



The unexplored potential of the EU  
as a mediator of PCVE efforts  
across its neighbourhood

**CONNEKT's Final Policy Recommendations for the EU**



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**JOINT POLICY PAPER ON STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATION FOR THE EU**

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## 01 INTRODUCTION

This policy paper is fruit of the results gathered through primary data collection but also of a dialogue among researchers, experts, practitioners, state officials, civil society actors and local community representatives within the framework of the Horizon 2020 EU-funded research project CONNEKT (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies). These conversations have consisted in a continuous exchange of ideas as well as a practical exercise of consensus-building. Throughout this project, the two regions under study, the Middle East and North Africa, on one side, and the Balkans, on the other, have engaged in deep debates and discussions on the understanding of radicalisation and violent extremism, its root-causes, drivers, ways of prevention as well as on the approaches to social transformation. While avoiding being trapped into the “conceptual conundrum” of how to define or understand radicalisation, extremism or terrorism (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020), that has been a constant in PCVE (Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism) studies, the cross-regional approach of the research required common matrices that could provide comparable data across both regions. At the same time, nuances on approaching the phenomenon based on individual or collective identities or values (such as religion, nationalism or ethno-nationalism), promoted the need to build common lines of understanding among all researchers involved, from the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans, with EU researchers facilitating and mediating the triangulation of dialogue and knowledge production.

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While working on both EU neighbouring regions seemed challenging at the beginning due to the differences in geography, demography, democracy levels, political systems and relations with the European Union, the simultaneous investigation across both regions turned out to become a virtue. Researching simultaneously on such distant and disconnected regions, pushed CONNEKT to create standards and methodologies of research that would allow the comparison across regions and the knowledge-transfer. In this way, the EU-funded project became an instrument of the EU to mediate knowledge transfer and exchange across both regions. Besides, comparison across countries allowed research to include broader dimensions of extremism and violent extremism, and overcome the overwhelming focus of the moment on jihadi movements prevailing at the outset of the project in 2020 (Kapidžić, 2021). But above all, it contributed to the enlargement of a cross-regional conversation on radicalisation and violent extremism across EU's neighbourhood South and East.

## 02

RESULTS OF CONNEKT AND  
PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

For more than three years and a half, CONNEKT has studied radicalisation and violent extremism drivers in the Middle East and North Africa region and in the Balkans among young people aged 12 to 30 years old.

Qualitative and quantitative research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, Jordan, Kosovo, Morocco, North Macedonia, and Tunisia has served to assess the relevance of seven drivers of radicalisation and VE that were initially selected - religion, economic deprivation, political issues, territorial inequalities, digital socialisation, transnational dynamics and education, culture and leisure opportunities – and, more importantly, identify which are the combinations of drivers that in specific contexts drive young people to violence. The better understanding of how drivers interact, how contexts are enabled or empowered informs the last stage of the project in creating participatory mechanisms to involve local communities and actors in PVE.

Research conducted under CONNEKT has been “non-reactive” to immediate terrorist attacks as the impact of the pandemic turned COVID-19 into the main global threat at the outset of the project. Terrorism had been operationally defeated in its strongholds in Syria and Iraq, and main EU concerns at the moment involved the issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families' eventual repatriation processes (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021). The first data collection procedure was implemented at the macro level, involving state officials, international organisations representatives and also security and intelligence-related actors. The findings revealed very state-centred male-dominated PCVE, and a framing of the phenomenon within religion, and economic or developmental issues (Kapidžić, 2021). While CSOs in the Balkans have more presence in the PCVE process, they are almost absent or constraint to the prevention domain in the Middle East and North Africa. The same happens when observing PCVE coordination with the EU, which is more structured with the Balkans (Anzil et al., 2022; Hirkić, Dudić-Sijamija and Bakić, 2024).

