran, Muhammad, Burqa, Human Rights, Sunnah, Aisha, Sharia, Allah, Women in Islam.

TARGET AUDIENCE	General people between 18-43 years old from Portugal, Italy, France, Romania, Sweden and Hungary. Primary target audience: people with no political and civic involvement; Secondary target audience: civically active layer of society, namely activists or intervening citizens.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Primary Target Audience: Rock in Rio, Real Madrid, UEFA, Pop Music, Netflix, FOX, Adidas, Eurovision, 9GAG, Hollywood; Secondary Target Audience: Human rights, Social activism, Amnesty International, United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Women's rights;
TARGET AUDIENCE	Young people, aged 16-33 from Portugal, Italy, France, Romania, Sweden and Hungary. Primary target audience: people with moderate political and civic engagement; Secondary target audience: moderate Muslim community.
ONLINE INTERESTS	Primary Target Audience: Rock in Rio, Real Madrid, UEFA, Pop Music, Netflix, FOX, Adidas, Eurovision, 9GAG, Hollywood, Fake news pages, BBC news pages, Euronews. (More specific Instagram pages, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr and online forums); Secondary Target Audience: Quran, hijab, burka, Al-Jhazeera, Islamic Culture, Mosque Syrian Religion Truth, Women in West for Khifah, Authentic Tauheed, Anwar al-Awlaki, Aniem Choudry, Islamic State, Ummah News, Jihad, Tafseer, Al-Qadr, Khyber

Critical thinking tools

The main aim of this campaign was to teach how to **critically analyse information by recognizing assumptions or implications**, especially as concerns information disseminated by both traditional and social media. The key actions of this campaign include **motivating people to actively share advices on how to analyse information in their social media profiles**.

4.2 Content Creation

Now that we have defined the target audience we wanted to reach, we will see more in depth how we have built the RETHINK project's content creation process. First of all, we laid on the assumption that the **digital world has become a game-changer for extremist groups**, whether Islamists or Far-right groups: it allows them to easily disseminate radical beliefs by targeting specific audiences from any place in the world. Extremists groups apply **old propaganda techniques, such as emotional and psychological manipulation, to modern marketing strategies**, in order to recruit new followers and to exploit some diffused fallacies, such as the false dilemma that induct people to believe that the world is divided between "us and them". Therefore, it is in the online environment that we have set the ground

for the RETHINK project's contents dissemination. We have created online contents, which enable firstly to **empower people to think by themselves**, and secondly to propose positive narratives (democracy, freedom and fundamental rights) to oppose the radical contents posted by extremists. In other words, **the aim was not to combat terrorism, but to prevent people from starting a process of radicalization**, which many times is not represented by a terrorist act, but by a cognitive process of ideological indoctrination.

We have chosen to produce **short videos** for all campaigns, allowing us to easily reach our target audience with **immediate key messages**, and to disseminate them through the **most popular social media channels (Youtube, Facebook and Instagram)** and on the **official RETHINK website**. Particularly, we have created an official RETHINK account on each of this social media, in order to disseminate all the campaign contents in English. In addition, we have chosen to focus on **Facebook** in order to disseminate our 7 campaigns on individual **national pages**, one per country: in this way, the countries of all the partners had the possibility to align a localised and contextual message to their national languages, to create their specific target audience, and to interact with their own local community.

Before having our social media accounts and national campaigns ready to be delivered, we made a preliminary work on *recognising* and *analysing* extremist narratives that we wanted to counter, taking into account some common indicators. Then, we proceeded with setting some *specific goals* for every “mission”/campaign, namely: disengagement and diversion in order to produce behavioural changes in perpetrators or justifiers of extremism; mitigation and limitation of the impact, as in the case of fake news; and building resilience, providing tools to take action against extremism.

The following step was to select the *messages* to be delivered throughout our videos, representing the “alternative narratives” that we wanted to propose. We focused on creating stories highlighting some key fact that the audience might have missed, giving them a sense of purpose or original interpretation. With this regard, we also paid attention to the process of “**activating our supporters**”: we wanted to awake our audience and motivate it to participate more to the discussions opened through the campaigns. In order to do so, we also applied cross-referencing techniques, taking advantage of existing networks or projects focusing on pertinent issues, within our organisations or outside, by sharing posts which redirect to their pages and messages, tagging them and using specific hashtags. Moreover, all the posts published on the national pages contained a **call-to-action**, being an invitation to start a conversation on the topic or to share relevant stories, encouraging them to do something with your campaign. These stories aimed to emotionally appeal our target and offer them a pathway to follow, being not only a click on “like” or “share” but even beyond, requiring the use of creativity and emotional skills. As for the *messengers*, in order to make the messages perceivable as impactful and legitimate, we chose to focus almost all of our videos on **direct testimonies** of true people, which had important messages to share taken from their own experiences of former extremists,

family members of **extremists** people, community or religious leaders, campaigners or people working directly on the field with extremists. In order to maintain a **steady flow of new posts** on our social media pages and on Facebook in particular, we published new posts several times a week. Thus, aside from the official RE-THINK videos produced by Lusófona University on the behalf of the partnership, **additional posts** were created at national level in order to better target the audiences, particularly on campaigns such as “Narratives from Global Islam”, “Violent Far-Right” and “Community Heroes”, for which we decided to produce a series of original posts to be sponsored. In all cases, **we stayed away from party politics at national levels**, in order not to introduce divisive topics that would shift away the attention from the main aims of our campaign.

When sharing contents on one Facebook national’s page, we used to tag the other campaigns: this allowed not only to facilitate the **process of cross-posting**, but also to make the **followers** of a specific national campaign **to migrate to the new one**, thus **increasing the audience** among the different campaigns. These strategies of content creation were not limited to the **video, articles or posts** shared, but involved also the **process of responding to comments and interacting with the audience**, as explained in the next section. An important point to be stressed in this regard is that the process has always been enlightened by the “**Do No Harm Policy**”, a very common principle used in peace building and non-formal education activities. Particularly, we tried to comply with two of its propositions: 1) *don’t spread extremist propaganda* - rather than forbidding actions or stigmatising them *a priori*, we opted from explaining the pros and cons of a possible actions, thus engaging the audience’s own critical analysis; 2) *avoid stigmatisation* - while trying to draw conclusions and simplifying things, there was a high risk of using generalisations and falling into stereotypes, that could hurt the target audience and polarise it inadvertently (Ritzmann, 2017).

When promoting the videos and materials on the campaigns' pages, they focused on creating texts to accompany video posts in order to provide context to the audience and to connect the videos to local realities. In these texts, there was a focus on opening conversations regarding specific ideas, behaviours and mindsets in general (promoted by extremist ideologies). This local adjustment led to less defensive individuals, more open to engaging in the discussion, as shown throughout the analysis of the campaign' analytics and comments.

Other modifications related to the target audience include changes in the names of Facebook pages: at one point of the project implementation, the Romanian partner, PATRIR, suggested that having the pages titles in English instead of in national languages could create susceptibilities with setting the target audiences for sponsorship in Romania. Thus, the Romanian and Hungarian partner proceeded with changing or translating campaigns names on Facebook: from "Violent Far-Right Romania" to "Against Violent Far-Right Romania" in Romania, and from "Violent Far-Right" to "Against Violent Far-Right Hungary".

The first campaign to be launched was "**Peer2Peer – a call-to-action against extremism (P2P)**". Under the motto "*raise your voice against extremist violence*", we wanted to motivate a positive online civic movement resilient to online hate speech that may lead to violent extremism. The films produced were intended to build an operational dissemination model to be firstly tested, then updated and improved as lessons learned for the remaining campaigns. The primary outputs produced in the framework of P2P campaign were four videos, each one reflecting on a different topic, respectively: multiculturalism, interreligious dialogue, equality of opportunities and violence.

1. "An Immigrant Story" - It is the story of Selma Uamusse, an activist and a social worker. A story of

personal empowerment aiming at breaking stereotypes and barriers concerning immigrants.

2. "Anger" - It analyses the individual process of anger and violent conflict from a self-experiential point of view.
3. "One God" - It is about the oneness of God and how the Abrahamic religions share common values around the 10 commandments, such as peace, tolerance, inclusion and freedom.
4. "Dreams" - It emphasizes the importance of equal opportunities concerning financial, social and professional motivations by enhancing the dialogue between two generations.

For the campaign "**Critical Thinking Tools**", which was the second to be launched, four videos were produced on topics such as disinformation and misinformation, conspiracy theories, privacy issues, fallacies used by terrorist groups and how to deconstruct them, fake news on Facebook, practical tips and tricks for identifying fake news items/fake. They are:

1. What is Fake News?
2. How to detect and debunk Fake News?
3. How to manufacture and spread Fake News?
4. How to manipulate people with Propaganda?

In addition to these, several other contents were shared or produced, also thanks to local activists who helped us in multiplying the dissemination effects of the campaign: it is the case of Romania, where partnerships with civic groups with large visibility and a steady stream of followers were created. Moreover, during the campaign for the Romanian Presidential Elections, materials from the campaign were published by PATRIR emphasizing how they would be useful for the citizens, especially before elections, when there is a significant increase in the dissemination of fake news. In Italy, the online campaign has been linked to the offline activities which were organised at school: after a training activity at school focused on the campaign's topics, participating students have been engaged in the content creation to

promote counternarrative actions against fake news, then published on the Italian Facebook page.

For the campaign **“Narratives from Global Islam”**, five videos were produced, in which a contemporary interpretation of the five pillars of Islam was provided:

1. The Pillar of Faith;
2. The Pillar of Prayer;
3. The Pillar of Fasting/Ramadan;
4. The Pillar of Charity;
5. The Pillar of Pilgrimage.

