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Preventing violent extremism in Norwegian municipalities. Between political visions of security and local expectations of social welfare

Martin M. Sjøen

Department of Safety, Economics and Planning, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway.
 E-mail: martinsjoen@gmail.com

This paper presents data from the national grant scheme for preventing radicalization and violent extremism in Norwegian municipalities. The findings suggest that municipal preventive needs are coalescing with the functions and practices of local welfare services. Another finding is that preventive projects prioritize competence development among first-line workers. There is a general dearth of effective evaluation in local preventive work in Norway. However, communities prone to extremist milieus tend to be more specific in describing how violent extremism is being prevented. On the other hand, several communities apply for funding through the grant scheme without being impacted by violent extremism. Thus, for these communities, the grant scheme is a particular avenue for ensuring basic welfare services and preventing extremism in local Norwegian communities.

Keywords: Preventing violent extremism, security, Norway, terrorism, QDA, counterterrorism.

1. Introduction

Since 9/11, terrorism has been discussed as an existential threat to citizens and democracies (Wolfendale 2016). Following this, European governments have put security legislations, policies and guidelines in place to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) (Stephens et al. 2021). In policy, P/CVE is envisioned as social measures performed by practitioners from welfare institutions. In other words, actors in education, social work and healthcare services are seen as crucial first-line protectors against terrorism.

The objective of P/CVE is to build individual and/or community resilience against extremist attitudes and violent behaviors (Gielen 2019). Thus, P/CVE represents a softer alternative to deterrence, surveillance and punitive measures associated with homeland security. Within P/CVE, a further distinguishment can be made between primary forms of prevention aimed at larger populations and targeted interventions for individuals or groups who are (at risk of) engaging in extremism. Primary P/CVE is a more general form of security, seeing how counterterrorism is not the main objective of providing welfare services but a potential outcome. Targeted efforts represent direct measures aimed at intervening in extremism.

In this paper, we present data from P/CVE work in Norway. Since 2015, the Norwegian Government has offered an annual grant scheme where municipalities can apply for funding to

prevent radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism. This study aims to explore and synthesize insights into local P/CVE projects that received financing from the grant scheme from 2015 to 2021. The study is guided by the following research question: *What are the preventive needs, capabilities and outcomes described in local Norwegian P/CVE projects?*

What follows is a discussion of integrating first-line practitioners into homeland security. In terms of theory, the paper applies perspectives from securitization theory (Berling et al. 2022) and rent-seeking theory (Tullock 2005). After this, attention is paid to surveying research on P/CVE before we describe qualitative document analysis (QDA) as a methodological framework. Lastly, key findings are presented and discussed.

2. The mainstreaming of P/CVE

Countering terrorism through preventing radicalization and violent extremism has become a common feature in modern security, witnessed through a proliferation of policies and practices in formal and informal social domains (Stephens et al. 2021). Several explanations can help to shed light on this development. Firstly, after 2001, a key feature in security is the resurgence of military power as a catalyst for counterterrorism. However, the limited success of the global war on terror to eradicate Jihadist terrorism showed that this issue was more complex than a problem that can be solved through coercive foreign policy and

military powers (Aly et al. 2015). Following the war on terror, terrorism increased globally, causing policymakers to reconfigure security to better deal with the root causes of terrorism.

Following the surge in global terrorism after 9/11 (Gielen 2019), policymakers and security services increased their attention on 'homegrown terrorism', which is terrorism carried out by people who are citizens in the country they attack. By focusing on the terrorist threat from 'within', counterterrorism was gradually 'softened' up by bringing greater attention to winning of hearts and minds through democratic citizenship and welfare services (Sjøen 2020).

In other words, European security was moved in a direction where hard counterterrorism was supplemented with softer measures in social domains. Bjørgo and Horgan (2009) relate this development to the concept of radicalization. While the concept of radicalization has long been used in research on violence, it was mainstreamed after the 9/11 attacks. During the last two decades, this term has become the *modus operandi* for explaining terrorism politically (Sjøen 2020).

