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countering violent extremism



YOUTH FOR CHANGE: BUILDING THE RESILIENCE OF SERBIAN YOUTH



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Summary

The main goal of the project was to build and strengthen the resilience of youth in Serbia, their families and the local community through youth engagement, leadership and development of their cognitive and social-emotional skills in the cities of Belgrade, Sjenica and Novi Pazar. Activities within the project included baseline and end-line research, along with the activities in the areas of education, knowledge acquisition and engagement of youth in their local communities in the field of preventing radicalization leading to violent extremism (RLVE).

The core of this project presented the prevention itself, since it focused on preventing RLVE among youth in Serbia offering them a constructive way to address potential grievances, along with youth education and engagement, as they are one of the most efficient means of reducing RLVE. It aimed at improving the situation of youth included in the project by empowering young people to take a more active role in their communities. This was gained by providing them with relevant skills and competences in the area of social and emotional well-being, facilitating their social integration, and building tolerance and creating an atmosphere of acceptance in the local communities. All of this was achieved through the delivery of psycho-educational and youth leadership program. At the same time, the baseline study allowed us to assess the potential for radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia and to explore protective and risk factors for these phenomena. Through all activities of this project, the resilience of youth was built and enhanced, along with providing them with a sense of belonging to society.

Executive summary of a baseline study

INTRODUCTION

Even though there are a growing research interest and evidence on the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism, previous studies indicated no single cause (Mcgilloway, Ghosh, & Bhui, 2015), unique profile of psychopathology or personality traits that make individuals more prone to radicalization and violent extremism (Demunter et al., 2019).

Several groups of risk factors were, however, identified. Accordingly, young people, in a formative life period, living in Serbia – a region with a recent history of violent interethnic conflict, could represent the population of particular interest for exploring radicalization and violent extremism.

The main aim of this study was to assess the potential for radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia and to explore protective and risk factors for these phenomena. Our results should inform data-driven programs aiming to reduce and prevent radicalization and violent extremism.



METHODOLOGY

A total of 288 students aged between 15 and 18 (29% males) from Belgrade and Sandžak region participated in the study, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in *Figures 1 and 2*. The baseline data were collected during September and October 2019. Students completed a comprehensive questionnaire assessing radicalization and violent extremism that was conceptualized as three-dimensional Militant-Extremist Mindset, including 1) acceptance, justification, and advocacy of the use of violence in certain circumstances; 2) beliefs in divine power such as heaven and God, the role of martyrdom, and afterlife pleasures; 3) and belief that there is something significantly wrong with the world we live in, and that the present-day world is vile and miserable. In addition, using a comprehensive battery of psychological instruments, interethnic perception and interaction was assessed, as well as potential risk factors for radicalization and violent extremism that were grouped around two broad clusters:

- 1) contextual risk factors, including financial and socio-emotional deprivation and exposure to violence and hostile school environment and
- 2) psychological risk factors including self-concept and esteem-related factors, ideology-related factors, and interaction-related psychological factors.

