Towards a Holistic Understanding of the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation in Europe

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Abstract

The focus on radicalisation has increased in recent years in response to incidents of international terrorism. European countries have boosted funding into various prevention policies and counter-radicalisation tools in an attempt to tackle the ever-increasing threat of broader social problems, political extremism and home-grown terrorism. However, these efforts have yet delivered coherent and effective initiatives that curtail the onset of radical tendencies disengage those who have already embraced violent extremism, and minimise the effectivity of terrorist entities. This article introduces the European research funded project Policy Recommendation and Improved Communication Tools for Law Enforcement and Security Agencies Preventing Violent Radicalisation (Pericles). The project develops a comprehensive approach to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism in Europe by addressing operational gaps and introducing developments that are modelled to the needs of practitioners. In addition, the needs of families will be explored in which the children or parents are radicalised or at risk of radicalisation. The project recognises the importance of families in identifying the signs of radicalisation and as a useful instrument for prevention and de-radicalisation. The project delivers a comprehensive understanding of current European counter-radicalisation programmes and policies as well as five tools that will enhance the capabilities of frontline staff in detecting radicalisation and formulating an informed response. The Pericles toolkit includes an advanced cyber-space detection system, an enhanced platform of exchange, vulnerability assessment tool, family care package, and an updated skills and competencies package.

Key words:

Extremism, policy recommendations, radicalisation, prevention.

Violent radicalisation in Europe

The threat of terrorism in Europe is high, with terrorist attacks of increasing frequency and diverse and complex threats from terror organisations. Perhaps most troubling is the growing sophistication with which terrorist organisations spread their ideologies and develop their recruitment strategies. Manifestations of radicalisation are becoming more diverse and complex, with groups exploiting societal vulnerabilities, whether these are social tensions or political polarisation (Lub, 2013). Although violent extremism is not a new phenomenon, innovative methods in the way individuals are being targeted present new challenges to law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and other relevant actors. One particular challenge is the number of individuals being successfully radicalised 'virtually', i.e., via the internet (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013). The European Union has responded by funding the development of measures that monitor and obstruct such activities, though not every member state has incorporated these into their counter-radicalisation strategy. The innovative capabilities of terrorist recruitment therefore raises the question of whether counterterrorism strategies are up-to-date enough to be able to handle such challenges. The serious investment in prevention strategies and proposals occurring across Europe may give the impression

that progress towards curtailing terrorism and related activities is being achieved. However, Western policy makers have struggled to deliver viable options that both boost successful results and provide LEAs and security agencies with the tools they need to properly manage security risks, protect the public and prevent terrorist attacks. Furthermore, any progress made is outpaced by the burgeoning spread of violent extremism through large-scale social engineering and technological advancements, especially on the internet.

