CounteR

Editorial

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the CounteR Project community! We are thrilled to present the first issue of our Newsletter, targeted to all those involved in the when, where and why of #combattingRadicalisation, #prevention, #detection, #crimePrediction, #violentTerrorism and #citizenProtection.

CounteR is a three-year project for supporting the fight against radicalisation and thus preventing future terrorist attacks and is implemented by a team representing 19 organisations from 11 EU Member States: SMEs, NGOs, and industrial, research and academic entities, along with six public law-enforcement agencies in the domains of justice, police and interior security. CounteR's ultimate goal is to provide law enforcement agencies, Internet providers and social media platforms with an early-warning tool to be used in the detection of potential radical content for the prevention of radicalisation spread.

Our Newsletter aims at presenting the project's goals and achievements to a diverse audience that seeks to share experiences, accelerate innovation, collaborate with peers, or merely get to know the insights and perspectives of their industry colleagues.

The Newsletter's issue #1 features special interviews with prominent representatives of the CounteR Consortium, which brings together an illustrious group of international subject-matter experts in counterterrorism, radicalisation, and law enforcement; academics, and technical SMEs with practical in-field knowledge.

We look forward to receiving your feedback and reactions, as well as suggestions for the content of issue #2. Enjoy reading and happy winter holidays to all those who celebrate!

THE VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS OF RADICALISATION DO NOT RESPECT BORDERS; IT IS US WHO MUST LEARN TO LOOK BEYOND

Professor Marco Lombardi, Director of the ITSTIME Research Centre at the Department of Sociology of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart (UCSC) in Milan, Italy: one of CounteR Project's academic partners

Professor Lombardi, you are the Director of a unique research centre: ITSTIME, which stands for *"The Italian Team for Security, Terrorist Issues and Managing Emergencies"*. What types of research does your Centre conduct?

The team is composed of experts from different fields and competencies: so, we value the multi-disciplinary aspect and cross-fertilisation as important tools for our work.

Our approach allows us to develop and conduct research focused on security issues from different perspectives, addressing both theoretically and empirically the new challenges **(continues on p. 4)**

IN FOCUS:

Dr. Holger Nitsch, Director of CEPOLIS Research Institute/Bavaria, Germany: **"Detecting and preventing radicalisation requires trust-building efforts with communities", p.7**

Tobias Mattes, Senior Researcher in the BayHfoeD Research Institute/Germany: **"The development of a system like CounteR can support LEAs in their daily work – and there is currently no comparable solution available", p.8**

What is CounteR?

Radicalisation, enabled by propaganda online and offline indoctrination, has been the main driver for violent terrorism in virtually every terrorist attack, in Europe and globally, over the last decade. In spite of the massive efforts being made by both the EU and the European and international law enforcement agencies in recent years, radicalisation – online in particular – is harder to stop than ever, especially in the context of social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the CounteR Project, implemented with funding from the European Commission's H2020 Programme, an open platform for analysis and early alert – the CounteR solution – will be launched, collecting and analysing data from dispersed sources in order

The project is developing an integrated situational awareness system that will identify radical content online – informal groupings of radicalisers and vulnerable individuals with potential to be radicalised. The system aims at fostering information-sharing and collaboration between diverse European agencies in charge of countering radical propaganda, fundraising, recruitment, and planning of terrorist acts.

"To date, technology has been focusing on detecting rather than on preventing. CounteR will leverage online data tracking, combined with culture-dependent and socio-psychological knowledge", Consortium member **Jennifer Woodard**, CEO of INSIKT Intelligence, commented.

Information gained by the system would allow law enforcement agencies and other community stake-

Project Objectives

Integrate and homogenize disparate real-time and static data sources to analyse them for detecting radical and terrorist-related content;

Integrate the analysis technologies with expert knowledge in order to develop models to predict risk and identify hot spots;

Hands-on involvement of a wide range of European LEAs to guarantee high impact in the fight against terrorism;

Aggressive dissemination of the project results in order to achieve maximum sector uptake and market excitement.

to predict critical communities at risk of radicalisation and violent extremism and aid law enforcement to more easily detect radicalisation processes. The CounteR platform will serve as a frontline policing tool that looks at risk factors at the community level and allows LEAs to implement more effective prevention programs. The system aims at supporting the fight against organised (cyber) crime and terrorism threats and at fostering information-sharing and collaboration between diverse European agencies in charge of countering radical propaganda, fundraising, recruitment, and planning of terrorist acts.

