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Commissioning Research on Violent Extremism:
Lessons Learned from the STRIVE Global Program

Farangiz Atamuradova

Carlotta Nanni

ABSTRACT[1]

As research on violent extremism (VE) and terrorism continues to grow, the safety and protection of those individuals involved in this research needs to grow simultaneously. At the same time, the various stakeholders commissioning the research also face significant methodological, ethical, legal and financial challenges in ensuring CVE research is conducted to the highest standards. An analysis of CVE research from the perspective of the donors has gone highly unnoticed. The aim of this chapter is to bring attention to select challenges and lessons research commissioners have come across during the first four years of implementation of Hedayah's STRIVE Global[2] Program using the Western Balkans as a case study. Learning from the challenges identified through submitted research proposals and final papers, the chapter concludes with a checklist of good practices for use by researchers and research commissioners of violent extremism and terrorism studies moving forward.

INTRODUCTION

In response to an existing threat of violent extremism (VE) and terrorism, an increasing amount of research has tried to better understand, prevent, and counter the phenomenon. Conducting research on violent extremism is challenging due to the absence of a universally accepted definition and the high sensitivity of the topic. This sensitivity has ethical implications, including both the safety of the researcher and the research subjects, underlining the pressing need to abide by legal and moral frameworks. Other challenges of researching violent extremism are linked to the project design and methodological frameworks. This includes ensuring a representative sample, an appropriate methodology for data collection, and the proper analysis and validation of the findings.

Importantly, the research process does not only involve the researchers, but also the stakeholders or donors commissioning the research. Organizations commissioning research on violent extremism face several difficulties, such as ensuring the quality and accuracy of the final research output, verifying compliance with ethical principles of research, and acknowledging inherent biases. Furthermore, it is difficult to closely monitor research processes from a distance. Finally, while the contextual knowledge of the research organization may be strong, there remains much room for improvement on more specific research skills that may affect final findings.

Through the STRIVE Global Program, Hedayah commissioned research to explore the drivers of radicalization in the Western Balkans and other regions. The program's target audience are credible, local organizations, institutions, or universities that do not normally receive international donor funding.

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1   The opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and are not representative of Hedayah or the STRIVE Global Program.

2   The STRIVE Global Program is a five year and half program (May 2015 – December 2020), funded by the European Union through the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (ICSP). Its overall objective is to build the capacity of state and non-state actors to effectively challenge radicalization leading to violent extremism.

Based on our experience publishing calls for proposals[3] and commissioning research throughout four years of implementing the STRIVE Global Program, Hedayah developed a checklist of good practices for researchers submitting proposals and for organizations commissioning research on similar topics. This chapter delineates those good practices and why they are important, both for researchers and research commissioners.

The checklist explained in this chapter was developed through a cross-analysis of common practices within proposals and research papers submitted to Hedayah's STRIVE's program targeting the Western Balkans. To verify the accuracy of this cross-analysis, the authors also surveyed the 34 organizations who had submitted proposals or papers for research in the region.[4] While the checklist was developed based on reflections and experiences commissioning research in the Western Balkans, it contains valuable recommendations and insights that can be applied to other contexts.

While there are many difficulties researchers and commissioners of research face, this chapter discusses only three main challenges which are, in our opinion, the most relevant in the context of the Western Balkans. This, however, is not to say that the challenges outlined in this chapter are necessarily exhaustive in the Western Balkans or in other contexts, nor are the recommendations outlined in this chapter the only remedies available to address them.

The three main challenges can be summarized as follows. First among the challenges discussed in this chapter is the choice of research topics. Despite the deep contextual understanding and expertise of local researchers, popular research trends and the interests of donors can influence the research topics they select. This, in effect, can affect opportunities for researchers to study topics that might be of greater relevance within their own country. A second challenge discussed in this chapter revolves around the ethical considerations required for research focusing on violent extremism, including the Do No Harm approach. Researchers operating in familiar contexts face specific ethical challenges and may run into obstacles or blind spots that researchers external to the context may otherwise avoid with significant implications for the research. The third and final challenge discussed in this essay is the development and implementation of coherent and relevant research designs and the clarification of existing assumptions, biases, and terminologies ensuring ease of reference for readers. A carefully outlined research paper with all underlying assumptions and definitions ensures the readers fully understand the perspective taken by the researchers.