Hence, a common theme in policy is that terrorism is caused by a radicalization of attitudes usually related to one or more vulnerability factors (Lindekilde 2012). However, any causal inference between radical attitudes and extreme behaviors is up to debate (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009). Extreme attitudes can be adopted in both pre and post behaviors, and there are even extremists who have not been radicalized at all, indicating that radicalization is not an accurate predictor of extreme actions. Terrorism manifests in socio-political contexts in which subjective attitudes are one of many explanatory factors.

Nevertheless, the concept of radicalization has gained traction across much of the Western world. Gielen (2019) links this to how Europe is confronted with an increase in extremist violence, and the fear is that these threats will rise even further in the years to come. In this landscape, security measures such as threat assessments are put in place to communicate risks, create awareness amongst citizens and professionals, and by discrediting the extremist narrative via counternarratives (Lid and Heierstad 2019).

In Norwegian security, publicizing national threat assessments has been a common feature to communicate risk and create awareness of security threats since the early 2000s. To be sure,

Norway has suffered at the hands of right-wing extremism before the 2000s. However, the country's attention abruptly turned towards right-wing extremism following the 22 July terrorist attacks that killed 77 people – the worst carnage in Norway's modern history, alongside the relatively large outflux of Islamist foreign fighters travelling from Norway to the Middle East (Ellefsen and Sjøen 2023).

These were turning points in domestic policy, triggering a wave of changes in the national security apparatus and the introduction of P/CVE efforts to detect, monitor, prevent and report potential terrorists to relevant authorities. During the last decade, the Norwegian Government has instructed local municipalities to implement P/CVE efforts by emphasizing multi-agency measures and by educating frontline personnel and practitioners about radicalization and violent extremism.

For security and risk scholars, the inclusion of so-called non-security actors into the realm of homeland security is not a recent development. This feature has been studied under concepts such as the 'widening' of security actors and through notions of 'risk society' (Berling et al. 2022). A central point here is that risk is a key characteristic of contemporary life, and ensuring security from threats is a shared responsibility in society. This is particularly the case in Norwegian counterterrorism, which has been framed as a moral responsibility for citizens and communities in the 21st century (Jore 2012).

Beyond the political ambitions to integrate local communities into homeland security, local actors can play an important role in P/CVE (Gielen 2019). Although terrorism is often influenced, planned and financed globally, terroristic violence strikes locally. Moreover, first-line workers have a proximal closeness to their target audiences, which centralized agencies tend not to have (Daugaard-Nielsen 2016). P/CVE through welfare systems is also assumed to be a bottom-up approach to alleviating root causes that can lead individuals towards extremism.

2.1. Surveying research on P/CVE

A review by Lewis et al. (2023) shows that there has been limited evidence on the effectiveness of approaches used in P/CVE efforts. At the same time, although uneven in quality and scope, some data can provide insights into the factors that

facilitate or generate barriers to P/CVE (Lindekilde 2012). As noted by Wolfowicz et al. (2022), it is therefore possible to assess which interventions are more likely to be effective.

However, one challenge in this context is the lack of assessment of the negative outcomes of P/CVE (Lindekilde 2012). This is related to concerns that first-line workers who are tasked with carrying out P/CVE may not always be qualified to do so. It should come as little surprise that teachers, nurses and social workers are not necessarily confident when engaging with counterterrorism objectives (Lewis et al. 2023; Sjøen 2020). Research in Norway and elsewhere has shown that there can be discomfort among first-line workers when they engage in contexts with expectations to deploy vigilance and report suspicious activity to authorities (Ellefsen and Sjøen 2023; Lid and Heierstad 2019).

Nevertheless, there are indications that multi-agency and trust-based local networks of public and civic actors hold merit in P/CVE work (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016). Moreover, research also suggests that local actors view their efforts as crucial within the context P/CVE (Lid and Heierstad 2019). While large numbers of practitioners working together locally in P/CVE efforts are linked with possible barriers in Norway, such as lack of resources, guidelines and clarity over the responsibilities and jurisdictional boundaries of different partners (Lid and Heierstad 2019), multi-agency collaboration is found to be crucial for identifying individuals at risk of violent extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016; Lewis et al. 2023).

Recent studies suggest that P/CVE efforts are approached through an individual lens. Thus, the role of social mechanisms is downplayed in some preventive programs. This downplaying is problematic considering how informal social ties (i.e., family, friends and support networks) have shown great importance in preventing involvement in violent extremism (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016; Haugstvedt and Sjøen 2021).