The CounteR project will develop a tool for taking down quickly and accurately the terrorism content online, and, at the same time, preserve the privacy protection and data anonymization of the content. The system will cover data from dynamic sources such as social media and a wide range of offline open sources, combined with world-renowned expertise in the psychology of radicalisation.

holders to employ counter narratives to extremist propaganda and manipulation rather than relying solely on surveillance. *"This is a key point in protecting the privacy of citizens, an issue that has been of great concern to policymakers and law-enforcement agencies alike, who must balance the important work they do with the need to comply with legal, regulatory and ethical frameworks"*, Consortium member **Catalin Trufin**, Head of EU Projects at ASSIST Software SRL, commented.

Project Stakeholders

INDUSTRY COMMUNITY

COMMUNITIES OF USERS

NGOS

PUBLIC BODIES

RESEARCHERS

MEDIA OUTLETS

CounteR's Cluster Group on LinkedIn

In October, 2021, the CounteR **Project**'s **consortium** launched a Cluster Group through its **LinkedIn profile** to interact with similar, interrelated and complementary businesses in the field of combatting radicalisation such as industry and commercial actors, end-users, suppliers, service-providers, CSOs, similar projects, academia, and institutions.

This voluntary virtual grouping will integrate organisations and projects operating in CounteR's thematic domains, who will be encouraged to discuss and reflect about their common challenges, opportunities, and interests.

The Cluster's aim is to serve as a community hub for its members to connect, to facilitate discussion, and to accelerate innovation by bringing together various partners able to contribute to the sector's needs.

The **European Institute Foundation** (EI), as a member of the CounteR Consortium, will manage the Cluster and will conduct webinars with key industry and scientific leaders, online surveys for soliciting insights on the market needs, and thematic discussions in various formats. The Cluster is meant to allow reflection and ideation that can take many forms, and – as with every phase in the design thinking process – would involve all the spheres of expertise that the CounteR stakeholders possess. In other words, getting a more rounded insight based on the ideas of the whole CounteR community would lead to more creative solutions that bring additional value to the project.

The ecosystem approach enables the combination of expertise from information technologies and science to introduce specific technical tools for delivering advanced, personalized, and connected solutions.

Join the CounteR Cluster

The Cluster members share common interests; are faced with common opportunities for growth and with similar challenges; and compete but also cooperate with each other;

All readers of the Newsletter are most welcome to join our Cluster! We look forward to your suggestions for topics to be discussed at the webinars.

CounteR Partners' Updates

Under the auspices of the UNESCO Chair in Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism, the Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies (FUNDEA) and the **Association Les Militants des Savoirs** will co-organise the **Youth First – Second Euro-Mediterranean Days on the Commitment of Young People Against Extreme Violence** from 13 to 15 December, 2021, in Granada/Spain.

Workshops and roundtables are planned on topics such

as: resilience through education for democratic citizenship; misinformation and fake news; youth and peace; and radicalisation, social discrimination and exclusion. This event, funded by the REDE project, will bring together young activists, bloggers, and youtubers, as well as researchers, civil society and institutional representatives from the EU and the Mediterranean countries. **Registration** for participation is free and open.