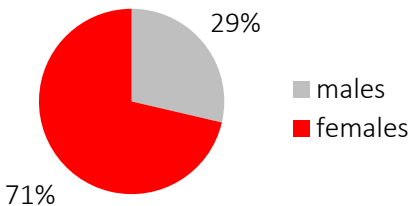


Figure 1. Gender structure of the sample

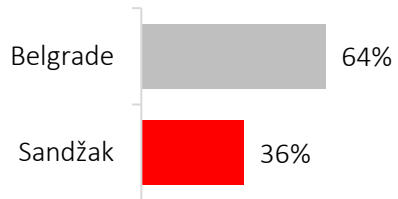


Figure 2. The regional structure of the sample

RESULTS

Within the baseline study, two main clusters of risk factors for radicalization and extremism were explored in-depth. The first group was labelled as contextual (e.g. family dysfunction, hostile school environment). In contrast, the second group was labelled as psychological risk factors (e.g. loneliness, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation). The results have revealed a complex interplay between contextual and psychological factors in their prediction of different aspects of radicalization. Namely, the results have shown that individual history of family dysfunction is followed by higher levels of loneliness, while growing-up in a harsh school environment is associated with higher levels of both loneliness and orientation towards social dominance. One's history of family dysfunction accompanied by social dominance orientation proved to be predictive of vile world views, while individuals who are more lonely, prone to social domination, and are exposed to a harsh school environment demonstrate greater readiness to accept, justify, and advocate for the use of violence, and possibly engage in radical violent acts. On the other hand, belief in the divine power, as the third aspect of the militant-extremist mindset proved not to be associated with proviolence tendencies but rather represents the distinctive characteristic of those who embrace authoritarianism and traditional values and reject social dominance orientation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study results, recommendations on interventions for prevention and reduction of radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia are provided and discussed, including:

- Interventions addressing attitudes towards intergroup relations
- Interventions addressing social isolation and loneliness
- Interventions addressing family functioning and school environments
- Interventions addressing negative worldview



Building Youth Resilience to Radicalization and Violent Extremism (BYRVE) Program

The main goal of the psycho-educational workshop program (BYRVE program) was to develop and strengthen the cognitive and social-emotional skills and competences relevant for students' overall development and well-being, along with preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism. The entire BYRVE program is evidence-based and in accordance with the results of the baseline study, relies on state-of-the-art psychological and educational science and incorporates a culturally and gender sensitive perspective into the workshop content.

During the period from October 2019 – March 2020 the BYRVE program was delivered to 251 high school students aged between 16 and 18 years old from 4 different schools in three cities in Serbia: IX gymnasium and technical school "Drvo Art" both from Belgrade, Economic-Trading school in Novi Pazar, and Technical-agricultural school in Sjenica.

The BYRVE program consists of the following modules:

1. Identity;
2. Strengthening self-confidence and creating a positive self-image;
3. Assertive communication;
4. Constructive problem solving;
5. Perspective-taking and conflict resolution;
6. Empathy and acceptance;
7. Stereotypes and prejudices;
8. Discrimination;
9. Cultural similarities and differences and cultural awareness;
10. Culture and identity.

“The workshop was useful because it helped me see situations from a different perspective.”

“I think that we should talk more about self-esteem.”

“The most interesting thing were different ways of thinking that are out of our comfort zone.”

“It is very important to discuss the discrimination that surrounds us.”

“I have learned to accept some of my flaws.”



The themes for the modules were selected and designed based on the factors and correlates that have been scientifically proven to be related to radicalization leading to violent extremism. Namely, research has shown that strengthening the capacities covered by the modules can reduce the probability of developing attitudes and behaviors that can lead to radicalization and violent extremism. The key for preventing RLVE tendencies in youth is to focus on empowering young people to understand between-groups differences, to build egalitarian rather than a hierarchical view on social groups, and to build their own social identities to be more inclusive. Developing intercultural skills that can help one to understand and respect cultural differences is another crucial factor of decreasing the risk from RLVE. The workshops also comprehend the terms of intergroup biases, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, and hence empower students to become more tolerant of group differences and accept them.

Throughout the delivery of this workshop program, young people were encouraged to participate in the workshops actively and to be engaged through small and large group discussions. A flexible and individualized approach that respects individual differences and characteristics was applied throughout the delivery of the workshops. Experts for delivering workshops maximized the potential for learning and participation by using interactive methods and techniques such as role-plays, brainstorming, pictures and videos, student presentations, icebreakers, learning games, etc. The program was adjusted to students' needs and following recommendations of the schools to be suitable for different local contexts. A great emphasis was put on the gender-sensitive perspective while designing and delivering the workshop's content to ensure gender equality and sensitivity. Additionally, this program was especially focused on students of different cultural and socio-economic background, including refugees and asylum seekers included in targeted schools, to avoid any potential stigmatization and to be accessible to the entire class.



To evaluate the BYRVE program, after each delivered workshop program, students were asked to anonymously rate in which degree on the scale from 1 to 5 (from 1 meaning 'not at all' to 5 meaning 'extremely') they found each specific workshop to be useful, pleasant, interesting and to which extent it met their needs and expectations. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts, comments, and feedback on each workshop, as well as to share if they found something to be particularly useful or harmful.