Moreover, there is conflicting evidence on the preventive impact and role of healthcare workers who target individual mental healthcare issues as part of P/CVE efforts (Wolfowicz et al. 2022). This might be extrapolated to other welfare services, as a meta-analysis indicates that being a recipient of welfare services can represent a minor risk factor for involvement in extremism

(Wolfowicz et al. 2022, 42). Additionally, higher socioeconomic conditions do not seem to have a clear relationship with non-radicalization. Thus, greater scrutiny is needed towards the assumption that societal welfare services are a natural bulwark against extremism and terrorism.

Notwithstanding, many P/CVE programs focus on primary prevention efforts through social welfare mechanisms (Lid and Heierstad 2019; Wolfowicz et al. 2022). This can be considered a non-specific and indirect forms of security. Further, many P/CVE efforts are aimed at professionals with indirect contact with the target group. In other words, there is reason to surmise that P/CVE efforts, for the most part, are performed by providing welfare services emphasizing 'business as usual'.

3. Theoretical background

This paper studies P/CVE efforts in Norway by applying perspectives from securitization theory and rent-seeking theory. Security scholars often study performative speech acts in which a securitizing actor argues the presence of an existential threat. If the audience accepts this speech act, the securitizing actor may implement exceptional emergency measures, which entail the securitization process (Berling et al. 2022).

As noted by Berling et al. (2022, 7), securitization theory was not intended just to describe the reality of security politics. Rather, the objective was to better understand the ethics about the political performance involved in any use of security. In other words, the concept of security is affecting politics. From this premise, security scholars will often organize their analyses around the political framing of existential threats, the implications of this framing and the political struggles over what to (de-)securitize (Berling et al. 2022). 'De-securitization' involves shifting the focus from the extraordinary to the ordinary, where security issues are brought to the ordinary realm where they can be dealt with within democratic rules and regulations. This study engages with securitization theory by emphasizing the shift from the extraordinary to the ordinary, which is when security issues are handled within the normal mode of politics.

This paper aims to study security beyond the securitization process by discussing how security constitutes and is constituted by broader political processes. Thus, securitization theory is

integrated with another perspective on governance, which is the redistribution of income through rent-seeking in the neoliberal economy.

Rent-seeking is an economic concept first developed by Tullock (2005) to describe the obtainment of added income by affecting the socio-political environment rather than creating new income through production. Hillman (2013) writes that rent-seeking occurs in many forms in public governance. Although not necessarily illegal, rent-seeking can be immoral in that people seek privileges that allow them to benefit from someone else's productive effort (Hillman 2013).

In some cases, rent-seeking is about maintaining the function and deliveries of services. In other cases, rent-seeking is a way to improve the chances of survival for those who offer services (Tullock 2005). Hence, rent-seeking contest is also a rational investment.

4. Methodology and research procedure

The study is guided by the following research question: *What are the preventive needs, capabilities and outcomes described in local Norwegian P/CVE projects?* This work engages with this question by using emergent qualitative document analysis (QDA) to study the Norwegian annual grant scheme to prevent radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism. QDA is a methodology for the systematic exploration of documents. According to Altheide et al. (2008), from a realist stance, QDA can be understood as the reflexive study of social change.

This study is part of a research project studying P/CVE efforts in Norway. Since 2015, the Norwegian Government has offered annual grants for projects to prevent extremism carried out in local Norwegian municipalities. All municipalities in Norway can apply for funding and, on average, the Norwegian authorities have financed between 30 and 40 projects annually. Some projects are recurring in the sense that they have received funding in more than one year.

The empirical corpus concerns document objects, which is an abstraction of three sets of documents consisting of: 1) project application from municipalities, 2) the award letter from the government and, 3) the project evaluation by the applicant. Nearly 1400 documents from 196 P/CVE projects carried out between 2015 and 2021 were studied for this purpose.

This research studies the national grant scheme on preventing and countering violent extremism in Norway. In accordance with the reflexive purpose of QDA (Altheide et al. 2008), the analysis provides insight into how extremism and its prevention is constructed, produced and managed in local P/CVE projects.