SPECIAL INTERVIEW

Prof. Marco Lombardi: "The violent behaviours of radicalisation do not respect borders; it is us who must learn to look beyond"

(from p. 1) in the new hybrid war domain. ITSTIME's analyses on terrorism are based on three main assumptions: first, "think terrorist": based on Weber's emphatic sociology, the group's motto stands at the base of its analytical approach when dealing with dai-

ly-collected primary sources. These sources are processed according to two main drivers: their communication value and the networks that stand behind them. Second, "terrorism is communication": the main difference between a terrorist and a criminal is that the latter seeks a symbolic acknowledgment of his action. This means that he is aware of the media system where he proposes himself as the main character. Since terrorism is a "communication phenomenon" where terrorists seek out and manage communication, it is, therefore, imperative to analyse its communication through media research tools. Third, "terrorism networks": both online and offline terrorism takes its nourishment from networks. They are essential for their permanence and for the threat's reiteration. Their identification allows connecting dots, highlighting the relationship between different actions and actors, and thus giving them the possibility to draw accurate risk scenarios. For that reason, ITSTIME works on the "double" empirical field: online, exploring actively chats and online communities; and offline, with missions from Syria to Somalia, from Afghanistan to Libya... Our Centre also coordinates a **scientific journal** and has a Facebook **page**.

Is there sufficient understanding in today's Europe about the social and psychological factors in the radicalisation process?

The knowledge of phenomena that change so quickly, and that know how to adapt quickly to exploit the vulnerabilities of the situation, is never enough. Precisely because of this capacity for change and adaptation, there also exist phenomena that are difficult to understand. In addition, with CounteR, we are trying to explain the social and psychological factors that characterise complex phenomena of which the observable data is only the result of the interweaving of these factors, which are concurring and difficult to observe individually. Still, I am optimistic, especially because, having now participated in several European projects on this issue, I realised that the partner LEAs have now developed knowledge and skills that allow us to collaborate effectively, we academics and researchers with their institutions of control of the territory. Now we manage to speak almost the same language, and this is the basis for understanding the phenomena on which we work together.

What are the key social and psychological factors and risks that influence the potential incubators of radicalization?

Just to give you an idea: only from the analysis of the main Terrorism Risk Assessment Instruments, the socio-team I lead and the psycho-team led by prof. Carlo Galimberti identified over 300 indicators that we have associated with some macro areas: Health, Mental Health and Addictions; Networking relations; Religion and Ideology; Family Background; Criminal attitudes; Socio-Demographic Variables; Education and Career; Military, Paramilitary, Foreign Fighting Experience; and Radicalisation in general. The number of indicators is increasing and the dimensions in which we organised them help us to identify the characteristics of those ecosystems that we could define as incubators of radicalisation. These factors

will be shared with the publication of the first two project deliverables, for which we are responsible.

What are the most recent trends that impact the radicalisation of communities offline and online in Europe today?

Undoubtedly in this last year, COVID has been an important impact factor also on the radicalisation processes. The pandemic has not proposed significant surprises (I mean novelties) but has behaved as any other crisis: COVID accelerated processes that were

already underway. As a result, previously-detected trends have been confirmed and, indeed, accelerated. But above all, a climate of generalised violence has served as pervasive cultural support and substratum to the processes of radicalisation with the result of speeding up the path that leads from adherence to a radical idea to its manifestation with violent behaviour.

How do you see the current developments in Europe regarding the vulnerabilities of communities and individuals to radicalisation?

As I anticipated, the pandemic has accelerated ongoing processes but has also increased inequalities at every level: the vulnerabilities that characterise individuals (micro), groups (meso), and communities/societies (macro) have become the wide-open gateway to propaganda activities that offer the easy solution to needs. In this way, the underlying causes of the radicalisation process have easily spread and, above all, have multiplied: today they are less significantly related to a single and strong identification of the

subject with a single strong idea (be it religious or ideological): there is a greater correlation between a significant number of "single weak signals" that make preventive action much more difficult. Finally, we add that the time for prevention has been reduced a lot: as I anticipated, the pandemic is an accelerator of processes and, therefore, much more quickly than in the past the "practical moment of violent action" is close to the idea that generates it.

What would be your explanation in easy-to-understand terms to the most typical radicalisation strategies, used to penetrate vulnerable communities?