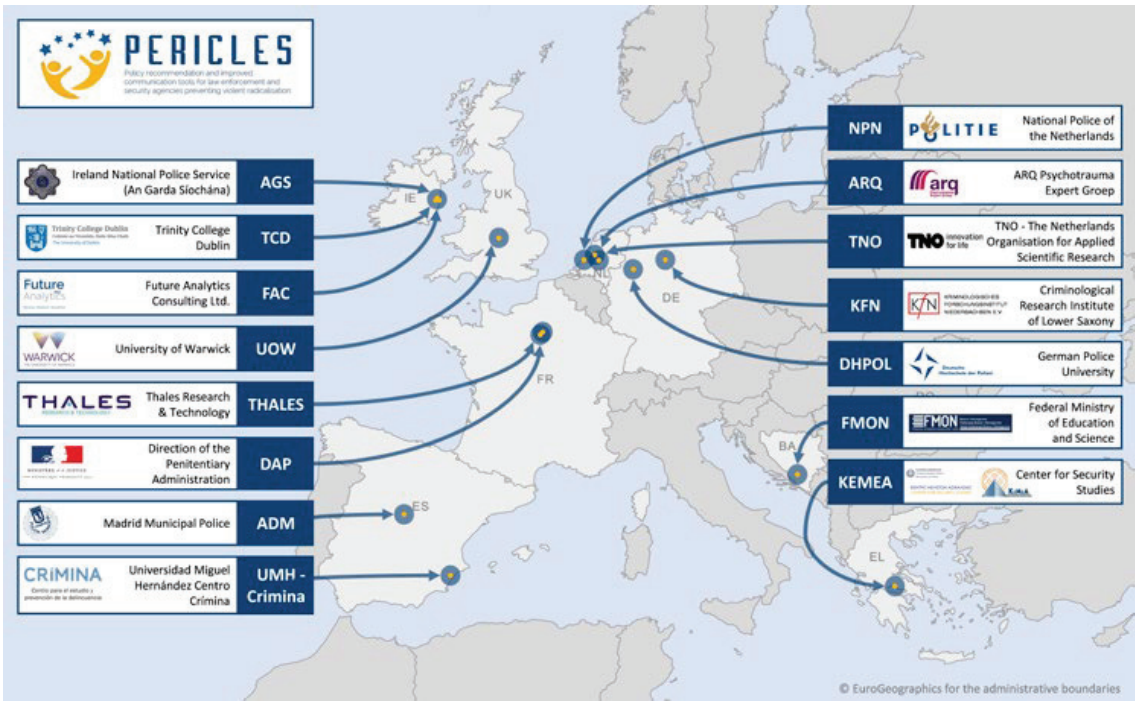
Current efforts fall short in a number of ways. First, there is little evidence demonstrating the effectiveness or assessing the impact of existing programmes and projects. The discernible lack of systematic evaluation of counter-extremism and radicalisation projects and programmes should be a pressing concern for both funding bodies and practitioners in the field of prevention (Kudlacek et al., 2017). Second, end user needs are only partially addressed by the action plans of current preventative initiatives. Third, there is insufficient development of the kind of specialised instruments that can identify individuals at risk of radicalisation and which could provide a guiding framework with which to address this vulnerability and that provides support to the individual's needs. Finally, an absence of technical solutions is identifiable in the prevention of online radicalisation. There is a need for the development of "intelligent" technologies than can scan and categorize web and multimedia data and detect radical speech in public communication channels, in order to achieve "early prevention" (Camacho et al., 2016). Current measures gather information mainly from open sources using the conventional keyword based approaches, which have proven to be highly unsuccessful. Current time-consuming and outdated practices need upgrading and the development of an online tool for the detection and prevention of radicalisation is an essential step in this process.

The Pericles project will deliver concrete progress in this area, developing tools including an advanced cyber-space detection system, an enhanced platform of exchange, a vulnerability assessment tool, family care package, and an updated skills and competencies package. In doing so, Pericles adopts a much-needed dynamic understanding of the full range of challenges that LEAs are faced. Moreover, it builds in depth understanding of the preferences and needs of end users which will, in turn, inform ongoing toolkit development and adjustments.