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3   The call for proposals mechanism has been adopted to select the local organizations in STRIVE target areas (Central Asia, Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa region, South Caucasus, and Turkey) to which to provide financial and technical support. Four calls for proposals divided by geographical and/or thematic lots for third party research organizations have been published since the start of the program in May 2015.

4   Only seven of the thirty-four grant receiving organizations responded to the survey. Data from their survey responses contributed to the development of the checklist.

CHALLENGE 1:

Navigating Popular Research Trends & Donor-Driven Research Topics

Demand for research on religious-based violent extremism has increased worldwide since the launch of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). More recent attacks carried out by or in the name of extremist groups proclaiming a religious cause—most notably by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—accelerated interest in religiously motivated violent extremism worldwide.[5] However, while ISIS and other groups that proclaim themselves as "Islamic" have dominated the headlines over the years, other violent extremist groups, including far-right political groups, are on the rise.[6]

As an organization evaluating research proposals, it is difficult to discern whether submitted proposals either reflect the local dynamics, what researchers perceive as a topic likely to be funded based on the popularity of the research topics at the time or, instead, one likely to be of interest to the funding entity. Research proposals we received from the Western Balkans tended to focus on violent extremism carried out in the name of religion. Only limited, if any, attention was given to far-right violent extremism, violent hooliganism, or neo-Nazi movements, all of which are gaining prominence in nearly all the Western Balkan countries and beyond. [7] Many of the proposals omitted a general assessment of the context and often seemed to suggest that ISIS-inspired violent extremism represents the only type of violent extremism in the region. While this may be true for some countries, evidence suggests that it is not an accurate depiction of the region as a whole.[8]

At the same time, however, researchers and commissioners face a dilemma: researching far-right violent extremism may be increasingly complicated and a lack of this research may create a misconception of the actual nature of violent extremism and violent extremist threats in a given context. The increasing popularity of far-right political discourses in Europe, for example, makes it harder to conduct research that is not construed as political in nature. Studies on the far right often point out the blurring lines between mainstream political and extremist rhetoric.[9] An attempt to mitigate the possibility that research findings will be misinterpreted could discourage researchers as well as research commissioners from broaching these politically sensitive topics. Unfortunately, this dynamic can result in a body of literature that may not necessarily reflect the entire spectrum of violent extremist trends and threats.

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5   The term "religious-based violent extremists" is used to refer primarily to groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

6   Global Terrorism Index, *Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018), 3, http://visionofhumanity.org/reports.

7   Valery Perry, *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2019).

8   Zdravko Saveski and Artan Sadiku, *The Radical Right in Macedonia* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, December 2012), https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/09568.pdf.

9   Luke Kelly, *Overview of Research on Far Right Extremism in the Western Balkans,* K4D Helpdesk Report (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, June 2019), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620_Western_Balkans_far_Right.pdf

Based on our experience, to address these issues, researchers and commissioners should be cognizant of and work to address the following:

- Commissioners of research should be mindful of how they word their calls for papers and their criteria within them, both of which may influence or overly circumscribe the proposals they receive.[10] Researchers will likely try to write research proposals that would increase their chances of receiving funds by "ticking the boxes" commissioners set or are perceived to have set. As a result, the more dictated and narrow in focus the call is, the less room there is for truly locally identified research topics. In the Western Balkans and beyond, donor-driven priorities, rather than locally identified trends and issues, have resulted in a redundant body of research on violent extremism, which misses the opportunity to address local issues and trends.[11] Organizations commissioning research must reflect and take into account how their own biases and personal views may affect their funding decisions and, therefore, existing research on violent extremism. Commissioning organizations might also consider avoiding specifications on research topics that may imply a strong preference for a specific type or definition of violent extremism.

- From a commissioner's experience, it can be helpful to involve local experts in the development of calls for proposals and to include them in the proposal review board to ensure contextual reflection. This approach ensures a flexible yet contextually specific selection process. Short-listed proposals present an innovative approach to researching identified gaps in the given context.

- Donors should encourage researchers to be assertive when identifying and presenting research topics and questions, especially when the proposed research may not entirely fit within a donor's preferred research topics. A strong, well-validated literature review and situational analysis of the research topic and its importance can justify topic selection in the proposal. While this may not guarantee funding, it will at the very least provide the commissioning entity a more accurate picture of local concerns about and variation in violent extremist actors, dynamics, and trends.