We can imagine that radicalisation is the conclusion of a sales process! In short: those who become radicalised express a need that is satisfied by buying "a good" from those who offer it. Obviously, in this case, it is a need and an intangible good: perhaps affections and emotions that refer to the psychological sphere, and also identity and belonging to the socio-psychological sphere, and then communication and social relationships. To counter this process, it is necessary to intercept the communicative relationship with the seller of the solution of the need. Or, to eradicate the causes of the need, other forms of response must be offered. Told in this way it is quite simple but obviously, everything is much more complicated because nothing of this sale is in the light of the sun and also because, unfortunately, at this moment the unresolved needs, the causes of radicalisation, have multiplied.

Prevention of incidents is a common theme in many media articles that cover the issue of radicalisation. Is there one single "recipe" for effective prevention?

There is no recipe (not even a magic potion) for any prevention strategy. Nor is there a recipe for preventing radicalisation. Like any action that takes place in a real situation, within a complex ecosystem that is constantly changing, the strategy must be adaptive. But there is a methodology that can be shared: on the other hand, this is the reason for projects like CounteR. And everyone must take a common perspective that must be transnational, continental, and European: the violent behaviours of radicalisation do not respect borders. In this case, it is we who must learn to look beyond, as terrorism already did...

How can research help law enforcement agencies to employ counter-narratives to extremist propaganda and manipulation, rather than relying solely on surveillance?

Passive surveillance of networked relationships has been a recurring feature of the activities of all LEAs and is no longer satisfactory. Moving to a strategic

online strategy means, after all, moving from Human Intelligence (Humint) to the activity that ITSTIME has defined as Digital Humint. However, an active strategy implies both a different set of rules for LEAs and the assumption of new skills that can stir some concern in terms of novelty, especially the so-called soft skills. It is in this field that a negotiated alliance between academia and LEAs is needed.

How will ITSTIME's research effort strengthen the capacity of CounteR's technological tool for analysing information, related to expressions of extreme views and support to violent activity?

The task of our team is to highlight the signals (even weak) that show the positioning of an actor along the path of radicalisation. Fortunately, we can make use of scientific literature that in recent years has often focused on this process, to which is added our experience in other European research projects and then the analysis of TRA-I, Terrorism Risk Assessment Instruments. The latter are important because they offer an operationalisation of sociological and psychological concepts. Our work is therefore to use both the theoretical tools and the most operational ones to offer an effective synthesis of the most significant factors to be identified through the technologies that will be developed during the project.

For you, what is the unique value that CounteR adds to the Centre's portfolio?

Scientific knowledge is cumulative: institutions often forget this and do not sufficiently consider the importance of the lesson learned from events that have anticipated aspects of the phenomenon that is being studied now. CounteR comes after a series of projects that have already studied the process of radicalisation and, from these first months of work, it seems clear that the partners have learned from the past. So, CounteR can only add something more. CounteR's perspective is to overcome the already experienced counter-narratives and alternative narratives to consider a complex ecosystem of communications that always simultaneously implies online and offline relational paths. 👥

Marco Lombardi is the Director of the ITSTIME Research Centre at the Department of Sociology of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart (UCSC) in Milan, Italy. He is the Director of the Department of Sociology and of the School of Journalism. Professor Lombardi teaches Crisis management and Risk Communication, Mass Communication theory, Sociology, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism.

He has extensive experience in managing EU-funded research projects and cooperates with different institutional agencies in the domain of security, both at the national and the international levels.

IN FOCUS: The Counter Project Consortium Members

Under the three-year CounteR project for supporting the fight against radicalisation and thus preventing future terrorist attacks, the European Commission's H2020 programme brought together 19 organisations from 11 EU Member States including SMEs, NGOs, and industrial, research and academia entities, along with six public law-enforcement agencies in the domains of justice, police and interior security.

The CounteR Consortium brings together world-class European entities, well experienced in key scientific, educational, technical and technological areas: it gathers an illustrious group of international subject-matter experts in counterterrorism, radicalisation and privacy law, six European law enforcement agencies with practical in-field knowledge, as well as a group of technical SMEs and academic partners. In each issue, in its section IN FOCUS, the CounteR's Newsletter will dedicate space to present two Consortium members that bridge the scientific, the industrial, and the practitioner domains.