The mean scores from evaluations, presented in *Figure 3*, show that students found all program modules to be useful, pleasant, interesting, and in line with their needs and expectations. Overall, the quantitative evaluation values are highly satisfactory, with all total values being near or above 4.00. The best-evaluated modules are the ones on topics of identity, assertive communication, culture, cultural similarities and differences and cultural awareness.

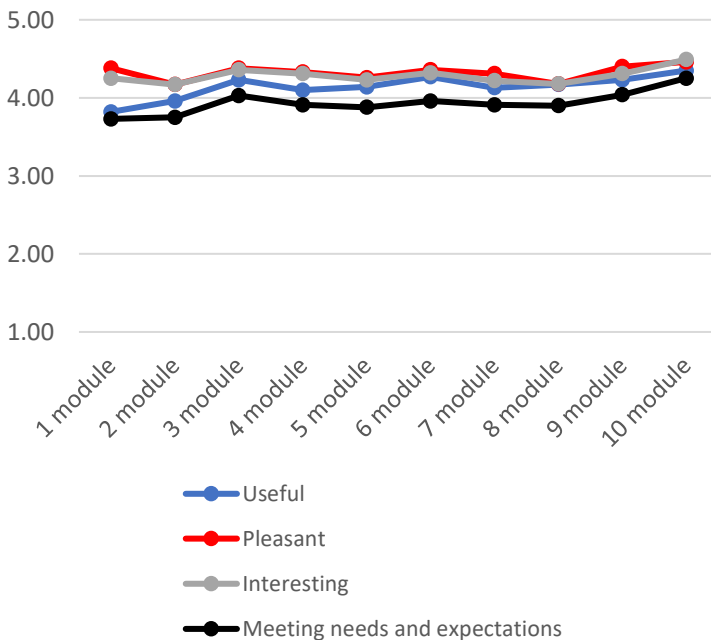


Figure 3. Evaluation scores for delivered modules

Qualitative data showed that students found workshops in particularly useful for gaining a chance to learn new skills which could be applicable in resolving different personal, or problems within peer group (e.g. „*We can use this exercise when facing everyday problems with friends in school*“). In addition, they pointed out that workshops helped them with learning strategies they can use to properly respond to peer pressure (e.g. „*We learned how to defend ourselves from our friends if they try to talk us into something we don't want to do.*“). The students were able to establish a meaningful relationship with the experts for delivering workshops, which further enabled them to learn and obtain different skills during the delivery of the workshops. The developed modules were very well thought-out, adjusted to students' age, gender, religion and ethnicity. Thus no students were left out, and everyone had an equal opportunity to actively participate and contribute to the workshops.

Based on program evaluation results, it can be concluded that students found the entire BYRVE program to be useful, pleasant, interesting, and adjusted to their needs and expectations.



Youth leadership program

Youth leadership program presents the second phase of the project that included the delivery of online training on youth leadership and youth engagement in the local communities. The training on youth leadership was intended for elected students from Belgrade, Sjenica and Novi Pazar that were active and eager to become youth leaders and after they gained relevant cognitive and social-emotional skills and competencies by completing the BYRVE program. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Serbia, the training was held online from May 19th to May 23rd and 18 youth leaders from 4 high schools participated in it.

The training consisted of 9 one-hour sessions divided into 5 training days and all of the sessions consisted of several small group activities, as well as group discussions that were successfully organized and conducted on the Zoom platform.

The topics of the sessions were:

1. Self-expression and public speaking;
2. Communication;
3. Goal-setting and personal motivation;
4. Small group facilitation skills;
5. Organizing and planning skills;
6. Basic leadership theories and skills;
7. The power of peer and community-based support;
8. Social responsibility;
9. Understanding countering violent extremism.

This training enabled male and female youth leaders to develop further and strengthen competencies and skills that would allow them to engage in the society through the promotion of human rights, dialogue and democratic principles. Furthermore, this training enabled them to more successfully transfer and apply their knowledge and skills in the future, especially when considering their involvement in local communities and participation in the final project activities, that will be explained at the end of this chapter.