**ASYMMETRY AND INEQUALITIES ACROSS REGIONS**

Asymmetry between both regions has been a constant in the research. Asymmetry on how each of the regions relates to the European Union but also how each perceives itself across global fractures is relevant to the results and to the research process itself. The divergent mobility restrictions across regions – and access to entry visas and travel infrastructure – strongly impacted the mobility of researchers throughout the process, particularly EU-bound. The unbalance was even more acute during the pandemic due to the inequality among vaccination status and recognitions among the countries involved in the research. Such unbalances strongly condition the mobility of researchers so that the real distance between the Middle East and North Africa and the Balkans becomes larger than what geography determines. Mobility across regions, due to infrastructure, political, economic and legal conditions, becomes a hazardous journey.

If the pandemic was an unexpected event that hindered the data collection process at the macro level everywhere, the Russian invasion of Ukraine impacted on the results of the research itself in an asymmetrical manner. Data collected at that meso/community level revealed an exploitation of domestic ethnic and identity problems to promote exclusionary ultranationalism in the Balkans<sup>1</sup>. In this case, the digital and the transnational drivers prove to be on the rise together with a surge of political ideologies against globalisation, multiculturalism, women or LGBTQ+ rights, linked to religion and far-right groups in the Balkans (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming a).

Findings at the community level in the MENA region revealed a greater concern on territorial inequalities and lack of opportunities, particularly for young people. The example is the combination of lack of economic development, political grievances and regional disparities that are qualified as the “Triangle of Anger” (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming). Economic and social factors, in conjunction with social inequalities become stronger drivers than poverty per se, especially in urban social contexts. Despite transnational influences, local grievances remain most significant, emphasising the importance of local contexts. In this sense, more research on the impact of urban policies on territorial inequalities and marginalisation perceptions is a necessary step to take to inform more inclusive urban design, planning and policing (Chirchi, forthcoming). Nevertheless, common patterns within enabling contexts can be identified, such as the case of football fans clubs, where transnational dynamics combined with local grievances in both regions play a strong role (Hirkić, Dudić-Sijamija and Bakić, 2024; Chirchi, forthcoming).

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### IT'S POLITICS, AFTER ALL

At the individual level, limited social mobility, education-employment mismatches, and dissatisfaction with state policies and services rank high in the perception of youngsters in MENA when identifying the drivers of extremism. Dissatisfaction with public services, particularly education and bureaucratic structures, is widespread among young people, as well as the limits to access to culture and leisure opportunities, reflecting deep political grievances and regional disparities (Mouna, forthcoming). The absence of meaningful political participation platforms for youth in both regions, MENA and Balkans, disengages them, rather than push them to claim their agency more actively through institutional frameworks. Instead, a lot of their social interactions happen in alternative spaces, such as online (Bondokji, Rawashdeh and Qataminm, 2024).

Results from the individual level research also highlight mistrust in political parties. In both MENA and the Balkans, political parties have the lowest level of trust among the police, army, judiciary, media, religions leaders and NGOs. Only 10% of the respondents eligible to vote in MENA have done so in most elections, while around 43% of them never voted. In the Balkans, even if participation is significantly higher (50% in Bosnia and Herzegovina or 30% in North

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<sup>1</sup> The impact of the pandemic and the war is very clearly reflected in the results obtained by research in Bulgaria, where the impact of infodemics, conspiracy theories and far-right narratives have come to the front (Ralchev and Stoyanova, 2022).

Macedonia), political parties are the least trusted institutions everywhere. Conversely, youth seem to place higher trust to army and the police, reflecting the securitised approach overshadowing individual perceptions on violence, the performative role of security actors in youth's perceptions in the Middle East as well as the new role of these actors in the democratic process in the Balkans (Bondokji, Rawashdeh and Qataminm, 2024).