In order to add credibility and dynamise our contents for young Muslims potentially vulnerable to extremist rhetoric, some Muslim role-models were identified as messengers of the campaigns (such as singers, community activists, and religious leaders) and asked to share stories in which they demonstrate to what extent their faith was compatible with democracy and fundamental rights. Aside from these primary outputs, additional contents were produced by national partners. In some cases, content was designed as a way to react to some early results of the campaign: this is the case of Italy, where CESIE’s team had noted that since the launching of the online campaign, the videos were collecting several negative reactions, especially from haters manifesting intolerance towards Islam and Muslim people. Thus, inspired by the podcast “Hummus - L’Islam per principianti” by the journalist Laura Cappon, CESIE decided to work on a series of new posts called *“Islam in pills”*, through which they could focus on the most common stereotypes issued by the comments and to deconstruct them (e.g. “All Muslims are terrorists” or “Islam is a religion of war”).

For the campaign **“The True Face of Extremism”**, the primary outputs produced were three videos:

1. “Living Together Is Never Easy” - an interview with Amin Maalouf, an Arabic expert on multiculturalism and global societies;

2. “My Son Nicolas Converted to Islam” - the testimony of a mother whose son was radicalised and travelled to Syria, where he died.
3. “Isis and the Consequences of an Islamist Radicalization” – the testimony of a journalist who had direct contact with former extremists related to the so-called Daesh.

Apart from the videos, national campaigns also featured posts based on international reports from the most prominent international organisations and think tanks, as well as news about violent extremism, aimed at showing the risks associated with extremism.

For the campaign **“Conspiracy Theories”**, five videos were produced, each one reflecting on different conspiracy theories:

1. “The Candidate”;
2. Planet Dish;
3. One Day I Will Win;
4. Little Village;
5. What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Also, in this case, additional content was created and adopted at local level.

For the campaign **“What is to be part of a Violent Far-Right group”** (*Violent Far-Right* on Facebook) three videos were produced based on personal narratives promoted by former extremists, experts on the topic and NGOs working on the rehabilitation of extremists:

1. “The Grift” - poem by the artist Joshua Idehen about the slow spread of fascism in Europe;
2. “Do good, out of evil” - the story of Fabian Wichmann, who works for the NGO “EXIT Germany” creating campaigns which put Neo-Nazis in absurd and contradictory situations;
3. “Falk Isernhagen – Testimony of a Former Extremist”.

Apart from these videos, the campaign methodology and the content creation have been modified alongside the spreading of Covid-19 since March 2020: it

has been observed that since the very beginning of the pandemic, far-right groups in Europe and beyond started to use the emergency as a way to manipulate people, spread fear and gain consensus. Thus, the consortium decided to use the campaign's page as a way to disseminate counternarratives and quality information focusing on the pandemic. The campaign's videos produced by Lusófona were then flanked by a series of posts intended to be viral on the effects and consequences of coronavirus on politics, focusing particularly on the activity of far-right groups, populist groups and more in general of fake news supporters.

For the last campaign "**Community Heroes**", examples of civic engagement and citizenship stories within the Muslim community were offered through three main videos:

- The story of "Mamodou Baldé";
- The story of "Muhammad Munir";
- The story of "Sara Ali";

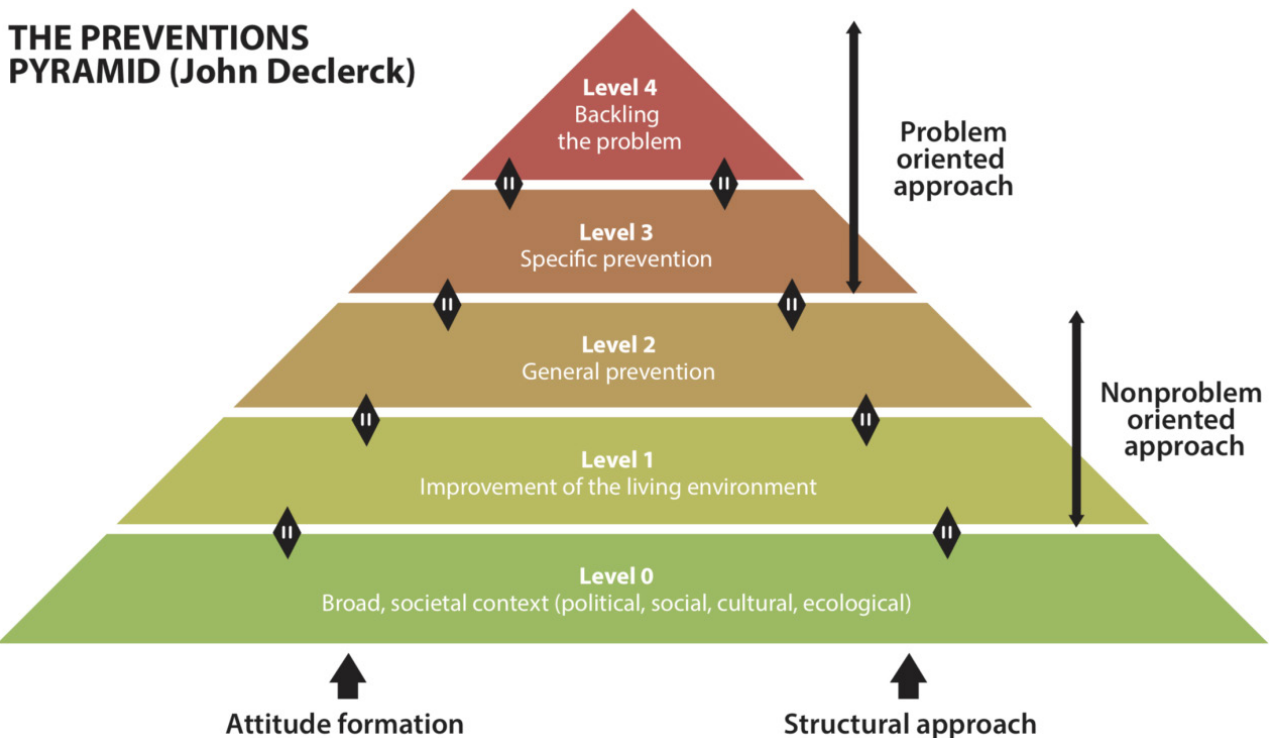
Additionally, as for the other campaigns, national partners shared original content related to the local communities. For instance, in Italy, CESIE selected and

interviewed three "community heroes" coming from migrant and Muslim communities and who, for their engagement within their local communities during the lockdown imposed by the spreading of the Covid-19 pandemic, could be considered as "examples" for young people.

4.3 Counterspeech and Counterexamples

As we tried to demonstrate so far, we used counterspeech and counterexamples as a tool for interacting with our target audience and with the general public in order to balance extremist narratives and to respond to them offering alternative narratives. Our approach in this regard can be framed within the so-called "Prevention Pyramid" developed by Johan Declerck and showed in the image below. The pyramid is a tool for identifying different target groups and appropriate ways of addressing them (RAN, 2015).

It explains how we can prevent radicalisation throughout different levels of intervention. Starting from the



assumption that the specific issue of radicalisation is determined by social variables and dependable on the social, economic and political context that we cannot change, what we wanted to reach with the RETHINK project were levels 2 and 3 (general and specific prevention), thus using social media strategy and tools not to directly combat the problem nor to directly improve the living environments. This strategy was not limited to the contents which were created as a part of our 7 online campaigns but extended to any kind of interaction with our target, including through answers to comments. In fact, throughout project, we have also worked on the analysis of the tone and content of the comments received in order to understand what counternarrative content might better resonate with our target audience. Therefore, after the analysis of the content creation process, we proceeded with the study of the comments received and the type of counterspeech and counterexamples needed to answer to them in the attempt to better express the type of prevention intervention that we wanted to ensure.

In almost all the campaigns, we received several supportive comments praising the counternarrative campaign or topics addressed in the videos or articles posted. Especially in the “Critical Thinking Tools” campaign, citizens paid a lot of attention to our materials and showed a willingness to educate themselves on topics related to fake news, manipulation and disinformation. Also, the “Narratives from Global Islam” campaign was highly appreciated, as demonstrated by the high rate of positive reactions and shares, especially in Portugal, which represents the country with the highest number of tolerant perspectives in our experience, among the RETHINK partners’ countries. However, the process of spreading counterspeech and counterexamples has been particularly relevant towards the negative comments received in all countries: it has been noted that people with opposite views were more likely to comment, mainly with comments expressed through hate speech. In fact, in all campaigns, we attracted several

comments expressing distrust and polarisation, feelings against the West and the European Union, as well as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, intolerance and racism, which allowed us to map online the spreading of conspiracy theories and hate speech against minorities. In countries such as Romania and Hungary, high polarisation was recorded, particularly in campaigns such as “Conspiracy Theories” or “Violent Far-Right”. In countries such as Romania and Hungary, high polarisation was recorded, particularly in campaigns such as “Conspiracy Theories” or “Violent Far-Right”. In Romania, where PATRIR reached a very defensive audience often expressing tense and hateful reactions, most of these negative comments were labelling the project as promoting socialism, far-left and accusations of supporting and promoting Arab migration and Islam, that would be encouraged by a feminist movement at the EU level. In Italy and France, campaigns such as “Narratives from Global Islam” and “Community Heroes” received several hate-based comments reflecting that the opinions regarding Muslim communities are more polarised in those countries.