The study applied an abductive content analysis to identify and describe patterns in the documents. Abduction refers to an observation in the data in which the researcher seeks to find the most likely explanation behind the observation. Abductive reasoning raises the level of theoretical engagement beyond the description of empirical data but with an acknowledgement that the theoretical proposition is fallible.

First, the documents were analyzed with the aim of identifying codes and categories in the document objects. We used the following codes: descriptions of 1) prevention needs, 2) objectives and capabilities, and 3) how the grant scheme is intended to realize these objectives. This level of analysis is referred to as a selective process where certain questions are prioritized (Bryman, 2008). The next step in the analysis is to look beyond the codes and categories by identifying general patterns to describe the outcomes of preventing extremism in local Norwegian communities.

Two investigators analyzed the documents independently to enhance the study's credibility and worthiness. Through this double coding, the investigators found a high level of agreement across the documents. In terms of research ethics, the data contained no sensitive information about individuals or groups. Access to the documents was obtained through the Norwegian Act relating to the right of access to public documents.

5. Findings

In the following, key findings are presented based on three themes from the analysis. First, we highlight how local municipalities describe their P/CVE objectives. Thereafter, we highlight how the applicants describe their P/CVE capabilities and evaluate the preventive outcomes.

5.1. *Something old or something new?*

What became clear from analyzing the document objects was that all the projects in this study describe that P/CVE coalesces with providing local welfare services through a business-as-usual

approach. This means that the rationale for applying for funding from the national grant scheme is that P/CVE can be achieved by emphasizing or reinforcing existing welfare services regardless of whether the community faces issues of violent extremism. Vestre Toten municipality provides an example in their 2017 application, which states that P/CVE:

Measures will be implemented to strengthen and complement existing services and meeting points throughout the project period

Some projects do not explicitly state how efforts to strengthen local existing welfare services are expected to prevent or counter extremism. For instance, in the application from Fjell municipality in 2017, the basis for the application appears to be that the community has received “100 refugees annually the last two years”, which is described as a sharp increase. It is stated in the application that the municipality is not faced with issues of extremism, suggesting that this project is precautionary and focused on potentially preventing a problem before it occurs by strengthening existing services.

While there is a tendency in many P/CVE projects to describe preventive objectives as an extension or reinforcement of existing welfare services, we also find data indicating that external funding through the national grant scheme can add a new feature to local services. In particular, receiving support from the grant scheme may facilitate new multi-agency collaborations among different welfare actors. One example is in the 2020 application by Molde municipality, which describes that the P/CVE project will aid the:

Development of a professional network in the municipality coordinated through the local counter-radicalization mentors by focusing on cooperation and sharing of expertise both internally in the municipality and between neighboring municipalities

Another common feature in the data is that nearly all P/CVE projects target children and young people or first-line actors working with young people and their relatives. Skien municipality writes in their application from 2021 that the P/CVE project aims to implement:

Measures that are aimed at employees of the child welfare service who work with children, young people and parents with an immigrant/refugee background. This includes families, unaccompanied minors in housing and unaccompanied minors who live on their own

Projects targeting young people occur in both formal and informal arenas. Formal arenas include conferences and workshops focusing on democratic citizenship in schools, while cultural festivals and vocational skills training are examples of informal arenas. Across these examples, we find that citizenship education, skills training and social inclusion are preventive objectives in all the P/CVE projects.

The more direct forms are aimed at front-line workers or relatives of young people with a cultural minority background. Typically, these projects aim to establish networks for different stakeholders who engage in P/CVE aimed at preventing vulnerability factors. One example is provided by Porsgrunn municipality in their 2016 application:

Young people with multicultural backgrounds who do not gain cultural understanding and a sense of meaning and belonging can be vulnerable in terms of exclusion and possible radicalization

5.2. The competent security practitioner

Another recurring theme is that many P/CVE projects utilize the grant scheme to develop preventive competence among first-line workers. This is typically approached through workshops, seminars and conferences on P/CVE alongside study trips to ‘extremist prone areas’. These activities tend to run parallel with existing welfare services. Fredrikstad municipality provides an example in their 2019 application:

The overall goal of the [P/CVE] project is that the preventive efforts will be continued as part of existing services in the municipalities – as well as with other partners [...] Additionally, capacity building and competence development will be emphasized during the project period – but with effects beyond the project period

However, developing competence is inhibited by the financial reality in the local municipal economy. In the application by Førde municipality in 2018, the need for developing

P/CVE competence is implicated by a frail local economy, which in itself is a factor for applying for external funding for the grant scheme:

In general, there is little funding in the municipality for [P/CVE] work. The current situation is dependent on external funds to do outreach youth work

As such, municipalities report that the P/CVE grant scheme is an avenue for ensuring financial sustainability to provide basic services while also preventing violent extremism. This tendency is interlinked with a broad divide in the data between communities with identified extremist milieu and communities that are not faced with significant extremist problems. P/CVE projects located in places affected by extremist milieus are more specific to their needs and aims for building preventive competence.

One example of specificity is provided by Trondheim municipality in 2017, where the application describes local experience with issues of right-wing, left-wing and religiously-motivated extremism. In their P/CVE application, the municipality details efforts to build competence among local mentors in direct contact with (former) extremists by training them in areas such as mental healthcare, education and crime prevention. The application specifies how this training will be conducted:

Mentors will receive training in preventive methods like motivational interviews (MI), counter-radicalization courses through the [European Union led] Radicalization Awareness Network alongside participating in study trips to cities affecting by extremist milieus

Nevertheless, detailed P/CVE projects tend to be outliers in the data pool, as most projects lack specificity when describing the need to develop relevant P/CVE competence.

5.3. The issues of evaluating outcomes

There is a dearth of evaluation throughout the analyzed P/CVE projects. Most projects provide input evaluation: ‘what has been done’, yet we find limited focus on effect evaluation: ‘what has been achieved’. The input evaluation tends to span both process evaluations, which look at how measures have been implemented in practice and

pragmatic evaluation, in which key stakeholders provide input to the evaluation (Gielen 2019).

In practical terms, process evaluations concern providing descriptive and sometimes vague assessment of the overall P/CVE project. Some examples of this are found in the application by Steinkjer municipality from 2018, stating that “the experiences suggest that the project has been well received”. Another example is found in the evaluation by Hamar municipality from 2018, which describes that “they received positive verbal feedback from the actors who participated in the program”. Additionally, all the applicants are asked to rate their performance on a scale of 1–10, with most municipalities assessing their P/CVE project between 6 and 9.

Pragmatic evaluations are based on a broader set of data, with self-reported appraisal by stakeholders or target audiences being the most common measurement. One example of this is by Færder municipality, whose evaluation from 2021 provide a comprehensive evaluation based on questionnaires and interview with stakeholders and field work with the target audience. P/CVE projects in local communities affected by extremist milieus tend to be more specific in their evaluation of preventive input and output.

Nevertheless, the general lack of evaluation is paradoxical considering how many P/CVE projects state in their application that they will provide evidence-based P/CVE efforts. As such, it could be expected that greater attention was given to assessing these evidence-based practices. A caveat should be made here, namely how the reference to ‘evidence base’ in the P/CVE projects is associated with first-line professions (education, healthcare and social work) rather than with preventing extremism. In addition, some P/CVE projects offer no evaluations since the project is either ongoing or delayed.

Although there are several issues regarding the evaluation of local P/CVE efforts, we find few projects that provide information about the potential negative impacts of their preventive work. One exception is from the evaluation by Oslo municipality in 2017, which described cross-sectoral challenges in the form of:

None of the municipal first-line agencies had knowledge of the overall efforts being made in the city. The lack of visibility of the local efforts and the lack of coordination across agencies had unfortunate consequences

Other challenges concern the sensitive nature of preventing violent extremism. In a local P/CVE project in Bergen municipality in 2017, the applicant describes challenges with collaborating between P/CVE workers and members of a local Mosque due to various tensions:

We work with people who are very conservative. Some of the participants have a cultural or religious view that differ significantly from the Norwegian participants. The dialogue with these actors has been challenging

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to answer the question: *What are the preventive needs, capabilities and outcomes described in local Norwegian P/CVE projects?* The analyzed projects frame their preventive needs and capabilities as coalescing with the ordinary function of the local welfare state. This can be viewed as a form of ‘business as usual’ in which welfare services may alleviate the root causes of terrorism.