In the Balkans, even though religion focused attention as a driver at the macro level, at the meso and micro level nationalism emerged as a strong driver in regards to far-right extremism, which displays itself in conjunction with xenophobia and racism (Kapidzić, Hirkić, Bakić and Dudić-Sijamija, 2023)

### IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT RELIGION

Deficiencies in political representation within state institutions, good governance, political accountability and trust in public institutions intersect with other drivers, particularly religion. At a macro level, religion is at the centre of the discussion and this has prompted either greater state intervention in religious affairs, as in the Middle East and North Africa, or greater coordination with faith-based organisations and religious leaders as it is the case of Muslim religious organisations in the Balkans (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the question here is whether it is more effective - or less harmful- a tighter state-controlled "model of governance", being susceptible of co-opting religious actors in their securitised prevention efforts and, thus, stripping them from their social credibility; or a "looser model of religious governance" that might leave entry points to extremist narratives or miss out the positive potential or religious actors in prevention efforts (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming). Moreover, findings show how the overemphasis on Islam has led to the non-engagement of other faith-based organisations in PCVE conversations, while in the Balkans results identify a conjunction of far-right and ethno-nationalist narratives with Christian Orthodox sentiments (Communale, forthcoming). In fact, the issue of FTFs, mainly focused at the beginning of the research on those joining Daesh, extended to foreign fighters leaving the north of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and other countries not part of the project) to fight with Russia in Ukraine, inspired by radical ideas fuelled by religious and far-right groups (Communale, forthcoming).

However, at a community level, the narrative on religion shifts from a negative perception as a driver to a positive perception as a prevention factor. At a meso/community level, the reliance on religious education as a preventive factor might lead to overlooking other relevant drivers that trigger an explosive combination of them, such as the "Triangle of anger" (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

### ALTERNATIVE SOCIALISATION SPACES

What the community level points at, and the micro level reveals, is the process of replacement of socialisation spaces for youth. The economic social and political constraints that young people encounter in their immediate socialisation interaction contexts (neighbourhood, school, family, leisure activities, political engagement, NGOs...) lead them to socialise in the online space (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Kapidzić, Hirkić, Bakić and Dudić-Sijamija, 2023).

CONNEKT's survey reveals a 90% of participants between 15-30 years old being online over four hours per day. Internet is the most common leisure time activity for both male and female youth (Mouna, forthcoming). And here is where a mostly unobserved driver, the lack of leisure opportunities, comes to the front. Beyond the formal educational system, the opportunities that youngsters have to socialise and use their free time is very much related to their claims over public services or their inability to have a voice in the social and political sphere. Leisure and entertainment opportunities, but also spaces for meaningful civil participation in a community, is what young people find when joining certain groups: a sense of belonging, empowerment, collective identity, agency, after all. This is the case of the subculture of football fan clubs analysed in various countries in MENA and the Balkans, where the history of violence is also reflected (Hirkić, Dudić-Sijamija and Bakić, 2024).

Even though both male and female spend the same average time online, women and girls tend to attend more leisure activities in closed spaces, whereas men and boys are likely to socialise outside the home (Mouna, forthcoming). In the MENA region, from the community and individual perspectives, online socialisation proves to be a risk but also a chance for youth when other opportunities are not available, either for access, affordability or safety. In this sense, the unbalance of regulatory frameworks between the EU, MENA and the Balkans unleashes the discussion over the regulation of online spaces. While over-regulating poses dangers in terms of freedom of expression, the lack of regulation creates a vacuum in which extremist narratives spread (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming).

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### AGENCY AT THE CORE

Women are less present in security-related domains (Traidi and Vidal Bertran, forthcoming) and less willing to participate in general, although they report higher level of concern regarding radicalisation and VE, particularly at the local level (Mouna, forthcoming). There is no gender-specific approach to PVE and gender roles and biases are reflected throughout the research findings, reinforcing the role of women as peace-builders and “specially made for” prevention efforts. The macro research findings present a male-dominated security domain and the only reference to gender comes from the Balkans and the permeability of a “toxic masculinity” culture (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2021). At the community level, social expectations and gender roles emerge among the potential drivers for young men to join violent extremist groups (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

Safety is always more a concern of young women and girls than men. Both at a community and individual level, women report higher concern for radicalisation and violent extremism than male, as they also feel less safe in their nearer surroundings (Mouna, forthcoming). Women participation is still very much limited to the social dimension and in the field of prevention, within stereotyped frameworks of maternity and emotionality (Traidi and Vidal Bertran, 2024).