Therefore, apart from the cases of comments containing insults or inappropriate content, which were always hidden or reported, the partners’ teams in charge of the national campaigns put continuous efforts in answering the majority of the comments received, in the attempt to create a flow of conversation with the audience and to offer additional sources of information able to counter extremist ideologies, especially in the case of hate speech. However, it has been noted in Romania that when addressing questions where the local Rethink team was invoking objective facts or critical thinking methods, many times the people who made these comments did not follow-up. Generally speaking, the approaches used by the RETHINK partners in order to answer to comments can be summarised as follows:

- Lowering the tones, providing neutral and quiet answers, using irony;

- Empathising with the audience, especially when dealing with emotional contents;
- Inviting the audience to deepen their knowledge or understanding of a specific topic;
- When facing stereotypes, fake news or conspiracy theories, offering fact-checking and linking reliable sources, from other RETHINK pages or external sources;

Let us have a look at some specific examples: in Italy, in the case of one comment describing all Italians as Catholics as opposed to Muslim people, who should not have the right to practice their faith, the social media management team replied: «Dear X, the Italians you are talking about could also be Muslims. The Constitution says in article 19: «everyone has the right to freely practice their religious faith in any form, individual or associated»». The conversation continues with the user replying back: *“Hate is not taught with religion... Let’s end the conversation...bye.”* and ended with the RETHINK Italian team replying *“You said a great thing: hate is not taught with any of the religions. Extremism is something else.”* This exchange is a practical example of how we acted in order to demystify the false perception that Catholicism is the official national religion in Italy, by quoting the Italian constitution, and that Islam is a religion of hate and violence. The same logic was used in several other occasions, in which the Italian team has linked international reports, news articles or national and international laws in order to counter hate speech, especially when dealing with contents about Islam or migrants.

In Hungary, one user wrote *“Liberals thinking is more important, even during a global epidemic... This shows how much brains they have”,* to which administrators answered: *“Hi, may I suggest you take a look at our post below and the article we linked there: during a global epidemic, when people are afraid and there is a lot of confusion, far-right tries to take advantage of the situation to create even more fear and confusion. It might just be even more important to fight extremism in these times than in others.”* Then the user wanted to have a more sustainable

engagement with the campaign, and answered saying: *“And which groups do you consider extremists here in Hungary?”* The SMM replied: *“Our campaign is not targeting specific groups in Hungary or Europe, but it tries to raise awareness about the dangers of extremist ideologies. But to give a concrete answer to your question: we don’t find it acceptable to have events like “the Day of Honour”, even if they don’t result in actual physical violence.”* When a second user jumped in to protect the values of non-extremism, concluding that *“It was about the far-right, not the right”,* the conversation between them started to focus on the responsibilities of the leftists and antifascist groups, which according to the first user are also involved in violent acts in Hungary. At one point, this first user also justified violence against LGBTQI+ people, replying *“Maybe because walking around naked in front of kids is not normal, that’s why... And I would call that demonstration a far-left one.”*

In Romania, on a similar exchange of views on right and left wings, the social media manager felt the need to clarify the objective of the campaign, due to the content of some comments: *“Notice the fraction of logic: Who takes a stand against the extreme violent right, Nazism and fascism, does it mean he is a communist? All totalitarian ideologies must be fought because they all led to the greatest tragedies of the modern world. None of them are legitimate. Among other things, the message of this video is that hating other people just because they speak a different language or look different does not mean patriotism or superiority, maybe just primitivism.”* Nonetheless, comments opposing this view continued, as for instance: *“But what about the extreme violence brought by Arab and African migrants, when will you speak about that??”,* supported by others: *“It doesn’t fit the “official” narrative. It’s taboo to talk about.”* and *“yes, and this will be the death of Europe.... the most fun will be the moment when Islam and feminists will be face to face!”*

With regard to these experiences, and especially the ones from Romania and Hungary, it has been noted

that extremists tend to deny the relevance of our content arguing that counternarratives are “liberal propaganda”. Moreover, when people associated with extremist ideologies comment they claim that any content related with human rights and social inclusion would necessarily need to be categorised into far-left, which is a classic fallacy approach towards counternarrative campaigns. This phenomenon is associated with **reciprocal radicalisation**, because extremist ideologies with opposite views of the world tend to amplify each other, even if non-intentionally. The existence of these comments also proves that there are Eurosceptic extremist civil groups active, which, consequently, underlines the need for more counterspeech projects that amplify the voice of moderate and tolerant perspectives towards the defence of fundamental rights, to the detriment of extremist rhetoric against social inclusion and multiculturalism.

5. COUNTERNARRATIVES IN EUROPE – BEST PRACTICES

5.1 Literature Research

Extremist and terrorist groups employ persuasive narrative strategies to disseminate their ideology in order to raise support, justify their actions, and recruit new members (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Counternarratives, i.e. “narratives comprised of content that challenges the themes intrinsic to other narratives,” (ibid., p. 386), are routinely employed in the context of CVE to challenge extremist narratives, discourage their support, and prevent potential new recruits from radicalizing. But how can counternarratives be employed most effectively in CVE?

In order to carry out a counternarrative strategy, three main steps ought to be followed: 1) terrorist/extremist

narratives have to be analysed; 2) counternarratives have to be developed in order to specifically contradict the themes found in terrorist/extremist narratives; 3) counternarratives have to be distributed effectively. Below, each of these steps is going to be looked at in more detail.

5.1.1 Analysis of terrorist/extremist narratives

The first step consists of identifying and understanding the themes present in extremist narratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Tuck & Silverman, 2016). The goal of theme analysis should be to make out patterns that give meaning to the words conveyed through speech or text, i.e. to understand the narrative’s latent content. By identifying the extremist group’s objectives and implications, one can not only develop a better understanding of the narrative content in itself, but also gain a more accurate understanding of how extremist narratives may be interpreted by their target audience. To approach this analytical task systematically, Braddock and Horgan (2016) suggest proceeding as follows:

1. Carefully read extremist/terrorist narratives at least twice before coding—once to familiarise oneself with the narrative, and then a second time paying closer attention to how the used language may entice readers to support its message.
2. During a third reading, generate a preliminary list of interpretative labels (‘codes’) that can be used to describe the latent content of the analysed speeches or text excerpts.
3. Group equivalent codes together in order to reduce their number and make it easier to manage code and organize codes into themes.
4. Once codes have been extrapolated and grouped together, organize them into overarching narratives. At this point, the codes bound together by common thematic labels should give an indication of the main themes that are present in the extremist/terrorist narrative.

5.1.2 Distribution of counternarratives

There is also a general scholarship consensus about the importance of the message source for its acceptance by individuals at risk of radicalisation. The message has to be constructed so as to convince the audience members that it originates from a credible entity; in other words, it is not just important what the counternarrative states, but also who delivers the message (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Carthy, Doody, Cox, O'Hora, & Sarma, 2020; Tuck & Silverman, 2016). Indeed, it is important that counternarratives intended for specific audiences aligned with terrorist or extremist groups maintain their authorship hidden or disguised as an individual or group who enjoy the respect of the target audience.

Awareness of the cultural context of the counternarrative target is essential to devise effective counternarrative dissemination strategies. The relevance given to leadership figures for guidance, as is typical of Muslim milieus that highly value hierarchy and authority, may make it more effective to frame the counternarrative origin as stemming from a place of legitimate leadership. Other contexts, such as the more individualist cultural background commonly associated with white nationalism, may call for a counternarrative delivery that omits the source of the message altogether, thus playing on the target group's values of autonomy and independence.

A) Disseminating counternarratives through trusted others:

When the narrative target population is embedded in cultures that strongly rely on authority-based relationships in which leadership figures provide guidance, counternarratives are best distributed by leveraging the trust enjoyed by those people within their communities. Such key figures may include, for example, experts in the extremist/terrorist group's ideology; former members of the extremist/terrorist group that still have social ties to current members; community members which the extremist/terrorist group claims

to represent; and ideological experts who may support the main tenets of the group, but be opposed to the use of violence (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Former members have been found to be particularly effective in successfully disseminating counternarratives (Carthy, Doody, Cox, O'Hora, & Sarma, 2020; Bélanger, et al., 2020). Indeed, they may enjoy close ties and an already established reputation within their communities that increase the likelihood of their message being accepted, rather than being perceived as an intrusion coming from without.

Members of the community which the extremist/terrorist groups claim to represent can also be instrumental in the successful dissemination of counternarratives. In the case of Islamic fundamentalism, this may mean the involvement of the Muslim community at large, which by constituting a pool of knowledge and expertise about Islamic doctrine may become a source of effective counternarratives, but also contribute to the counternarrative persuasiveness (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2008).

Lastly, in the cases in which revealing the authorship of the counternarrative is necessary, it is appropriate to choose as target audience individuals who defend extremist principles while opposing to violence. By taking advantage of the ideological affinity between non-violent individuals and extremists, counternarratives can be delivered in a way that finds the target audience, i.e. youth at risk of radicalisation, particularly receptive.

B) Disseminating counternarratives via anonymous communicators:

Nowadays, it is common that extremist groups rely strongly on internet forums and social media to disseminate their narratives. Due to their accessibility, such platforms are not just a hotbed for radicalised and highly engaged individuals, but also host a large number of casual browsers who are drawn to them out of curiosity. In order for counternarratives to be spread successfully in an environment such as internet forums

and social media platforms, it must be posted by an account that comes across as genuine, so as to limit the arousal of psychological resistance to its message.