Issue #1 features the **University of the Bavarian Police and its Research Institute CEPOLIS**, Germany: an end-user in the domain of radicalisation. 👥

Dr. Holger Nitsch: "Detecting and preventing radicalisation requires trust-building efforts with communities"

What is the value for CEPOLIS from participating in the CounteR Project?

The University of the Bavarian Police and its research institute CEPOLIS are constantly trying to stay on top of to the latest developments and innovations in the field of security. Therefore, the research with international partners in EU-funded projects is a great advantage. Also, the combination of practitioners and academics of different scientific fields is of great value. As a research institute, we are interested in all topics, related to policing and security. Topics such as those tackled by the CounteR Project are of great interest for policing.

Tell us about your entity's mission, history, and general achievements?

We started with international research low scale more than 10 years ago. Up until today we participated in a large variety of projects and, from each such initiative, we were able to learn more. We were also able to provide police with the latest developments, testing, getting new ideas, and involve some topics in our curriculum to enhance our education. We do expect from CounteR that the results will also contribute to this positive trend.

What is your experience with, or participation in other projects?

Our participation in international consortia and projects certainly enriches our exposure to various experiences. Such work definitely widens our network from an academic, but also from a policing / end-user perspective, which is quite positive. All participants learn from each other and the joint goal of a project is a challenge that usually all partners would like to successfully achieve. The interdisciplinary approach is also helping all partners to think outside their own boxes. Coming from a law enforcement agency, I can say that the end-user driven approach is much appreciated, especially in times of a pandemic.

CounteR's key task is to develop an early-warning tool to be used in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism: in your perspective, how will this contribute to a safer Europe?

The contribution will be very useful for various players in Europe. Again, from the end-user perspective, the relevant departments of the police will be hopefully able to use these tools in addition to the existing tools and methodologies. As radicalisation is a process, it is obvious that early warning can protect vulnerable people from getting radicalised and this process can be stopped and hopefully reversed at an earlier stage. This will support the current police work and will therefore contribute to creating a safer Europe for all its citizens.

From your experience, how can risks for radicalisation at the community level be detected and prevented?

To achieve this goal, there has to be a mix of different tools and methodologies to prevent vulnerable people from radicalisation and to create a safe society. Communication will be a very useful method and with regards to policing, community policing will be of great value to reach this. Furthermore, there have to be several trust-building efforts to create a common and trustful society. To stop radicalisation at an early stage and also to counter all forms of violent extremism is of importance to fulfil these aims. Tools that are developed through projects like CounteR will support these efforts in a very positive way and will help law-enforcement to prevent radicalisation and guarantee communities to be safer.

Dr. Holger Nitsch is the Director of CEPOLIS Research Institute and the Director of the Centre for Excellence for Police and Security Research at the Department for Policing at the University of Public Services in in Bavaria/Germany. His specialisation, expertise and research interests cover terrorism, radicalisation, violent extremism, illegal migration, and cybercrime and organised crime.

Dr. Nitsch's career includes work in the domain of antiterrorism for aircrafts and airports. Dr. Nitsch's extensive project management experience includes projects such as PROPHETs (H2020) and of DroneWISE (ISFP). He also is a member of the CENTRIC advisory board and the Foreign Affairs Association, and has been awarded the position of an honourable professor.

Tobias Mattes: "The development of a system like CounteR can support LEAs in their daily work – and there is currently no comparable solution available"

What are your roles in, and contributions for, the CounteR project within the Consortium?

I was involved in the development of the so-called 'user scenarios'. The aim here was to develop practical case scenarios to cover as many LEAs' real-life-needs as possible for developing the CounteR solution. More generally, I am a senior researcher at the BayHfoeD research institute. My key contributions to our daily work in EU projects is related to my knowledge as a practitioner and my experience in law enforcement agencies.

Could you summarize the progress achieved so far in CounteR's implementation?