The lack of a gender perspective has prevented both research and practice to capture the complexity of gender roles and narratives within radicalisation processes. Gender, sexuality and

identity intertwine with both religious or political extremist contents both in online and offline spheres (Traidi and Vidal Bertran, 2024). More knowledge and capacity-building across regions is required to comprehend the complex intersections between gender and extremist narratives and drivers.

In the case of youth, inclusion is very much linked to the claim over safe spaces for social interaction and political participation. Youth does not trust political parties to be their voice and focus their immediate claims on issues linked to deficient governance and dissatisfaction with public services. Unjust institutional narratives and practices and limited social mobility are at the crossroads of youth dissatisfaction among young people in the MENA region, coupled with territorial inequalities (Chirchi, forthcoming).

When young people have been involved in the conversion on PCVE across CONNEKT's research, they have focused their attention on the digital domain as a place where action-oriented strategies should be addressed, and the community-level context where a "whole-of-community" approach should involve school, family, health and other public services covering wider psychosocial factors (CONNEKT, 2023). In all cases, within conversations around the youth and gender dimension of violent extremism, agency or the absence of it, lay at the core of the discussion. Even when approaching prevention through resilience-building mechanisms, there is an increasing risk of conceptualising resilience in a submissive way, in which communities need to endure the burden of the drivers (lack of employment, deficient public services, strong perceptions of inequality...) without falling into the trap of extremism (CONNEKT, 2021 and 2023). On the contrary, both youth and women emphasise the need to understand resilience as a way of empowering communities to resist extremism, as well as to confront local, state or international policies that expose their specific community contexts to the combination factors that ignite violent extremism (CONNEKT, 2023a and 2023b).

### THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT MATTERS

Research findings highlight that local grievances matter more in local communities (Bieber and Pollozhani, 2022) and this is why CONNEKT's final purpose is using all the aforementioned knowledge to inform the elaboration of specific guidelines, toolkits and handbooks for local community actors to implement in their local contexts<sup>2</sup>.

Nonetheless, if the whole research process is mainly focused on the community level, the perceptions of grievances of international nature definitely intersect with local ones. When asked about their perception on foreign policy, youth in MENA mentioned particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in both regions the US and the EU constituted the most influential foreign actors (Bondokji and Rawasheh, 2024). Data was collected before October 2023, so the impact of the Israeli war on Gaza was not reflected in the findings.

In the Balkans, the relation with the EU is very much influenced by its enlargement process (Peci, 2024). In the MENA region, the EU's 50% of perceived influence in the respective countries (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2024) might shift with the impact of the current conflict,

as it strengthens the narrative of the injustice committed against the groups with which they identify with. Further research is needed to understand how the conflict-related asymmetries and perceptions of injustice impact youth in the region.

Transnational dynamics are growingly present in the narratives of VE groups and in the perceptions of youth at a community level. In the MENA region this translates into the concerns on how escalating conflict in the Middle East will feed into the narrative of violent groups, already capturing the arguments of the international double standards between Palestine and Ukraine. In the Balkans, the concern on the rising far-right groups and the identity and cultural divides exploited by state and non-state actors.