This can be achieved by engaging in forum discussions over a longer period of time, developing relationships with individual forum members, and thus earning legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the online community. After such trust has been established, it may be possible to carefully refute the extremist narratives with counternarrative points, developed using the guidelines laid out above. While the most committed members of the online community may respond negatively and with hostility, the emerging discussion may however undermine the narrative's legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of casual browsers who consume the internet content without participating in it actively.

5.2 Projects

The ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand Counternarratives Project is one example of counternarrative strategies employed to prevent radicalisation (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Bodo, 2018; Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Ahmed, 2019). By disseminating counternarrative videos subtitled in over twenty languages in which ISIS defectors voice their personal experiences, showing the disconnect between ISIS's proclaimed goals and the reality it creates on the field, and demonstrating the impact of ISIS's ideology on the community of fellow Muslims, the ICSVE challenges and undermines the ISIS narrative among its supporters and sympathizers on Facebook.

The Redirect Method was developed by Moonshot CVE together with Google, and consists of providing alternative, especially curated video playlists, to internet users that are drawn to extremist content on platforms such as YouTube.

The Eurotopia Project, on the other hand, aims to convey alternatives to Islamist and far-right extremist

narratives through video campaigns, disseminated on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. More specifically, it seeks to challenge the definition of hero and villain expressed by extremist narratives, highlighting the harm against civilians that violent extremism brings about.

The "Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!" project aims at disseminating authentic alternative narratives to prevent the spread of jihadist propaganda through the innovative methodology of "Online – Street work". Jamal al-Khatib – My path! is based on the story of a young prisoner who left the jihadist subculture in Austria: he told his youth worker that he wished to write a book about his experiences so as to help prevent other young people from making the same mistakes. The character Jamal al-Khatib was developed as a means of integrating the different biographical episodes of the young people into a single narrative. Instead of writing a book, we decided to shoot short films, as this would counter extremist propaganda on its own home ground — the internet. The target group is defined as young adults considering the idea of fanaticism.

Twin Track is a campaign aiming at exploring the social process of radicalisation and creating constructive responses to vulnerabilities that may isolate individuals towards violent extremism. Throughout the campaign, youngsters learn how to recognize the steps that may lead someone to become a radical, including the discussion of what actions they should take. The innovator factor of the campaign is the recognition of similarities between radicalisation, gang culture and drugs addiction.

Dare to be Grey is a foundation that challenges polarisation in society. It calls for recognition of the 'grey' middle ground in issues often mistakenly considered 'black and white'. The initiative seeks to promote the different views and voices of the large majority of moderate thinkers, which are too often muted by more extreme voices. Dare to be Grey aims to raise awareness

principally through online channels: using multiple video and photo campaigns, writing and disseminating online articles, and offering a platform for anyone with a 'grey' story to be told. Dare to be Grey also developed a dialogue technique called 'First Aid For Polarisation', and is often involved in offline actions.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT

Managing social media with topics of social causes such as the one at the Rethink project, especially at a time as complex as the one we are going through, it is undoubtedly a difficult challenge. From content filters that social media implement to the excess of information, often false, all enable the messages to reach the targeted audience in a correct manner.

But social media provide learning opportunities from the audience feedback and market research to better understand what they think, how they act and what they want. And with it we can deliver the right message at the right time. However, many organizations fail to see results from social media. Only good planning and careful data analysis can help minimize the barriers we have at the moment. In short, jump into content production, sending messages to the medium without any action plan is never a good strategy.

We cannot forget that social media work because a good defined audience can check out what we are sharing, and then choose whether or not to follow, and opt into receiving our messaging. If there is a rule of thumb this is producing valuable content on social media to help organizations not only earn the permission to send a message to the audience, but also to build trust and rapport.

It is all about telling a worthwhile story.

6.1 Marketing and Advertising

A message propagation on social media starts with a post, but only the advertising enables the reach to a targeted audience. With advertising it is possible to segment an audience with the right behaviour and interests, geo targeted and demographically accurate.

When creating a content plan for social media, it is important to evaluate what we want the audience to do. The power of social media comes down to the organic capacity of people to share content, comment and ideally get involved. That is why they are so important for companies and entities. If the right message has the reach the right people, it can achieve "stratospheric" results with everyone who matters. But more than a strong content and advertising plan, marketing is about delivering value. And it is value that any institution should focus on when managing campaigns like Rethink.

As previously indicated, a good plan allows to overcome many of the challenges that social media present. But what is a good plan? Let us go through some important points.

Valuable content:

Sharing a blog post, video, or another form of content that educates, entertains, or convinces the audience to take action. It is all about telling a worthwhile story that provides a person with more than what they started with. Instead of being overly promotional, which the audience knows how to tune out at this point, we need to teach them something new, make them laugh, or maybe change their opinion.

For example, at first, a person might be looking for different ways to solve a problem, which they might learn about from a post you have written. Then, as they continue to research, they might want to understand other opinions on the subject from other sources. As their

needs change during the learning process, the content they receive must adapt to serve their changing interests.

Sharing content on social media, or elsewhere, is a long-term play.

We cannot build trust overnight.

This is why it may take months, and multiple interactions with different content, to build a rapport with your audience. Repetition also helps our brain form memories. We want to build a positive memory of us. We need regularly to reach them on social media. A content series for instance can be similar to a TV show, as it's addressing the same overall theme from the same source, but each episode tackles something different. This might be a series of articles on or Facebook account, a photo series on Instagram, or a video series on YouTube.

A series allows us to set a schedule with the audience. It sets expectations. And they will begin to form a memory when we publish a new content on a certain day.

A good plan also works with setting correctly the kind of content we should address:

Types of Content

For a project of social interest like Rethink, we recommend considering the following pillars:

- Foundational Content
- Educational Content
- Engagement Content
- Actionable Content

FOUNDATIONAL CONTENT

Introductory information that describes your organization, your values, and expertise in a succinct manner.

It also works as branding content.

It remembers to the audience our promise and what we do.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Typically, content created to answer questions or issues faced by our knowledge of the audience needs.

Whether pulled from research or feedback, this content is created in response to people asking the same questions consistently or to reinforce our message.

ENGAGEMENT CONTENT

Content created to generate a reaction and bring the audience to us.

Usually a question, a sharable content or a message that addresses a passion or an emotional tension.

ATTENTION:

When creating this kind of content, the strategist should be ready to address different replies (both positive and negative reactions) before posting the content. Let us look at an example of the Violent Far Right campaign from the Rethink Project. The goal was to show an alternative narrative that deconstructs the extremist rhetoric to those already engaged within a process of radicalisation in order to change violent behaviour. The project received important interaction on this matter through several comments which lead us to conclude that extremists tend to deny the relevance of this content saying that counternarratives are "liberal propaganda". Moreover, when people associated with extremist ideologies comment on Facebook, they claim that any content related with human rights and social inclusion would necessarily need to be categorised into far-left, which is a classic fallacy approach towards counternarrative campaigns. This phenomenon is associated with reciprocal radicalisation, because extremist ideologies with opposite views of the world tend to amplify each other, even if non-intentionally. Were we ready to manage this kind of comments? Yes, we were, and before launching the posts with the campaign videos and starting the advertising to reach more users,

the teams from the different countries were ready to manage all the content.

ACTIONABLE CONTENT

Simple. Direct.

This content requests the audience to take a clear action. It can be a request to share, click, tag, comment or event take the content offline and go to the neighbourhood spread the word.

In sum, when planning, we should apply the different TYPES OF CONTENT along the weeks. Planning ahead enables the whole teams to anticipate what kind of reactions the audience may have.

The audience is organic, so they react differently along the time. Never expect same reactions for similar contents. We have to think ahead and understand the context that week or even that day. That is why data is so important.

But now that we have a good vision of creating a good plan, we need to get back to the basics of the marketing for social media – delivering value.

The simplest way to think about how to deliver value is to get into our audience shoes, and question the following:

- “What’s in for my audience?” - if we can’t reply to this with our content, our content has no value to the audience
- After reading this what I want them (the audience) to do? Is there any action? A simple share? As said before, am I addressing a need? A question?
- Is it a passive content or the audience should do some action (even if it is only to think about it)? If it is just a film or a content post to show something but without any change on the audience behaviour, think twice and create new content

Advertising

The experience gained in the management of the seven campaigns from the Rethink project allowed us to determine the best strategies to create advertising campaigns on social media, in this case Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. For an entity that wants to make its first campaign setup, it is very important to ensure that the profiles that will manage the campaigns are valid and have a history of advertising with other projects in the past. With the current limitations of social media in advertising social issues, there is a huge risk of seeing campaigns disapproved and never being able to pass a first promotion of a post, be it text or video.

What do you need to do before launching the first campaign?

1. Ensure that the profile that will manage the campaign has a history of advertising in the past
2. If it is Facebook / Instagram, manage the campaign using a Business account to be able to access the Facebook support team
3. Fully configure the campaign assets (e.g. the Facebook page, the YouTube channel) with the most detailed information possible in the profile, with photos and already with a base of posts to boot (at least four posts in the last week)
4. If there is no past advertising history, open a request to speak with the platform’s support teams, explain what you will be doing and ask them to indicate how they can ensure that campaigns are authorized - it is possible they request your personal data for identity verification
5. Test a low value first campaign and validate if it is approved

This first step is important, because although it is possible that the first campaigns are even automatically approved, it does not always happen. Having a content plan, deadlines and goals to achieve, and suddenly

being unable to give continuity it's frustrating and can put interrupt your work. Once tested, it is time to proceed with the real setup.

Reaching an audience through social media is particularly complex today. Organic reach is virtually null, so the advertising through paid advertising must reach the audience. Similarly, too much information makes the public less reactive and interactive, making conversion to actions very difficult.