CHALLENGE 2:

Adhering to Ethical Principles in Research

Tore Bjørgo, head of Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, states, "extremism is a research ethics minefield where there is a risk of serious missteps."[12] While this quote refers to ethical challenges in the context of interviewing Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right extremist, it is apt in describing researching violent extremism more broadly. The issue of ethics is

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10   For more on this, see: Perry, "Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia."
11   Saveski and Sadiku, *The Radical Right in Macedonia*.
12   Elin Fugelsnes, "Extremism is a Research Ethics Minefield," *ScienceNordic,* June 25, 2016, http://sciencenordic.com/extremism-research-ethics-minefield.

important in any kind of research and even more critical with highly sensitive research topics such as violent extremism.

The aim of ethics and protocols is to protect human subjects, "safeguarding them from any potential harm that participating in the study could bring, warning them of these dangers, and ensuring that they give a fully informed consent to participate."[13] A number of publications highlight the importance of ethics in researching violent extremism specifically and scholars, practitioners, and researchers continue to widely discuss the topic.[14] The U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research's *Belmont Report* outlines general, basic principles of ethics relevant to social research, including:

1 respect for persons: "subjects enter into the research voluntarily and with adequate information," essentially respecting their autonomy or protecting those with "diminished autonomy"

2 beneficence: "persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being"

3 justice: where all subjects are treated equally and equals should not be discriminated depending on their existing conditions

Source: Adapted from *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subject Research.*[15]

Research topics proposed by Western Balkans STRIVE applicants varied. Some focused on understanding the relationship between violent extremism and vulnerable populations, while others focused on returning terrorist fighters. Some sought to study disengagement, deradicalization, and rehabilitation programs, while others sought to understand the role of the educational sector, mass or social media, and local religious narratives and discourses; youth and women; or factors increasing the susceptibility to radicalization. Despite their topical diversity, all the proposed research topics proved highly sensitive,

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13   Anne Speckhard, "Research Challenges Involved in Field Research and Interviews Regarding the Militant Jihad, Extremism, and Suicide Terrorism," *Democracy and Security* 5, no.3 (2009): 199-222, https://doi.org/10.1080/17419160903183409.

14   To name a few: Marie Breen Smyth, "Subjectivities, 'Suspect Communities', Governments and Ethics of Research on 'Terrorism'," in *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda,* eds. Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 194-215; Ted Reynolds, "Ethical and Legal Issues Surrounding Academic Research into Online Radicalization: A UK Experience," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no.3 (2012): 499-513, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.723447.

15   The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subject Research, Report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979), https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/sites/default/files/the-belmont-report-508c_FINAL.pdf.

with specific ethical implications. One component of the STRIVE research review was a careful assessment of research methodology design and the incorporation of ethical principles. As part of the research methodology, we assessed the data gathering techniques employed in the research for any potential ethical issues.

Research can be qualitative, quantitative, or a mix of both. The data gathering technique is determined depending on the research question and context and each method requires ethical considerations. Rarely, however, did the concept notes we received cover the ethical aspects of the research project and how applicants planned to address these issues. There are a number of publications and ethics committees that provide guidance on how to best address the ethical aspects of research.[16] Basic ethical considerations include informing the participants of the purpose of the study, their ability to withdraw from the study at any point, where and how their data will be stored and for how long, and who will have access to it. Another common issue is that potential research participants may be hesitant to partake in the project due to sensitivities or dangers to their personal security, whether from violent extremist groups or security forces.

THE DO NO HARM APPROACH & RESEARCHING VULNERABLE GROUPS

A critical ethical consideration when conducting research is the Do No Harm approach, especially when researching vulnerable populations. One of the main concerns is that participating in the research may stigmatize an identified group of individuals, which can be mitigated adopting Do No Harm principles and practices.

Among the proposals for research on violent extremism that Hedayah received for the STRIVE Global Program, many involved research with or on potentially vulnerable populations, including proposals that aimed to assess their "susceptibility" to radicalization. From the reviewers' perspective, research on vulnerable populations raises several concerns. First, considering that individuals engaged in extremist activities can vary significantly in age, socioeconomic status, literacy level, occupation, ethnicity, ideology, and past criminal records, it is difficult and problematic to suggest one broad grouping of individuals as more "susceptible" to radicalization than any other.