Before and after the delivery of online training, the participants anonymously filled out the pre- and post-test. The goal of this test was to assess the increase in students' knowledge about different topics covered by the online training and to measure the effectiveness of the training. Figure 4 presents the results of the administered test.

Percentages of correct answers

Pre-test results	Post-test results	Level of change
61%	86%	+25%

Figure 4. Results of pre- and post-test

The overall increase on correct answers of 25% shows that the students successfully learned about the subjects covered by the training, and that their knowledge has significantly increased. Some of the questions with the highest increase in correct answers were questions regarding radicalization and social responsibility, which additionally underlines the importance of the training, as well as the gaps in the educational system which does not address these questions enough during formal education. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of developing and implementing similar programs for adolescents that would be a part of their informal education.

To evaluate the online training on youth leadership, after each training day students were asked to anonymously rate, through an online form, in which degree on the scale from 1 to 5 (from 1 meaning 'not at all' to 5 meaning 'extremely') they found each training day to be interesting and pleasant, useful, as well to which extent it was clear and understandable. The evaluation scores can be seen in Figure 5, and the evaluation showed that the students were extremely satisfied with the training, with all values exceeding 4.60 out of 5. This result suggests that the participants found the training highly interesting, pleasant and useful, and though that the expert who delivered the training was very clear and understandable.

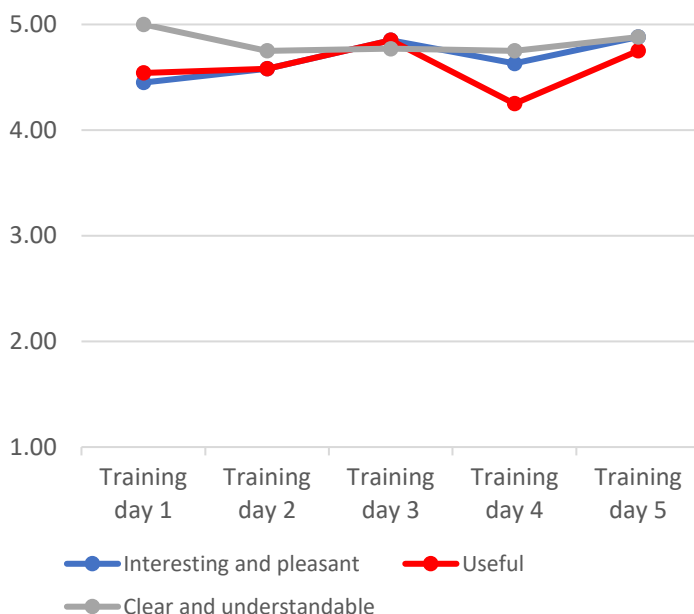


Figure 5. Evaluation scores for delivered online training

In conclusion, the delivery of online training on youth leadership was very successful. By the end of the training, all participants were more relaxed and engaged during sessions, more spontaneous remarks were made, and it seemed as if the youth leaders have made bonds and relationships between themselves, both within and between schools. The online training was also a very different experience for youth leaders since they claimed that they haven't had similar activities that were not directly related to their school obligations. Even though youth leaders have not had the chance to meet in person, we consider the online training to have been extremely successful and that it represented a great opportunity for participants to connect, despite the fact that it was delivered through an online medium. At the very end, youth leaders expressed how fun and interesting this experience was, which is also supported by the evaluations that they had completed at the end of each training day.

After the successful completion of the online training on youth leadership, youth leaders continued with their activities under the youth leadership program that included their engagement and active participation in the local communities. Due to the global pandemic, instead of organizing public events in their local communities, they decided to make a video that raised public awareness on countering violent extremism, promoting positive values and youth engagement. Throughout this activity, they presented lessons learned and the most important messages they had taken from the previous project activities to their peers and the wider public in a creative and age-adjusted way.

Results of the end-line study

METHODOLOGY

The baseline sample consisted of 288 students attending high schools and technical schools in Belgrade, Sjenica, and Novi Pazar. All personal information was kept confidential. To remain anonymous, students were asked to leave only their unique code (generated by following simple steps in constructing their unique code). These codes enabled us to link participants' entries from the baseline with the ones in the end-line study. After the baseline assessment, 166 participants (58%) were assigned to experimental and 122 (42%) to the control group. In the period of October 2019 to March 2020, the experimental group completed the previously described BYRVE program, while the control group did not participate in any additional activity between the two assessments.