Aware of this challenge, we should build an advertising plan that would allow us to garner some core audience through page followers, and then work on look-a-likes audiences with messages already customized by your content team.

So, your first stage should focus on gathering followers and studying whether the audience raised impacted message interactions. For Facebook, as an example, your goal should be page likes instead of post interactions.

Based on the audience feedback, we should search for similar audiences and build campaigns with content to drive viewership and interaction. Mind that video content is always a winner, so this should be your goal if you have the resources.

If you are working with more than one team (i.e. different NGOs around Europe), the participation of all teams is crucial. Set up a collaborative model for online advertising, in which each team can propose which content should be promoted, in addition to the basic promotion plan. Think globally but act locally is still mandatory on this kind of projects.

Based on our experience, the communication strategy was based on attracting Rethink context-sensitive, mobilizing and actionable audiences into the Rethink context. The impact on less permeable audiences would

be totally null in this campaign, having been tested pre-launch with results below what was needed to meet the campaign objectives.

In conclusion:

The purpose of this explanation does not focus on the use of platforms, but rather on the abstract model to be adopted. Above all, it is intended that advertising brings users to the pages, and based on them, it is important to begin to build an audience that through observation will allow us to identify new audiences. These audiences are obtained by the platform tools, and always require tests before getting into a greater investment. But mind that not all campaigns work the same way. In the case of Rethink, we had situations where starting immediately to promote the posts, to generate interaction over the content, was a strategy with many better results than first looking for followers. If there is a real strategy, it is testing.

6.2 Safety

For an entity that wants to use social media to communicate issues of social causes, it is essential to be prepared for the risks it entails. As previously indicated, planning is just as important for the success of good management of social media as it is for predicting and anticipating risks in relation to the content and topics to be communicated.

Among the main impacts felt throughout the Rethink Project with regard to risks and the security of communicating on social media, we highlight:

- Negative reactions of dissatisfaction with the content presented, counterarguing before the themes or giving critical opinions but at the level of little constructed comments and simply to generate confusion (usually called trolling);
- Groups infiltrating audiences of well-defined characteristics within a specific theme (e.g. extreme right disguised as elements of Muslim communities

to be the target of promoted content and thus control and generate noise);

- Bullying to page managers and organizations that manage and promote content;
- Conversations among the pages followers that turn into violent word exchanges and even threats;

In reality, any of the situations can generate risk of crises and crises jeopardize the security of those who manage the pages, those who visit and those who interact with them. But what is a crisis and how do we learn in the Rethink project to manage?

Defined broadly, a crisis is anything that can bring serious harm to people, or to our organization. We can also consider a crisis if there's a threat of harm to our reputation. It is a time of instability in our usual operating procedures that calls for strong leadership. And we, as organizations have a responsibility to communicate before, during, and after every level of crisis. And, in some cases, responding quickly and confidently during and after a crisis, can even enhance the reputation of our organization.

But how did we manage? First, we needed to understand what generated the crisis, what audiences and channels were being used. We had an issue with extreme right users infiltrated on a Muslim themed campaign Facebook page. All this happened with the Italian team and due to the experience on handling this situation, was possible to avoid major issues.

The strategy was to first (and before the official crisis) make some time to review our threats and write down the specific audiences you'll need to reach during and after each crisis. Being ready enable us to respond quickly and confidently, so we were able, as an organization, to present our side of the story with factual information in an appropriate tone.

And the golden rule, to keep a safe social media environment is to avoid at all cost any reply with our heart.

And never take any comment personally. We need to be ready in advance.

And additionally, be very careful about:

- Denying warning signs
- Cover up (hiding anything wrong ever happened)
- Giving in to speculation
- "No comment. I don't know" is not the answer

6.3 Social Media Platforms – pros and cons

Social media have evolved immensely over the years. Some for the better, others not so much, but still they offer a lot of value to those who consult them and to those who use them to communicate. What can we consider as the most important values for those who communicate on social media?

Without a doubt the audience. The most popular networks allow reaching a volume of people that no other medium allows. And if traction is an important element, which means that we have a lot of people following us and interacting, online advertising is a catalyst. With advertising we are able to reach an even greater number of people with the ability to target them that no other medium allows: be it demographic data, behaviour towards the content and actions that follow, the way to reach the right people with the right message is increasingly more efficient. For example, with advertising on Rethink, we looked for groups of people who had an interest in social causes. After testing, we realized that they would be the most permeable people and promoters of our content. Based on this information, we started to add new audiences and more interests around similar themes and the result was explained by the great interest generated by video content.

Another important point is the possibility of reaching out to people and they are our disclosure means. As a rule, people accept suggestions better if they come

from friends, family and influencers rather than from entities and brands. Social media, if well worked, allow us to use this potential to get our message even further.

From the user's perspective, social media connect people to content, interests and above all, to other people. Social media and Facebook in particular provide an invaluable resource, allowing people to connect instantly.

Tools like Facebook Groups are proof of that. One of the strongest and most used tools, with which people share interests with others. For an entity with Rethink, the groups were important partners, especially by the hand of international partners, in order to share messages in these areas. As a rule, groups guarantee people with common interests and this represents a classified audience and ready to react. We just have to find them and ask, whenever necessary, support from administrators. They better than anyone can introduce and dynamise us within these groups, many of them private.

There is, however, a trade-off. Social media increasingly generate less interaction. The excess of information and the increasing volume of false information generate general anaesthesia in the audience. An example was a significant decrease during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interaction rate has simply plummeted.

Additionally, the existence of false profiles threatens any entity that, in a small-time window, may see an entire work threatened by a negative comment or a mass discrediting action. When something catches fire on social media, it cannot always be erased in time. Be it a comment to a movie on YouTube, a poor positive retweet from someone with a large base of followers, a post on Facebook that degenerates into conversations between very unpleasant or even worrying followers.

And with regard to the user itself, the use of social media triggers the feeling of less happiness. From several studies carried out on the topic, it is clear that the use of a social media such as Facebook or Instagram, was linked to less happiness and less satisfaction with life - the greater the daily use of the social media, the more the decrease in these variables was observed. Everything points to the fact that the social media evoke a perception of social isolation in a way that other solitary activities do not.

Comparing our lives with other people's lives is mentally damaging, and this influence on our lives is quite worrying. We made the mistake of competing with others. And this happens when we browse our feeds and make verdicts about all the content we evaluate.

But unfortunately, there is more. And we still have an incredible amount of people that believe in everything they see on the internet. Because they spend most of their online time on social media, the source of information can become dubious.

And how can we evaluate each network in a particular way? We could make a generic assessment of each network; however it is important to frame the importance of them for topics such as those of the Rethink Project. It is in this sense that we summarize the main points:

Facebook for NGOs and Social Causes

Pros - access to a wide audience, the various tools available as pages and groups, and the possibility of obtaining funding are undoubtedly a positive point. Additionally, when associated with online advertising to increase the reach of messages to a target audience, the "personal interest" segmentation tools are particularly relevant. Another positive point is the ability to mobilize the interaction of interested audiences and obtain feedback for a better understanding of the impact of the actions.

Cons - many people hide behind a fake profile. The risk of the wolf in sheep's clothing behaviour is very high, and requires careful management of people who follow a page and comment on content. In addition, it is easy for a conversation to burn down on a topic, leading to endless conversations from people with the most varied points of view. The current limitations on social causes content make it difficult to promote information that, although they may be valid, are filtered by Facebook quality control teams. Younger audiences have been abandoning this medium, making it increasingly difficult to find users under the age of 20.

Youtube for NGOs and Social Causes:

Pros - if it did not happen, it is not on Youtube. Also considered one of the biggest search engines on the internet, all content must be present in this medium. When well-built and enriched with text content in the title and descriptions, it reveals an excellent reach to everyone who searches Google and YouTube. With the possibility of opening videos to comments and enriching their follower base, it also allows subscribers to be informed about updates. As for advertising, it is possible to segment people by types of content and even by content channels on Youtube, which contextualizes the information in a very focused way.

Cons - To stand out in the more than 5 billion videos that are viewed daily on Youtube is not easy. The ability to generate traction with users is slow and difficult. And just like on Facebook, less positive comments and lively conversations emerge. Fortunately, there are ways to moderate these comments that you minimize. It requires an investment in planning and creating video content to present quality films that attract the audience.

Instagram for NGOs and Social Causes:

Pros - growing more and more, Instagram accesses a vast audience. Originally used by a young audience,

it is now a fully transversal medium. It allows any entity to launch content, be it images, videos, streaming, and short stories. It is a medium that, through a simple #hashtag, allows content to reach a large volume of people. Sharing the Facebook Platform for advertising, it allows managing both networks in a very organized way and focused on reaching audiences.

Cons - as it is a very instant medium, content is consumed very quickly. To have results it is important to insist on the rotation of the contents, a great graphic creativity and resilience regarding the themes. Easily a post is abandoned without much feedback - alias is one of the biggest challenges, as the Instagram user writes little, usually reacting with a "heart" or a share.

Twitter for NGOs and Social Causes:

Pros - the excellent medium for everything that happens in real time. This is where everything has to happen before it can be published on other networks. Not being in some countries a network with the success of Facebook or Instagram, it has a very big impact because many of the users are opinion leaders, journalists and people active in society. The advertising tool is complex, making it very difficult to promote content, but when it works, it allows you to access additional audiences that a #hashtag or a follow cannot. Some of the updates are indexed by Google, which allows people to find content more easily than on Instagram and Facebook.