Second, a research proposal referring to a population believed to be more vulnerable to radicalization based solely on any one characteristic—among proposed research topics in the Western Balkans, their ethnic background most notably—can lead to the stigmatization of and unjustified attention toward the targeted group in policy and practice and in the broader population. At best, such research demonstrates implicit reductionism and confirmation bias. At worst, research carried out without consideration of its ethical implications on one specific group in a larger population can further divisions based on pre-exist-

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16   Speckhard, "Research Challenges Involved in Field Research and Interviews Regarding the Militant Jihad, Extremism, and Suicide Terrorism"; Reynolds, "Ethical and Legal Issues Surrounding Academic Research into Online Radicalization." For additional resources, see: British Educational Research Association, available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/; University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC), available at: https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/.

ing social structures. Research stigmatizing a community, even inadvertently, can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginalization, which could, in turn, play into the grievance narratives violent extremists use to recruit new members.

There is no proven causality between a social vulnerability factor and radicalization. This lack of evidence of causation, despite observed correlation during the research conducted by STRIVE Global grantees, poses challenges to countering violent extremism (CVE) program development and implementation. CVE needs to balance practicality, ethics, and effectiveness to avoid reinforcing false assumptions, stereotypes, and misjudgements. It is imperative that researchers and research commissioners alike adopt the principle of Do No Harm to account for any negative implications of research.

Based on our experience, to address these issues, researchers and commissioners should be cognizant of and work to address the following:

- **Donors should require that proposals adopt formal or informal ethical reviews to their research before submission.** In the STRIVE Global Program, the proposals with more developed ethical procedures typically originated from universities. Universities usually have an ethics committee or review board in place ensuring that any research the university conceptualizes, commissions, and/or conducts abides by established ethical principles and guidelines. This is not to say that university-conducted research alone is always ethical. However, based on the experience of the STRIVE Global Program, universities tended to demonstrate proper processes for addressing ethical concerns. Research institutes or local organizations should establish similar mechanisms, even informal ones, to ensure that ethical principles are considered.

- **To promote forward planning for ethical challenges in the research process, research commissioners could encourage researchers to develop their own ethical checklist or provide guidelines to the researchers.** Research commissioners are also encouraged to create their own ethical checklist for applicants and include it in the proposal requirements. The checklist should address ethical questions related to how the researchers gather data, inform research participants about the purpose and parameters of the study, and how they will store and protect the data they gathered, including information about who will have access to their data and how long it will be kept. The list can be altered and extended depending on the context, where certain questions will be more vital than others.

- **Proposals must account for political sensitivities around the collected data, how their findings could be misconstrued if not presented in a generally acceptable way, and the ethical and security implications of the overarching political dynamics.** To do so, it is important that the organizations commissioning research know the context of the target countries well or involve local experts in the evaluation and revision process (both procedures that were followed in STRIVE Global Program). We encouraged applicants to inform governments or even involve official entities in the

research process to mitigate political sensitivities. Additionally, STRIVE advises successful applicants to submit the research findings for peer review for any sensitivities.

- **Research commissioners must maintain awareness of the sensitivities and potential biases within the context they are commissioning research and within research proposals.** Research commissioners and researchers should be aware of how the given research could strengthen the external negative perceptions towards already stigmatized or marginalized groups in a given context, resulting in a perpetuation of underdevelopment and discrimination. As mentioned in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) *Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe*, "it is important to challenge assumptions about any risk assessment tool and process so as to avoid profiling or stigmatizing individuals or even pushing them towards violence."[17] To mitigate some of these concerns, researchers should take great care to present the requisite evidence underlying their research decisions, clearly outline any of their own conflicts of interest, be transparent regarding their own assumptions and biases in research proposals and processes, and strategize ways in which to avoid causing harm within the populations they are studying.

- **Researchers need to clearly acknowledge existing assumptions and mitigate inherent biases, both of which contribute to the proposal's strength.** Ensuring a diverse and inclusive team of researchers in terms of ethnicity, religion, and gender can be a good balancing strategy. Biases should be clearly and honestly stated in the limitations of the study.