Due to the CoVID-19 pandemic, end-line data was gathered online in the period of May and June 2020. Participants completed the same psychological instruments as before to be comparable with the baseline results. Out of 251 filled out end-line questionnaires, in total, 111 students left valid participant codes that enabled us to link their data with the baseline results.

All procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki standards, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade, Serbia (Protocol #2019-037).



SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 111 high-school students between 15 and 18 years of age. Most of the students had between 16 and 17 years of age (88%) at the time of assessment. The experimental group consisted of 67, while the control group consisted of 44 participants. The participants were recruited from four high schools in Serbia: IX gymnasium and technical school “Drvo Art” from Belgrade region, Economic-Trading school in Novi Pazar, and Technical-agricultural high school in Sjenica from Sandžak region.

The gender and regional structure of the sample are depicted in Figures 6 and 7.

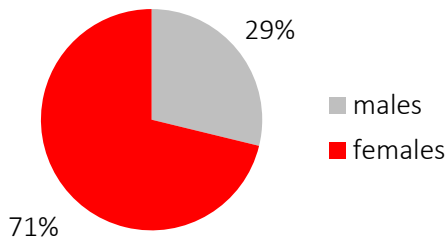


Figure 6. Gender structure of the sample

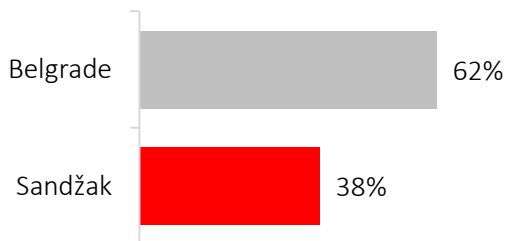


Figure 7. The regional structure of the sample

MAIN RESULTS

Results within the sample of Belgrade high school students showed a significant decrease in the key factor of Militant Extremist Mindset - Pro-violence. No significant differences between groups for Vile World and Divine Power were found. This result does not come as a surprise since both factors are deeply rooted in one's view of the world, and it is not likely they could be easily changed throughout a brief psychoeducational program. More precisely, Divine power and Vile world attitudes are predominantly determined by one's early socialization and experiences. Namely, as the results of the baseline study show, Divine power is predominantly rooted in one's religious beliefs. At the same time, Vile world attitudes can be understood to a large degree as the consequence of one's adverse childhood experiences. Moreover, it should be noticed that Divine power is not considered as a predictor of extremist beliefs and actions per se, namely, it can only be the amplifier of aggressive behaviour when there are already high Pro-violence tendencies. Finally, results showed a trend-level decrease in Right-Wing Authoritarianism in the experimental group, when compared with the control group.

A trend-level increase in inter-group contacts with the Bosniak and Croat group in the school context and an increase in the frequency of contact in free time with the Croat group was identified within Belgrade high school students. As for the acceptance of different groups, the increase in accepting Bosniaks and Croats as neighbours was detected in the experimental group, a trend-level increase in acceptance of Albanians as neighbours was found in the Belgrade region. Also, a trend-level increase in accepting members of different ethnic groups as romantic partners, specifically Bosniaks and Albanians was found in the Belgrade region.

The lack of significant changes in other measures assessed within this study could be attributed to various factors. First of all, psychological traits such as self-esteem and self-concept are deeply rooted in one's personality, and their change requires much more time and a more individual-oriented approach.

In addition, the scores on some questionnaires and measures were already high (e.g. Egalitarianism) at the baseline assessment, so there was no much space for improvement. When it comes to loneliness, lack of improvement could be most certainly attributed to the global CoVID-19 pandemic just before and during the conduction of the end-line study, where most of the people were overwhelmed with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Moreover, restriction of movement and reduction in social contacts introduced during pandemic most certainly significantly limited potential contact with people of different ethnicities which could lead to the practising of newly adopted attitudes and their strengthening. In line with that, the lack of experience and interaction with different ethnic groups probably caused no improvement in some aspects of intercultural sensitivity scale. Still, it should be pointed out that the scores on some aspects of this scale, obtained within the baseline study, were very high and left little space for improvement.