Cons - everything happens quickly, and it is difficult to achieve wide reach. The existence of fake accounts remains a problem. It is a network that works well with general themes but does not mobilize communities with more specific themes as much. The functioning of the advertising system is deficient in targeting when compared to other networks. The need to keep pace with updates along with the few characters per post, can greatly limit entities in creating content.

Conclusion

Once again, we can determine that the entities that choose social media to communicate must plan, and once the communication process has started, they must observe the behaviour of the audiences. The potential remains enormous, and if we deliver value, we are generating viral, shareable content that will allow us to go much further in a way that no other medium allows. It is above all a process of trial, error, learning, correction and doing it again.

7. CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS

7.1 Awareness

The project monitored and evaluated (a) the number of people reached by the online content, (b) the content viewing by the digital target audience and expressed, and, finally, (c) the social media engagement with the target audience expressed by the number of likes, comments and shares. In marketing technical language, (a) and (b) are usually understood as awareness metrics and (c) as engagement metrics. Other useful metrics also include the clicks and the minutes visualized per video.

The marketing strategy for the project was based on the strategic dissemination of the Rethink's movies, plus the creation of specific content, such as posts, images, interviews, teasers, trailers and short movies. Moreover, the project team also monitored the major international news sites for relevant news and resources related with P/CVE, by sharing them in a timely manner.

Regarding marketing and communication management, the social media pages were updated several times a week in order to maintain a stable flow of posts

and, therefore, mobilize actionable target audiences into the campaign context. Furthermore, the project was composed of six partners located in six countries. Therefore, in order to better target the audiences, posts were created by the national teams for each national page, so more immersive in cultural and idiosyncratic issues of each community. Then, these national teams helped draw audience profiles to reach with advertising and created specific advertising for their pages in their language.

Concerning the advertising methodology which helped the campaign to improve results throughout paid results, the project's team decided to allocate the resources according to the population numbers. By using this methodology, we had a fairer division of costs since if a country has more population, it will necessarily have more paid results.

Moreover, the marketing team aimed at garnering some core audience through page followers, and then work on look-a-likes audiences with messages already customized by local teams. At the first phase focused on garnering followers and studying whether the audience raised impacted message interactions. From audience feedback, we searched for similar audiences.

With regard to the key performance indicators for counterspeech campaigns, one may infer it is easier to reach online audiences and contribute to their awareness through visualisations than to create engagement, such as comments and reactions. Concerning the specific results of the RETHINK project, great results were achieved in reaching audiences through visualisations, even with highly ambitious key performance indicators. The use of paid promotions and advertising was key to reach the proposed results, and when audiences were reached, interactions were easiest to get.

	Reach¹	Visualisations	Engagement²	Clicks³	Minutes
P2P	777 296	366 893	8 822	22 156	109 785
Critical Thinking Tools	1 355 362	500 771	5 857	41 255	229 237
Narratives of Global Islam	692 877	317 548	7 693	24 448	156 778
The True Face of Extremism	762 219	376 297	1 694	17 869	304 942
Conspiracy Theories	852 156	780 990	2 538	30 137	518 276
Violent Far-Right	763 787	362 296	2 387	38 072	308 774
Community Heroes	779 079	416 067	4 800	21 295	159 661
Campaigning TOTAL	5 982 776	3 120 862	33 791	195 232	1 787 453

Table 1 – Statistics of the RETHINK’s Campaigns

The option of sharing was also important, in order to reach people that were not initially targeted.¹²³

As seen in the previous table, the total of campaigns reached 3 120 862 million visualisations, with the Critical Thinking Tools and the Conspiracy Theories campaigns being the most visualized. The Peer2Peer campaign was the first campaign to be applied and it was expected to have the lowest number in terms of visualisations, since the project was able to learn from the lessons of that campaign. However, it was the third campaign, Narratives of Global Islam, which had the lowest number of visualisations. The number of visualisations is one of the most important indicators in order to evaluate awareness, but, the reaching metrics is also a traditional metrics, even though is not so precise. Reach can be defined as “the number of unique users who had any content from your Facebook Page or about your Page enter their screen”, the project reached a total of 5 million users, but this interaction is not so accurate because the content can be in the user’s screen but they do not really visualise and interpret it.

7.2 Engagement

Generally, online users tend to like and share, more than comment and react. However, as stated in the table 1 the project reached a total of 33 791 engagement reactions, including likes/reactions, comments and shares. Clicks were not included as an engagement metrics. The Peer2Peer and Narratives of Global Islam campaigns had the highest levels of engagement, including viral posts in the Narratives of Global Islam’s campaign. The True Face of Extremism campaign had the lowest level of engagement.

With regard to comments, the campaigns received a total of 1483 comments, which allows the project to have first-hand material that leads to a qualitative analysis of grassroots opinions that are shared throughout the civil society. This analysis has several benefits, such as to monitor the state of hate speech and its relationship with conspiracy theories, to understand the impact of the project and to receive direct feedback from online users

¹ The numbers of reaching are based on Facebook statistics.

² Engagement is traditionally defined as the addition of reactions, comments and shares.

³ The numbers of clicks are based on Facebook statistics.

Other important indicator is the number of movies' minutes visualised; all the campaigns' movies had 1 787 453 million minutes visualized, with each movie having a medium of 5 minutes of duration. The campaigns True Face of Extremism and Violent Far-Right were the campaigns with the highest number of visualized minutes, being the Peer2Peer campaign with the lowest number. The total minutes viewed that are more than 1 million represents a meaningful impact of the project with regard to societal impact and democratic debate.

The engagement strategy always took into consideration the need for an impactful call-to-action focused in generating greater interaction through questions made to the audience, debates, interviews, social myths deconstruction and hashtags.

The use of paid sponsored ads increased the level of organic engagement, resulting in more efficient audience targeting and particularly in cost-reducing strategies that conducted to low costs per interaction. This strategy created a sustained growth of followers who will be able to engage with the RETHINK campaigns, after the end of the project.

7.3 What Worked Well

7.3.1 Partnerships and Networking

Intense Networking with public authorities, project partners and entities that are part of the Civil Society Network managed by the RAN allowed the project to effectively reach credible messengers, such as former extremists and their families/friends. For instance, the project was able to contact a mother whose son was radicalised and travelled to fight in Syria, where he died, and invited her to participate in the True Face of Extremism campaign.

This was an important knowledge asset to the project, since she could amplify her voice and experiences on

how to detect radicalisation signals to other families and key community actors. Other important messengers for the project included Amin Maalouf who is an international recognised author on multiculturalism and globalization, and Candida Pinto, who is a specialized journalist on violent extremism and jihadism, having contact with a Portuguese jihadist bride called Angela Barreto. The project also counted on with the participation of the Portuguese Islamic Community leader, Sheikh David Munir, former neo-Nazi, poet and songwriter Joshua Idehen and Mozambican singer Selma Uamusse.

7.3.2 Real-Life Narratives

The narratives included real-life stories and testimonies, including narratives from youth with a migrant background, former extremists and their families, activists, singers and civil society leaders. Real-life elements create a dynamic storyboard with the audience, leading to higher levels of social media awareness and engagement.

For instance, with regard to the Violent Far-Right campaign, the videos recall on real life stories of conversion thus able to encourage users' empathy to embrace behavioural change in order to leave violent-extremist movements. We believe that these are the main reasons why we achieved to reach the target audience in terms of visualizations and interactions, especially through the three campaign's videos, which recorded great results.

7.3.3 Online debate of controversial issues

We consider that the campaigns reached its goal due to opening a space to sensitive conversations and bringing clarity and awareness about how violent extremist movements recruit and build up their propaganda narratives.

The messages of the campaign videos managed to touch one of its key objectives by reaching one of the most sensitive target groups: young people vulnerable/

attracted to far-right narratives and challenging their views directly. Moreover, the videos managed to spark strong and virulent reactions and debates in the comment section from people who have affinities towards far-right narratives.

7.3.4 Engaging with the local community.

The project delivered offline sessions in universities, schools, migrant communities and religious communities in Romania, France, Italy, Hungary and Portugal. The events were able to maximise the effect of online campaigns in their target audiences, in order to reach more followers and, thereby, creating a social movement against all forms of violent extremism.

7.3.5 Online Monitoring of Hate Speech

The counternarrative campaigns not only challenge extremist views, but also contribute to a real-time monitoring of online hate speech against minorities based on the qualitative evaluation of comments and messages. Some of these comments were focused on defending and justifying the actions and messages of far-right movements as being a legitimate reaction to the rise of what they perceived as “the violence of Muslim immigrants”.

The existence of these comments proves that there are Eurosceptic extremist civil groups active, which, consequently, identifies the need for more counterspeech projects that amplify the voice of moderate and tolerant perspectives towards the defence of fundamental rights, to the detriment of extremist rhetoric against social inclusion and multiculturalism.

7.3.6 High levels of Awareness

With regard to the social media metrics of awareness, the project reached high levels of awareness with a high number of people visualising the campaign’s alternative narratives movies. The total of 7 campaigns had 2 697 226 visualisations, surpassing the proposed KPIs that the project wanted to reach. This means that

people watched the counternarrative campaigns and are now more aware about its main issues, involving human rights, pluralism and democratic values.

7.3.7 Virality – Engagement

The project created several posts which went viral on Facebook and Instagram. As an example, the Italian team, CESIE, disseminated a post that went viral with 558 reactions and 604 comments; this post aimed at deconstructing the social erroneous myth that all Muslims are extremists or terrorists and that Islam is a religion of war through facts-sharing. From those 558 reactions, there were 266 likes, 152 reactions of angry, 112 reactions of a laugh, 14 reactions of crying, 10 reactions of surprise and 5 reactions of loves. The percentage of positive reactions, including likes and loves were higher than the negative reactions, e.g. angry. However, the comments in the post were not so positive and even allowed us to map online hate speech against Islamic minorities.