- **Researchers should abide by the Do No Harm principle in their research design to ensure that neither the research process nor its outcomes inadvertently contribute to the further marginalization of specific ethnic or religious groups or put participants at risk.** This is particularly true in research exploring the "vulnerability" of specific groups to radicalization. Researchers must be cognizant of the fact that research findings can be interpreted beyond their original intent or meaning, feeding into local narratives that promote stigmatization or political goals.

- **The Do No Harm principle should guide the evaluation of the research methodology and its potential long-term impact within the society to avoid creating community alienation.** This is problematic in research that involves interviews with former foreign fighters, for instance. A number of research proposals did not explain the possible implications their interviews may have on the lives of these individuals and their families or the strategy to mitigate the risks for the researchers themselves. For instance, interviewing a returning terrorist fighter may result in an unwanted attention drawn towards the individual and the family. Whether during the concept note stage or throughout project implementation, STRIVE ensures the partner organization abides by the Do No Harm principle and seeks to clarify any questions that may raise concerns in the future.

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17   OSCE, Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe (Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2019): 18, https://www.osce.org/secretariat/418274.

- Researchers need to consider the above points on the Do No Harm principle before submitting their work. Reviewers will likely judge by the coverage of sensitive aspects and compliance with the Do No Harm approach. The approach is meant to help "practitioners think through the short- and long-term effects of certain initiatives or programs on a community," to avoid negative, unintended consequences.[18]

- Finally, researchers should explicitly state all their assumptions, biases, and caveats upfront in research proposals and final research products. Outlining assumptions helps the reader understand the limitations and the realities of the analysis and the findings and safeguards against risks associated with the overgeneralization and overstatement of research findings. Upholding ethical principles during the research is one of the main elements to fall under scrutiny from other researchers and donor organizations. Failing to abide by ethical principles may lead to reputational damage for all parties.

CHALLENGE 3:

Developing and Implementing a Realistic, Logical, and Coherent Research Design

In our experience reviewing research proposals and final papers, we noticed that some crucial elements of the research design were routinely missing. At other times, proposals fail to define key terms, explain research questions and data analysis methods, or delineate budget plans and timelines.

Sufficient details in the research design can help to orient the research commissioner to better understand the critical research questions and methodologies involved in the research, which reduces the need for over-involvement in the research process once funded. Clear communication throughout the proposal review process and project implementation period is, therefore, essential.[19] Hence, as an organization commissioning research, we strive to ensure that all the questions reviewers of a proposal or final paper may ask are answered.

Good practices for researchers and commissioners to ensure a coherent research design and proposal based on our experience:

- Always conduct and include a proper literature review. We often carry out a thorough literature and context review to assess existing gaps and needs and to avoid duplication of efforts.

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18 Georgia Holmer, *Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013), 5, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR336-Countering%20Violent%20Extremism-A%20Peacebuilding%20Perspective.pdf.

19   For further discussion, see: David Malet and Mark Korbitz, *Resilience is for Research Designs Too: Funders, Researchers, & Navigating Study Constraints* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://resolvenet.org/research/resilience-research-designs-too-funders-researchers-navigating-study-constraints.

This is a common practice that should be carried out by the researchers as well as the commissioning organization.

- **Define all the terms used in the research project.** While we still lack an official definition of certain terms related to violent extremism,[20] it is important that researchers define the terms they employ and explain how they relate to the proposed research questions. In some cases, organizations use the terms "extremism", "radicalism", "violent extremism", and "radicalization" interchangeably. The confusion among the terms can be partly due to the translation of the words between local languages and English. In order to mitigate definitional confusion, we suggest STRIVE Global grantees write the final paper in the local language and then translate it into English in close collaboration with a professional translating company to avoid any loss of information. As a commissioner, we strongly encourage grantees to allocate appropriate funds for translation in the initial budgeting phase. Based on our experience, translating final documents has been less costly than continuous translation.