We do not have robust evidence that this indicates a process of de-securitization, where municipalities ‘return’ P/CVE to the normal realm of local governance from a former position of securitization. However, P/CVE is primarily maintained within the local sovereign authority where it can be dealt with within their routine procedures and practice. This mirror similar research in Norway (Lid and Heierstad 2019) and elsewhere (Wolfowicz et al. 2022). Yet, this interpretation rests on how securitization constitutes a function system in its own regards that is different from ordinary politics. As noted by Berling et al. (2022, 206), we might have reached a stage of dissolution of the distinctions between security professionals and amateurs, and between state bureaucracy and network-based solutions, by normalizing the bureaucratization and institutionalization of the extraordinary.

Furthermore, we find a divide between municipalities affected by extremism and those that do not report having this problem. The former are more specific in detailing how extremism manifests locally and how this can be prevented. For understandable reasons, this is not the case in communities that are not prone to extremism. This can suggest that the business-as-usual approach is fitting for communities that are not

prone to extremism. Considering the number of municipalities who report that they are not prone to extremism yet have applied for funding, it appears as if the grant scheme is adding valuable rent to promote basic local welfare services.

From a policy perspective, rent-seeking can promote cost-efficient welfare services (Tullock 2005). Thus, the grant scheme is likely an avenue for ensuring basic welfare services in some communities that are the recipients of external funding. This indicates that the grant scheme can also encourage rent-seeking practices, which can be beneficial for local communities yet impose a national overall welfare loss (Hillman 2013).

However, what we interpret to be rent-seeking practices can also be considered a precautionary step by local actors who are eager to put preventive measures in place before they are faced with extremism. In other words, it might well be that focusing on basic welfare services can help to create resilient communities in the first place (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2016). Indeed, for some communities, we might also expect that rent-seeking can strengthen the business-as-usual approach, which can serve as a democratic counterweight against (further) securitization. Still, the grant scheme is scrutinized in some evaluations by local P/CVE actors, as they report dedicating much time and resources to apply for external funding rather than using this time to provide basic welfare services.

In terms of preventive capabilities, local projects stress the need for competence development among first-line workers while also establishing cross-sectoral collaboration between different municipal actors. This is in line with policy expectations and similar research (Lid and Heierstad 2019). Hence, while welfare services are framed as a bulwark against extremism, municipalities that apply for external funding typically describe the need to develop new networks for coordinating welfare services. In other words, the description of a business-as-usual approach is also dependent on adding ‘new business’ for efficient P/CVE. Thus, there are signs that the implementation of new security networks indicates securitization processes. This interpretation rests on how the business-as-usual approach normalizes the integration of exceptional security (Berling et al. 2022). Also, this potential securitization could be understood

to overlap and interact with rent-seeking through a dialectic relationship in the neoliberal economy.

Furthermore, the data show a trend toward P/CVE projects focusing on primary forms of prevention aimed at larger populations. Some projects fuse elements of primary prevention with secondary interventions. On this note, there are unclear boundaries between doing preventive work and developing first-line competence, which makes it difficult to assess what is descriptively being achieved in practice.

Other research shows that the boundaries between primary and targeted preventive levels are rarely evident in practice (Lid and Heierstad 2019; Wolfowicz et al. 2022). Providing basic welfare services can produce a more general form of resilience, seeing how security is not the main objective of social welfare but a potential (and often indirect) outcome of it. On the other hand, to ensure that P/CVE are not enacted haphazardly, local projects should seek systematic insights into how any preventive efforts are experienced by the target audience, as well as focusing on the potential unintended consequences of preventing extremism through local welfare services.

Concerning preventive achievements, there is a dearth of assessments of outcomes in project evaluations, which is common in research (Gielen 2019). Furthermore, it stands to reason that the primary preventions that are described in the majority of the analyzed P/CVE projects are not necessarily based on local risk assessment of violent extremism. From a policy perspective, it might be reasonable to prioritize funding to municipalities that are prone to extremism and who tend to provide more specificity in their preventive needs, capabilities and outcomes.

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