7.3.8 Visual Aesthetics

The audiovisual edition and production of the campaigns was based on the most contemporary techniques of aesthetics and communication techniques, such as motion-graphics, short narratives, documentary-style, sketches and interviews. The use of these techniques generates a positive engagement with young audiences and classroom settings, contributing to a sustainable use of the campaigns in educational contexts in the long-term.

7.3.9 Combined Advertising Strategy – Organic and Sponsored

The use of paid sponsored ads was an effective strategy to disseminate the videos produced in order to reach a larger audience. It allowed the consortium to raise awareness regarding religion and its role in society as something that can bring people together in diversity rather than something to tear us apart. The promotion of these posts increased the level of organic

engagement. This has resulted in more efficient audience targeting and particularly in cost-reducing strategies that conducted to lower costs per interaction.

7.3.10 External Dissemination

The consortium reached out to possible 'local ambassadors' for the campaign to help disseminate the campaign's online content and interacted with the media, by giving radio and television interviews to well-known channels, such as the "Sic Notícias" TV broadcast channels in Portugal or the "Civil Radio" in Hungary.

7.3.11 Educational Resources

Resources produced within the framework of the campaign can then be transferable to other contexts, such as classroom contexts. Some of them were already applied into offline activities in schools and NGOs. This is possible due to the high-quality of the motion in graphics animation, but also to the didactical explanation of complex facts through a clear and objective discourse based on sociological facts. On the other hand, this is also important for the long-term sustainability of the campaign, since the movies can now be used in educational contexts in Romania, Italy, Sweden, Portugal, Hungary, and France with subtitles produced into those languages, depending on the application of the campaign.

7.4 What Could Be Improved

7.4.1 Restrictions due to Facebook Policy

One initial limitation to using both Sponsored Ads and organic dissemination strategies in this campaign was the fact that due to a strong rise in polarisation and hate speech on social media, Facebook has now imposed stronger restrictions for promoting any content on political or sensitive topics with the same intention to fight hate speech and extremist narratives. This means that when we tried to use sponsored ads for the videos, it took a prolonged time until Facebook verified

and accepted the promotion of the ads after initially rejecting them completely a few times.

Additionally, when trying to promote the campaign posts organically by sharing it on FB communities, the Social Media Manager FB account was restricted a few times with the notification that this content is not suitable on FB. However, the Consortium Social Media team managed to overcome these issues by adjusting the content of the ads and the description of the videos in order to avoid any keywords that would trigger the FB algorithm.

7.4.2 Instagram and Twitter

All the campaign's movies and content were uploaded to the project's Instagram and Twitter channels, and new communication and marketing techniques were adopted, such as the use of IGTV to promote the movies on Instagram. Nonetheless, the strategic advertising in Twitter and Instagram could have been more explored.

7.4.3 Duration of Movies

The majority of the movies had a medium of 4-5 minutes, with teasers and trailers having around 30 seconds. The videos duration could have been smaller, in order to generate more interest. However, the complexity of sensitive topics needed more time to explain, in order to avoid ambiguities and obscurities.

7.4.4 Involving influencers and youtubers

The consortium explored the possibility of sponsoring content shared through the pages of online partners and influencers, however YouTube influencers were not open to sharing content that was not their own, even though some of them expressed sympathy with our goals. The contact with influencers and ambassadors could have been a point to improve in further projects.

7.4.5 Recommendations for Civil Society Organisations

The main step to start a counterspeech campaign online is to define its goals. This step allows putting a light on three key elements: what is the final purpose of the campaign? What aim do you want to give to it? What change do you want to bring up?

Taking the time to answer these questions helps to understand the core purpose of a counterspeech campaign: prevent people to agree with extreme theories and propaganda, inform vulnerable people exposed to these contents and make people who could be interested to join these extremist groups question their interests, it also helps to fight against the trivialization of extremists theories. Goals need to be measurable to assess the progress in real time as the campaign is broadcasted. They also must stay realistic and attainable as the work done to reach these goals require effort and must be reasonably achievable. Obviously, a counter-speech campaign can be challenging, however, setting precise and specific goals favours a smoother progress for the campaign.

The campaign is going to revolve around key words and phrases; hence, those are its supporting pillars and have to be thought through to be impactful. The content of what is going to be communicated has to define what impact we want to have on the public: what we want the public to know and do with our message? How do we want to make them feel? Thus, the optimal ways to implicate the public with a counterspeech campaign through its core communication is to focus on powerful, engaging and unifying messages. These messages have to remind the importance to counter online extremism and recruitment, with key elements such as: 'the need to respond to and challenge extremist theories', 'people vulnerable to extremist recruitment need help, advice and support to prevent them from being drawn into these extremist groups', 'the fight against extremism is a global issue', 'extremists use their ideologies to be manipulative'. Through these various communication elements, a counterspeech

campaign can resonate with vulnerable people and help them find resilience, develop their critical thinking to build protective mechanisms allowing them to recognize extremist speech leading to radicalisation.

The aspect of virality of social media is a useful way to make the campaign impactful and seen by a broad spectrum, while still keeping in mind that aspect, the message of the campaign has also to be carefully adapted to avoid backlash and instead enhance engagement.

In its substance, a campaign communication strategy can be composed of a central message and supporting messages. As seen in the Rethink project, for the message to be effective it has to be: concise with a few key catchphrases, compelling with meaningful phrases to stimulate reaction, simple to make it understandable and easy to duplicate in different languages, memorable with repeated slogans easy to keep in mind, relatable for the audience thus bringing engagement and finally the textual content has to be tailored to the public it is destined to.

The typology of the audience recipient of the campaign is also a core element to the preparation of a counterspeech campaign. The message has to be defined while keeping in mind the identity of the public, their interests, habits and behaviour online, demographic attributes, links to the campaign theme. Defining the target audience is a crucial step for the effectiveness of the campaign, it consists in a defined group of age, with certain habits related to the campaign, with a habit to engage with instant and catchy content and from a particular region.

An organization's audience can be divided into three categories: people interested in the content (who consume it), people that can be influenced (the ones exposed to the content) and the sympathizers. The sympathizer is the audience that already adheres to

existing content, they are active and easily mobilized. This will obviously allow you to find the right messenger to reach these different targets. This must be audible and credible in the eyes of the people targeted, so that the message is received effectively.

A meticulous geographic targeting is a practice that helps deliver the campaign directly to an audience based on its geographic locations. It ensures the campaign will be seen by a specific audience. This useful method is easily achievable through existing tools such as Google Ads and Facebook Ads. Geographic targeting helps to significantly raise the engagement, the notoriety and awareness of the campaign. This practice is fundamental for the campaign as it guarantees its effectiveness and impact, but geographic targeting also heavily depends on the correct delimitation of the audience typology. Thus, this step can create a federated and engaged community around the campaign thereby ensuring conversion.

A prevention campaign revolves around an impactful message and visuals, but these cannot be effective if the importance of the tone is not taken into account in the preparation steps. The tone brought by the message is crucial, it establishes an identity for the campaign and has also an impact on the image of the organization behind it. Therefore, the tone of the campaign needs to be carefully thought through to avoid a shallow message.

The first step of finding the tone of a campaign is to define how to tell a message and an organization's story. What is the best tone for the message and furthermore for the audience we are aiming for? A large variety of tones exist when launching a campaign like comical or ironical but most counterspeech projects revolve around informative, storytelling, mobilizing tones. The tone helps give an emotional appeal, for example a campaign can communicate an organization's values. In this sense,

this emotional aspect makes the audience sense an organization's personality that they can identify and resonate with on a personal level and in consequence it helps developing a bond with the target audience. A campaign is generally divided in multiple visuals or textual contents meaning that the tone has to maintain a consistency through the entirety of the contents and across all social media platforms. Consistency in tone can give a positive impact to the image of the organization as it shows it can be trustworthy and coherent.

Alongside the goals of informing and raising awareness, a campaign needs a core purpose behind its diffusion. An organization must ask itself what is the general goal during the diffusion of the campaign? Whether it is to generate engagement, to create discussions on the thematic of the campaign itself, to generate audience support to the campaign, it is essential to avoid backlash by staying true to the central message and be open to discussion with the audience. In this sense, these potential goals each have a meaning: the engagement permits to reach a substantial and relevant audience, the discussions allow to open a debate without any taboos, the audience support shows how important it is for an organization to first create a bond with its public to then facilitate to successfully achieve the whole project.

Once the campaign is launched, it is also important to measure its performance and adjust the content if needed. The pre-defined goals allow to framework what should be measured in the performance, it can be evaluated through multiple criteria such as: how many persons see the campaign? How many persons are making comments, liking and sharing the campaign? Are the comments and messages received positive or negative? What is working well and what is not? In this sense should the digital strategy be improved?

Furthermore, a defined creation process helps recurrently reconsider and adapt the content, an organization can follow these 5 steps to develop a campaign:

- Step 1: Before starting any brainstorm or creative process, the study of existing similar campaigns on social media helps evaluate what has already been done and thus facilitates to stand out by bringing a new and unique campaign.
- Step 2: With a multidisciplinary team, the organization reflects on pertinent content that can be created.
- Step 3: Creation of the content which can be video, text and animation for example.
- Step 4: The campaign is launched online.
- Step 5: Is the feedback positive?
 - Step 5a: if the answer is yes, then the campaign can be deemed a success and considered a good practice that can be replicated.
 - Step 5b: if the answer is no, then it means the content was questioned and challenged by the audience. To respond to this, the content must be improved and the process of creation goes back to Step 3: the content is reviewed, analysed to understand its weaknesses and from there new upgraded content can be brought up.