## 03

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU ON PCVE  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA AND THE BALKANS**1. STRENGTHENING CROSS-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN PCVE:**

- a. As a donor, promote and fund research and actions that engage local national stakeholders to address relevant concerns and challenges according to the specific local contexts, and coordinate engagement with other international donors to avoid overlapping and ensure stable funding to local civil society organisations to set the research and action agenda. The funding should entail the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the proper channelling and use of funds devoted to PCVE and also to create accumulated knowledge on effectiveness, impact and coherence of PCVE policies.
- b. Through the use of EU Delegations in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans, the EU can become a principal triangulator of the discussion and exchange on PCVE policies and practices. EU Delegations have the capacity to identify relevant stakeholders, particularly at the local and community level, in both neighbourhoods and engage them in the cross-regional conversation with the EU on PCVE.
- c. Mobilise DG NEAR expertise and knowledge on and from both regions, promoting a P/CVE “whole of society approach” in EU’s neighbourhood. To this end, facilitate the exchange at a civil society level across MENA and Balkans to coordinate and transfer good practices in the field of action and policy impact. Permanent platforms of exchange on prevention measures and cooperation networks across peripheral regions should be triangulated by the EU. All EU institutions should enhance transparency and accountability on political positions and priorities and strengthen coherence in foreign policy across regions.

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**2. PLACING GOOD GOVERNANCE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND RULE OF LAW AT THE CORE OF THE PCVE EFFORTS:**

- a. Provide sustained funds and stable platforms to foster partnerships for good governance and community engagement and enhance particularly good governance of religious institutions and promote transfer of experience accumulated on PVE with Islamic religious actors to other faith-based organisations.
- b. Avoid asymmetric language regarding prevention and challenge gender stereotypes on women in prevention through promoting an understanding of resilience based on agency rather than submission.
- c. Engage with neighbourhood countries in the difficult conversation of dealing with political grievances as drivers of radicalisation, challenging the overarching focus on religion.
- d. Support governments in their digital transition, and promote training, policy development, knowledge and technology transfer to government and civil society actors in order to deal

with hate speech and extremist content online to improve state responses in both regions. At the same time, in coordination with local stakeholders, foster digital literacy and inclusion, particularly among vulnerable communities.

### 3. PROMOTE RESEARCH AND ACTION IN COOPERATION WITH DIVERSE SOCIAL ACTORS:

- a. Explore the role of **diasporas** as conveyors of narratives and their potential as mediators of EU relations with its neighbourhood. Pay attention to the narratives that stigmatise certain communities under the spotlight of media and political attention.
- b. Advocate for more inclusion of **women** in the decision-making process, also in the field of countering violent extremism. Specific research should deal with masculinities as well as with the role of women and narratives on gender within extremist movements.
- c. Include **youth** in the design, decision-making and implementation of P/CVE policies, particularly regarding the online domain. Youth can contribute to create appealing online content that can provide alternative narratives that resonate to young people. Address the issue of social mobility and the need to improve expectations for youth in the Middle East and North Africa region.
- d. Triangulate cooperation among **local authorities and community stakeholders** to enlarge leisure opportunities for young people, promote non-formal education activities, cultural activities that foster collective identities - through expanding for example European exchange cultural programs - and sports as alternative spaces of belonging. Promoting safe spaces for youth to voice out their concerns should be a priority. Civic engagement should not be destined to fill in the gaps left by public services, but they should be avenues to channel youth's energies (and anger) into non-violent meaningful political participation.

## 04 CONCLUSION

It is evident that the European Union needs to enlarge the conversation on PCVE policies to its neighbourhood and that the EU can play a unique role in promoting the exchange and cross-fertilisation of knowledge and best practices across the MENA region and the Balkans. The issue at stake is whether the EU will invest the necessary strength to this triangulation so that cooperation across regions on PCVE allows societies and policy-makers to be better prepared for the coming security challenges at a global, regional and local scale.

The overlapping of crises, driving factors and contextual variables requires embracing complexity to grasp the intersection of drivers and trends that travel from local to global, through the dissatisfaction of youngsters and their rising trust gap towards formal political structures. Common trends across the MENA region and the Balkans indicate the visible gateways for rising extremist expressions as well as offer clues on the potential avenues to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism, empowering particularly the agency of youth and their engagement in social transformation as well as establishing a more symmetrical dialogue and relation across regions.

## 05

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