Overall methodology

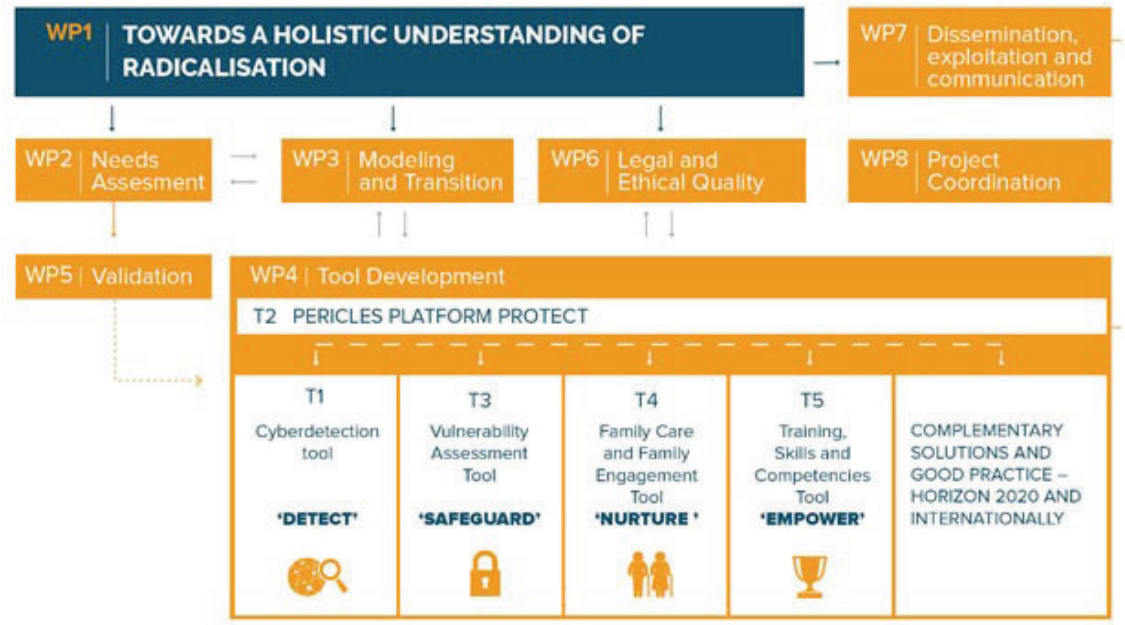
Pericles is an EU-funded project under the Horizon 2020 *Research and Innovation* action. The project consortium consists of large international companies, small and medium enterprises, research and development organisations, and academic partners. The full list of partners are outlined in figure 1.

Figure 1 — Pericles consortium



The Pericles vision is to develop a comprehensive approach to preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism, which provides LEAs and security agencies with enhanced tools to assist them in their practice. Although the project largely addresses the needs of LEAs, the comprehensiveness of the Pericles prevention strategy allows it to be used by prisons, social workers, teachers and other educational workers, and the families of 'at-risk' individuals. The ideologies of violent left-wing and right-wing extremism as well as religious extremism are addressed by the project. Pericles also maintains a special focus on the risks connected with violent propaganda in the digital sphere. This is achieved through a structured methodical framework comprising of eight targeted work packages, which have clear inter-linkages to ensure that relevant results and conclusions feed in to each other.

Figure 2 — Pericles work plan



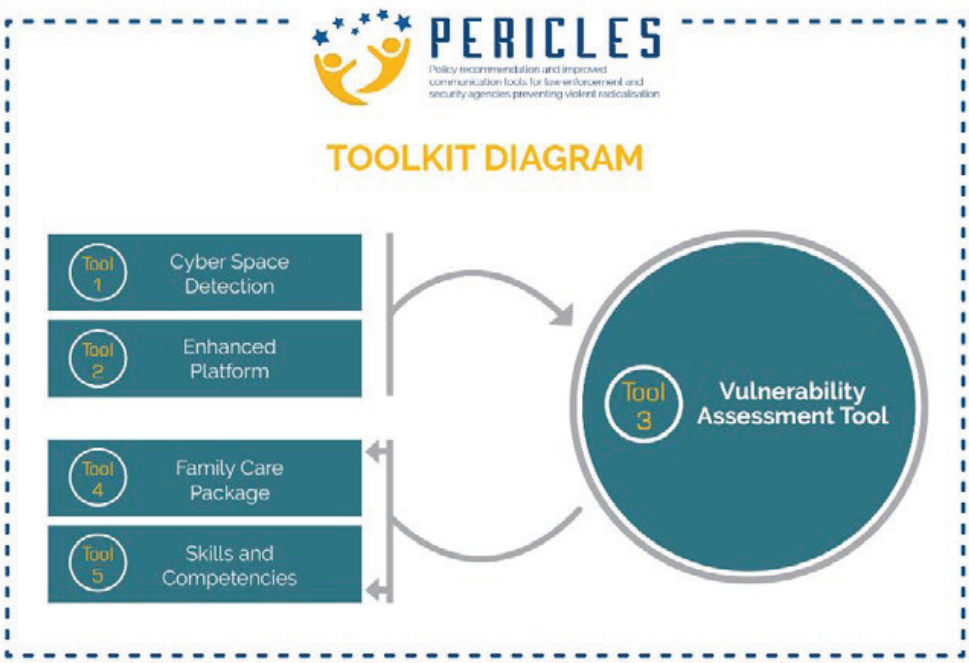
The project's first work package provides an overview and analysis of contemporary prevention tools and polices in Europe that aim to counteract the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals. This will provide an understanding of prevention efforts in different contexts and allows for the identification of first line practitioners to whom the Pericles toolkit will be directed. A variety of information sources will be used to collect the data, such as academic peer reviewed and professional journals, research textbooks on the subject area, policy documents and implementation strategies from national governments and non-governmental organisations. In a second step, an analysis will be performed on the data collected in order to identify any gaps existing in modern prevention and counter-radicalisation policies. Such an analysis is critical for raising awareness of which tools/measures front-line practitioners require in order to better tackle radicalisation. The results of this analysis will guide the development of the Pericles toolkit in work package four.