Besides the step-by-step guide previously developed, we created practical recommendations for civil society organizations (CSOs) on how to create sustainable counternarratives, including tips and tricks with regard to (1) political and legal affairs, (2) personal security and safety, (3) content creation, (4) content engagement, and (5) dissemination.

There is no universal framework for engaging civil society organizations (CSOs) in these types of initiatives. However, there are common challenges and recommendations that cut across most contexts and should be considered when offering tools to vulnerable audiences' that promote resilience and critical thinking mechanisms.

POLITICAL AND LEGAL AFFAIRS – The political atmosphere and legal restrictions within each country make it difficult for civil society actors to engage in collective action against extremist narratives. This is because local dynamics and socio-political sensitivities often are not properly taken into account during a counternarrative program design, especially when it comes to creating counternarratives and critical thinking mechanisms for local actors. It is therefore highly advised that CSOs map the political and legal factors in their regions in order to know how to tailor content. For example, in countries where politics are particularly divisive, it is advised to stay away from party politics, in order not to introduce divisive topics that would deter attention from the main aims of the campaign. Moreover, it is suggested that CSOs work with rule-of-law based institutions that can push for more transparent legal and policy frameworks for safe engagement.

PERSONAL SECURITY AND SAFETY – It is important to note that civil society actors working in this field are inherently exposed to threats to their personal safety due to the nature of the work. Instead of reacting to events in an impulsive or violent way, projects should create a safety management plan, in order to avoid threatening situations through foresight and appropriate planning. The first step that projects should do is to create a risk management plan through the following steps: (1) Identify, assess and judge risks; (2) Assign ownership of risks, (3) Take actions to reduce or anticipate risks, (4) Monitor and review the progress.

After the risk management plan is created, you should consider a set of safe operational approaches, such as:

1. Safe use of technology, including turning the geolocation off on devices.
2. Safe operational practice, including the use of a secure device.
3. Safe communication practices, including not sharing the location when having a meeting and setting clear boundaries.

4. Give feedback (internal and external).
5. Contacts with professional services or help lines.
6. Create profiles just for the project.

CONTENT CREATION - When creating content, it is key that it is both locally relevant and is additive, rather than duplicative. To create content that is locally relevant, CSOs are advised to consult with relevant stakeholders on the ground that can provide counsel on the most pressing and pertinent events related to the campaign. To ensure content is additive, rather than duplicative, it is advised that CSOs conduct background research on any similar campaigns that have been carried out in the past in the local region. This ensures that the campaign is not seen as simply another short term “project” in the field (which decreases perception of local legitimacy) and allows for campaigns to learn from and build upon past EU actions.

CONTENT ENGAGEMENT– In general, it is difficult to create engagement organically on social media with these types of campaigns and initiatives. The reasons for this are complex and generally are contingent upon local factors. However, recommendations for this challenge include a strategy of early promotion when it comes to upcoming campaigns’ individual Facebook pages in order to gain a larger audience from the get-go. It also recommended enlisting the help of “local ambassadors” who already have established legitimacy to promote activities. There is also a strong temporal aspect of content engagement – it is critically important that CSOs map engagement trends on different social media channels in order to know when and how to promote initiative activities in the local context.

DISSEMINATION – CSOs often face barriers to disseminating the results of their projects. To promote wider dissemination, it is recommended to draw upon local networks that have been built up during the project. For example, sharing relevant information by NGOs

which have aims and activities that are in line with the current project’s aims helps generate interest in the project from those who already follow pages focusing on similar topics. Moreover, engaging with embassy representatives in the region is also recommended. By reaching out to the embassies of the countries which are involved in the project, relevant institutional stakeholders are involved which allows to build even stronger European ties and widen the platforms for dissemination of the project results. Other important suggestion could be to cooperate with school leaders in order to add these counternarratives to the curriculum and turn the campaign materials into educational materials. Finally, other suggestion may be to involve actors, writers and influencers.

Tips for NGOs and Activists on Social Media

There is a lot of literature related to social media management techniques, so let’s focus on the main lessons learned that can help an NGO or activists to achieve results on social media.

What can you do then?

- Study your audience and understand which social media they are on, what they comment on, what motivates them and what negative arguments you find in between.
- Evaluate the content and messages you want to get across. Be sure of the actions that your audience must take after seeing your content. A message must always have an action from your audience. It can be a share, a comment, an action on the street, a simple thought. But never ever allow your content to simply promote “nothing”. Social media must be active and not passive, as if your audience were a spectator. Leave that to Netflix.
- Once the content and objectives for each of them have been defined, carry out a plan: which day the content will be published, which format, what people are expected to do with that content.

- At the same time, create all possible response scenarios that can generate - negative reactions, hate responses, disinformation ... be prepared for the worst. And please, before publishing any post.
- Plan an engagement loop with the audience. Tell a story, not ad-hoc content. Be able to create a sequence of content for people to feel close to the message.
- Do not worry about repeating. Unfortunately, everything we publish on social media has a very low reach when it is not paid for with advertising, so repeating and recycling content is a way to keep your presence always active and reach more people.
- If you have the money to advertise the content and go further into the audience, be prepared to see much of the content being disapproved. Facebook, Google and Twitter currently have very tight filters for social content.
- The first step in running a campaign is to have a real profile, preferably that you have run campaigns in the past. Otherwise, when creating the profile, try to contact the network and explain what you want to do. They will be able to get their support to see the campaigns approved.
- Paid advertising is key for strategically reaching the audience through an efficient and cost-benefit process; when audiences are reached, interactions are quite high. Importantly, throughout the campaign period, the effort has to be focused on being able to reach audiences at the lowest possible cost.
- Measure everything. Measuring the impact of what we do in digital is essential to optimize and improve all results over time. Analytics is for you what a GPS System and a radar for a ship that enters a fog bank. Ensures they don't get lost or hit a piece of land.
- Test, evaluate, repeat. There is no magic formula.

Development of counternarratives

Counternarratives should be developed based on the themes identified during the analysis phase. When

doing so, it is useful to follow a number of recommendations:

- Firstly, it must be made sure that counternarratives do not reinforce the themes emphasized in extremist narratives. For example, a narrative calling for a race war should not be countered with a counternarrative that uses words and phrases such as 'fighting' or 'battle', which would give the impression of legitimizing the narrative's conflict-oriented worldview.
- Secondly, counternarratives should draw attention to incongruities within the terrorist/extremist narratives, as well as point out the inconsistencies between the actions of extremists, and the tenets of their ideology.
- Thirdly, analogies likening present-day events to stories at the core of the extremist/terrorist narrative ought to be disrupted. For example, far-right extremists may draw on *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce to sustain their view that the United States are an autocratic entity bent on repealing the right to bear arms. By pointing out that none of the instances signalled by Pierce are actually under threat, counternarratives may weaken the analogy embedded in the narrative, thus exposing the narrative's internal flaws and diminishing its appeal.
- Fourthly, the counternarrative should undermine the binary thinking of the extremist/terrorist narrative, such as the opposition between believers and unbelievers that is typical of Islamist and jihadist narratives. By revealing how such a black & white characterization is not viable in real life, and how people relate in much more complex ways than what the Manichaeism of the narrative suggests, the counternarrative may contribute to discrediting the extremist narrative as a whole.
- Lastly, and related to the previous point, the counternarrative should provide alternative themes to describe the extremist/terrorist narrative's target. In other words, those characterized as enemies within

the extremist/terrorist narrative should be depicted in a way that highlights their similarity to the narrative's target audience and increase feelings of interdependence, for example by highlighting ways in which the target can be of utility to the target audience.

8. CONCLUSION

The handbook intends to share the lessons learned throughout the methodology of the RETHINK project, which includes monitoring and evaluation, as well as strategy, content creation, best practices in Europe, social media management and tangible recommendations for civil society organisations. The aim of these lessons is to replicate and maximise the measurable impact of the project to other similar contexts and organisations with regard to message, geography, and audience and media platforms.

To sum up, it is important for other organisations when creating counternarratives to replicate a series of lessons learned. Such lessons include the intense networking with public authorities, project partners and civil society networking in order to effectively reach credible messengers, such as former extremists and their families/friends. Other important lesson is to share real-life narratives from credible messengers, to create a dynamic storyboard with the audience, leading to higher levels of social media awareness and engagement. The creation of safe online spaces to discuss controversial issues is also a key point, though it is needful to have a strategy of comments' moderation and a contingency plan for virality; a qualitative analysis of comments can be an indicator of online hate speech, including a real-time monitoring and posterior mapping.

The use of paid sponsored ads can be an effective strategy to disseminate the videos produced in order

to reach a larger audience. The promotion of posts can increase the level of organic engagement, which can result in more efficient audience targeting and particularly in cost-reducing strategies.

Civil society organisations should try to reach local ambassadors and the local media for the campaign to help disseminate the campaign's online content. Another tip is to maximise the content of the campaigns with offline sessions in universities, schools, migrant communities and religious communities.

Finally, when creating social media content, managers and creators should always take in mind to create a call-to-action through questions, debates, brainstorming and lives.

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Peace Action, Training & Research Inst of Romania (PATRIR) – Romania

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Uppsala Universitet (UU) - Sweden

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