Our team is involved in the development and testing of the CounteR ecosystem's corresponding functions in a test environment according to the stages of progress. The team is doing its best to provide all the possible feedback. As you know, LEAs cannot implement a solution like CounteR in their secured IT-landscape when it is still in its development phase: after the project's completion, certification must be carried out by the responsible body, before we could use the ecosystem. This is why the testing activities are of such crucial importance.

What benefits and outcomes do you expect for your entity as a result of your participation in CounteR?

From my point of view, there are two main aspects: first, the development of a system like CounteR can support LEAs in their daily work – and there is currently no comparable solution available. However, in the development phase, there is always a narrow ridge that lies between technical possibilities and re-quirements/end-users' needs. By actively participating in CounteR, we as a LEA can bring in our ideas and experiences to build the most suitable solution possible, which will later be accepted by our investigators in their everyday work. Second, the exchange of knowledge and networking – discussions and knowledge exchange of all participating institutions and LEAs take place within the Consortium. Good networks are essential for police officers on the operational but also on strategic levels. In areas such as cross-border fight against organised crime, prevention of radicalisation or counterterrorism, international cooperation becomes easier when specialists from different EU countries know each other personally. In this way, we manage to break the ice, and future direct contact becomes easier.

Among other communication channels, CounteR has launched a Cluster Group on LinkedIn to bring together Consortium members with external actors: what are the themes that you would be interested in discussing with the Cluster Group members?

In terms of technical points: data mining and automatic text annotation with entity extraction and automatic risk assessment; while in terms of actual trends: fundraising, recruitment and mobilisation in radicalised communities.

In your opinion, how can CounteR ensure that its high-quality research will meet the needs of the LEAs and the end-users?

From my point of view, this can be guaranteed through an active participation of LEA practitioners in all project progress steps: on the one hand, in development and progression of the 'used case' scenarios; and on the other hand, in areas such as end-user tests, so that usability is measured by the end-users' feedback. In my opinion, another key factor would be to hold regular discussions of the research results with LEA specialists through group discussions or fireside events in all stages of the project implementation.

Tobias Mattes is Senior Researcher in the BayHfoeD Research Institute/Germany. He has years of experience as active police officer across all three career levels of the Bavarian police, in both operationally and strategically positions. He also works as senior lecturer at the Bavarian Police University, Mr. Mattes is also senior researcher in EU projects, and visiting lecturer at the German Police University and the Bavarian Police University.

Upcoming in CounteR Newsletter's Issue #2

Chris Georgiev, Head of Business Development – Asia-Pacific at Imagga Technologies Ltd./Bulgaria: "The early detection of problematic online content might be one of the most important priorities for safeguarding Europe and its democratic societies"

Georgi Kostadinov, Head of Artificial Intelligence (AI) at Imagga Technologies Ltd./Bulgaria: "CounteR is not just a research project – it is a tool to be used in real life for understanding and combating radicalisation online"

CounteR Consortium

ASSIST Software SRL, Romania

INSIKT Intelligence, Spain

Imagga Technologies LtD., Bulgaria

ICON Studios Ltd., Malta

Consorzio Interuniversitario Nazionale per l'Informatica, Italy

Institut national de Recherche en Informatique et Automatique, France

Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Academia, Italy

Malta Information Technology Law Association, Malta

European Institute Foundation, Bulgaria

Association les Militants du Savoir, France

ETICAS Research and Consulting, Spain

Elliniki Etairia Tilepoikinonion kai Tilematikon Efarmogon A.E.-Forthnet S.A., Greece

Ministério da Justiça, Portugal,

Hochschule für den öffentlichen Dienst in Bayern, Germany

State Police Latvia, Latvia,

Serviciul de Protectie si Paza, Romania,

National Police General Directorate at the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria,

Ministère de l'intérieur/ direction générale de la sécurité intérieure, France

YOUR COUNTER POINTS OF CONTACT ARE:

Mr. Catalin Trufin, Project Coordinator
ASSIST Software SRL
catalin.trufin@assist.ro

Mr. Borislav Mavrov, Dissemination manager
European Institute
bmavrov@europe.bg

CounteR

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