Conclusion and lessons learned

To counter and prevent radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia, several components within the project „Youth for change: Building the resilience of Serbian youth through engagement, leadership and development of their cognitive and social-emotional skills“ were designed and delivered:

- ❖ A baseline study was conducted, aiming to assess radicalization and violent extremism and provide information on protective and risk factors. Results of the baseline study showed that adolescents who are exposed to a hostile school environment tend to be lonelier and more prone to social dominance orientation, are more likely to justify and embrace the use of violence. Those that were growing up in dysfunctional families and who are prone to social dominance are more likely to see the world as a vile and miserable place. On the other hand, those who embrace authoritarianism, but reject social dominance are prone to rely on divine power. In addition to enabling a better understanding of phenomena in question, the baseline study results were used as a foundation for the development of an evidence-based program for encountering radicalization and violent extremism.
- ❖ As for the results of the end-line study, they showed that within the sample of Belgrade high school students there was a significant decrease in the key factor of Militant Extremist Mindset - Pro-violence, along with a trend-level decrease in Right-Wing Authoritarianism in the experimental group, when compared with the control group. As for the acceptance of different groups, the increase in accepting Bosniaks and Croats as neighbours was detected in the experimental group, a trend-level increase in acceptance of Albanians as neighbours was found in the Belgrade region.

- ❖ To encounter radicalization and violent extremism, psycho-educational workshop program Building Youth Resilience To Radicalization & Violent Extremism (BYRVE), was developed based on 1) the best practices from previous programs and 2) baseline study results. The BYRVE program consists of 10 modules, covering various relevant topics (i.e., identity, communication, discrimination, tolerance, cultural diversity, etc.). The program was delivered to 251 high school students from four different schools in three cities in Serbia: Belgrade, Sjenica and Novi Pazar. Effectiveness of the program was assessed based on baseline – end-line methodology, by comparing intervention (i.e., group who took part in psycho-educational workshop program) and control group (who did not receive any intervention).
- ❖ A youth leadership program was conducted with 20 youth leaders to support youth engagement and their active participation in society. Throughout the online training on youth leadership, youth leaders have had the opportunity to discover their own potential by developing interpersonal and leadership skills such as public speaking, organizing and planning skills. By increasing their self-confidence, motivation and obtaining relevant knowledge, youth leaders through video filming brought positive change into their community and raised public awareness to prevent RLVE.



The full baseline and end-line research reports, along with BYRVE program and online training can be accessed at: <https://psychosocialinnovation.net/en/publications/radicalization-and-violent-extremism/>

It can be concluded that the implementation of this project was very successful and that the main goal of this project has been achieved.

The baseline study provided valuable insights into radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Serbia, as well as risk and protective factors, which are important for both understandings of this phenomenon as well as for the development of data-driven programs for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. In addition, developed psycho-educational BYRVE program has proven to be effective in countering various aspects relevant for radicalization and violent extremism and together with youth leadership program was evaluated by students as pleasant and interesting, adjusted to their needs and expectations, and in particularly useful for gaining a chance to learn new skills which could be applicable in resolving different personal, or problems within their peer group. Finally, based on the study results and lessons learned, main recommendation for adjustment and improvement of BYRVE program would include leaving more time for working through some of the topics in question (i.e. Identity, Constructive Problem Solving, Discrimination, Culture and Identity). It is recommended that all workshops would be extended to two school classes instead of the standard class duration in Serbian schools (45 minutes), where possible, especially the mentioned topics.





PSYCHOSOCIAL INNOVATION NETWORK (PIN) IS ENGAGED IN THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF DIFFERENT PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND COMMUNITY BASED SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH, THAT AIM TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE THEIR EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING.

HEDAYAH IS THE PREMIER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO USING ITS EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCES TO COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE) IN ALL OF ITS FORMS AND MANIFESTATIONS THROUGH DIALOGUE, COMMUNICATIONS, CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMS, RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS.



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