- **Make sure information about research design and planned analysis of results is complete.** Commissioned research projects have financial and time constraints. When receiving proposals, reviewers not only assess the quality but also how well the research project is planned in terms of objectives, realistic research questions, methods, timeframes, and budget lines. At times, proposals submitted to STRIVE were ambitious and not feasible with the given grant financial amount and time. If a certain project is selected, reviewers assist grantees to keep their project within the given time and financial framework to attain the best results. Sometimes less is more when developing research proposals: more efficient projects are focused on one or two specific research questions and articulate how answers to those questions contribute to the body of knowledge or influence policy change.[21]

- **At the completion stage of the project, the organization shares their research report with commissioners for a final peer review before publication.** Based on the experience of reviewing these reports, those that went through a smoother peer review process demonstrated the following:

  - The research design was time-sensitive, attainable, realistic, and valid;

  - Validity checks on the research process, methods, and data were in place and successfully implemented to ensure data triangulation;

  - The findings were situated within the existing research in the local context, providing a comprehensive analysis of the findings;

  - The researchers aptly paired quantitative and qualitative data in a logical and accurate manner, drawing analysis from the two.

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20 For a detailed discussion, see, for example: J.M. Berger, *Researching Violent Extremism: The State of Play* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://resolvenet.org/research/researching-violent-extremism-state-play.

21 For a detailed discussion of narrowing research foci, see: *Kris Inman Going Back to Basics: Going Back to Basics: Research on Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2019-10/RSVE_RVESeries_Backto-Basics_ResearchonVE_KInman_Oct2019.pdf.

In conclusion, both researchers and research commissioning organizations should review existing research in a specific context to avoid duplication of efforts, over-funding similar projects, and missing existing gaps in research. Furthermore, researchers should carefully outline all existing hypotheses, assumptions, limitations, and key terminologies to guide reviewers and readers on the thought processes and situational circumstances of the research conducted. Finally, while providing an analysis solely on the gathered data may be insightful, it is important to interrelate, compare, and contrast various sources of data to present coherent conclusions from the research conducted.

CONCLUSION

A Recommended Checklist for Researchers & Research Commissioners

This chapter provided an overview of selected issues research commissioners have come across during the implementation of Hedayah's STRIVE Global Program focused on the Western Balkans. Based on the submitted research proposals and final papers, the authors have developed a list of recommendations for researchers and research commissioners moving forward:

- Consider all existing forms of violent extremism present in the target areas before developing a research proposal. At the same time, research commissioners need to be mindful of how they word their call for papers and how their criteria may influence received proposals and research in general.

- Avoid dictating the topic of research based on donor requirements and interests. Instead, base research topics on observations and needs identified at the local level.

- Observe the Do No Harm approach and develop strategies to avoid stigmatizing or targeting specific populations as broadly linked or susceptible to violent extremism, unless specifically and unequivocally borne out by the evidence.

- Establish a comprehensive ethical checklist for research. Commissioners and researchers should create their own ethical codes and guidelines when soliciting or developing research projects to ensure adherence to the Do No Harm principles.

- Sustain and encourage diversity within the research team to establish checks on individual biases and organize regular check-ins to monitor and address personal biases. Any biases should be mentioned in the initial proposal and final publications as potential limitations to the study.

- **Disclose all assumptions up front in the research proposal and the final report. Paradigms and biases are unavoidable.** Still, it is advisable to declare any potential biases or paradigm preferences at the onset to have a clear and common starting point for the researcher, the commissioning entity, and the audience.

- **Carry out background research on the context where the research will be commissioned or conducted to identify existing research agendas and remaining knowledge gaps and needs.** This is particularly important to avoid duplication of efforts by researchers and commissioning entities and orient topics within the call for proposals' guidelines.

- **Write the final paper in the local language and then translate it into English in close collaboration with professional translating services to avoid any loss of information.**

- **State clearly the project's research questions, hypotheses, and objectives in the proposal and in the final report.** Outlining these elements and mentioning them consistently helps to develop appropriate activities and allows the reader to follow the logical framework of the research process.

- **Align research design, including the proposed methodology and list of activities, with the project duration, ensuring that the design is time-sensitive, attainable, realistic, and valid.**

- **While providing a separate analysis of gathered data may be insightful, it is important to interrelate various sources of data in a coherent structure.** Quantitative and qualitative analysis must be integrated and complement one another.

- **Commissioners should be flexible when reviewing proposals; while the main principles should guide the proposal, researchers need to be able to propose and lead on the research topic.**

- **The same principle of flexibility should be applied when developing a call for proposals: commissioners should provide guidance for research topics but encourage and be open to well-presented alternative suggestions on research proposals.**

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