In order to capture the knowledge and experiences of key actors in the field of counter-radicalisation, a needs assessment will be conducted in work package two that will collect data from LEAs, former radicals, convicted terrorists and families of radicals throughout Europe. A series of interviews and questionnaires will be devised. These will aim to elicit a detailed description of the respondent's background and lifestyle, factors motivating him or her to join the radical groups and, where applicable, factors prompting him or her to disengage and/or de-radicalise. Participants will be drawn from TERRA's network and the Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE) network, which are grassroots networks of organisations, families and individuals at the forefront of countering violent extremism

in Europe. The results drawn from work package one (holistic understanding of counter-radicalisation) and work package two (needs assessment) will then be refined into two theoretical models; the first model conceptualises the radicalisation processes and the second the policies and solutions for counter-radicalisation. This is to ensure that the Pericles toolkit will be developed according to end-user requirements. Both models will enrich the understanding of how individuals radicalise and the programmes that are suitable in preventing and countering this process. Taken together, they also provide the technical backbone for the development of the tools. The results from the aforementioned work packages will come together to form the Pericles toolkit. Here, new and enhanced tools will improve practitioner capabilities in the identification, response to, and support of individuals at risk of radicalisation.

- **Cyber-space detection system.** Pericles will provide an updated cyber-space detection system based on an analysis of metadata and violent and online-radicalised communication. Social networks will be studied, with a focus on Twitter, which is one of the most popular open channels of dissemination of radical propaganda (Miró-Llinares & Rodríguez-Sala, 2016; Esteve-Campello, Miró-Llinares & Rabasa-Dolado, 2017).
- **Enhanced platform of exchange.** An enhanced platform will be generated that provides end users with a more efficient interface for exchanging information and examples of best practices of strategies and tools aimed at preventing radicalisation.

Figure 3 — Pericles toolkit



- **Vulnerability assessment tool.** An assessment tool will be developed that combines a variety of indicators from 'at-risk' individuals and groups, to create a risk evaluation along with recommended actions. Indicators include religion, family circumstances, personal factors and local resources.
- **Family care package.** Tailored material for family members of those at risk of radicalisation will be produced. Families will be provided with advice and support on how they can detect signs of radicalisation, how to intervene during the earliest stages, and the best course of action to take.
- **Updated skills and competencies package.** An updated counter-radicalisation training course will be developed for frontline staff in order to increase their knowledge, awareness and understanding of radicalisation for better preparedness. These interactive courses will involve the latest tools and resources to cover crucial points, such as warning signs, providing advice to vulnerable individuals, and developing the skills to build resilience.

Vulnerability assessment tool

Law enforcement agencies, alongside other front-line workers, are in the unique position of working with individuals vulnerable to radicalisation. With sufficient knowledge and equipment and once an assessment of the warning signs has been conducted, LEAs are better able to respond to radicalisation. It is difficult, however, to conduct a reliable assessment, and this is a potential pitfall in the process. Pericles addresses this by developing an assessment tool that combines a variety of risk indicators in order to create a risk evaluation. The vulnerability assessment tool (VAT) provides support to stakeholders regarding the identification of vulnerable individuals in their environment, as well as offering a range of options for how to approach individuals, which can be considered and implemented on identification. It combines different types of indicators such as behaviour, school results, mental health issues, police records, and social contacts in order to assess the vulnerability of an individual or group to (further) radicalisation. The methodology builds upon the Pericles Cyberspace Detection Tool and Enhanced Platform as well as relevant academic research findings and expertise from other projects such as EU FP7 projects SAFIRE ([2]) and TERRA ([3]). The tool uses and builds on existing vulnerability indicator sets and assessment tools for radicalisation that are now being used by, among others, the Dutch National Police. Certain combinations of the indicators should lead to a red flag, indicating certain assessed risk of radicalisation, and appropriate interventions will be proposed. By combining indicators from diverse agencies, such as LEAs, schools, and social services, cooperation between these organisations will be stimulated and a multi-agency perspective will be promoted.

([2]) More information on the SAFIRE project, including detailed descriptions of project results, can be found at http://www.safire-project-results.eu/.

([3]) More information on the TERRA project, including detailed descriptions of project results, can be found at http://www.terra-net.eu/.

An enhanced platform of exchange

A multi-agency approach is needed to support individuals in making well-informed decisions on how to support people vulnerable to radicalisation. Developing a support package that generates the best possible guidance should therefore include the knowledge and expertise of key players in counter-radicalisation. A clear challenge here concerns the absence of an information-sharing platform between the relevant actors both on a national and international level. The enhanced exchange tool, to be developed in Pericles, responds to the increasing need for timely information exchange when vulnerable people are identified. Although the need for a multi-agency approach has been identified in various European Member States, very few counter-radicalisation strategies have actually been developed on this basis. Frontline practitioners often deal with radicalised individuals, or those at risk, using only the databases provided from their own organisation. The Pericles exchange platform extends the availability of information to an international basis in quick time. The tool supports law enforcement agencies, among other stakeholders, in a two-fold process. The first application of the tool is the identification of different stakeholder profiles in the field of counter-radicalisation (relevant practitioners, societal users and law enforcement agents). Relevant actors, their objectives, roles and relationships are visualised on screen to identify the skills and support such groups can offer as well as a prompt identification of the limitations they face. In its second application, the tool matches a best possible approach to the situation at hand. The solutions suggested are both produced on the basis of the information entered by the user and drawn from the best practices of relevant actors across Europe.

The Pericles exchange platform is an information sharing tool, allowing the user to access and share information nationally and select best practice approaches. New information is not created by the system and the tool does not exist as an intelligence system. Instead, the exchange platform facilitates access to existing information relevant to the prevention of radicalisation. The tool compiles numerous response actions from international prevention sources. Given the potential sensitivity of the information shared and the various legal and privacy policies governing information exchange, the tool and its resulting activities are overseen by the ethical and security boards of the project. The exchange platform exists on a secure Internet server and end-user accounts are established for the participating users.

Practical problems addressed

The gravity of the threat from radicalisation has prompted the development of various tools that countries have used to help tackle violent extremism. Even though countering radicalisation has been high on the political agenda in the EU, there are limited technologies enhancing the capabilities of LEAs to meet their prevention goals in the counter-radicalisation domain. With the two new tools proposed in this project—the vulnerability assessment

tool and the enhanced platform of exchange—LEAs can achieve improved monitoring and contextualisation of individuals and groups exhibiting signs of violent extremism. The resistance of practitioners to accommodating new tools for tackling radicalisation demonstrates a potential obstacle. Pericles overcomes this through a close collaboration with its many LEA partners, whose expertise and opinions will shape the evolution, direction and eventual output of the project. In order to address the increasing complexities of violent extremism, outdated technologies and methods should be replaced with new systems, tools and practices. Keeping up-to-date with terror-related advancements is needed to effectively prevent the onset of terrorism and radicalisation and should take the form of long-term measures that involve collaborations and information-exchange between national and international practitioners.

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