



CHAMPIONS

Recommendations from the National Policymaker Roundtables

Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania

COOPERATE / COMMUNICATE / COLLABORATE

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Introduction



The Project

CHAMPIONS' central action is to establish permanent offline working groups – 'CHAMPIONS Roundtables' – combining FLPs (first-line-practitioners) of different disciplines, professions and institutions or agencies, to jointly develop effective detection and response solutions to counter polarisation, build resilience and protect vulnerable groups in their local communities.

FLPs will be trained to build capacity to design solutions and programmes to most effectively address the drivers of polarisation and to collaborate most efficiently by breaking down institutional barriers. In the medium term, their actions not only directly affect vulnerable individuals, but also the wider community – who will be engaged in awareness-raising events – as well as local and national policy-makers. To facilitate these processes of offline joined-up solution development, an online platform will be developed.

The long-term aim of the project is to transfer the CHAMPIONS pilot model to other communities across the EU where other FLP Roundtables are established and become users of the developed platform. To achieve this, synergies with related EU-funded projects, platforms and networks will be harnessed throughout the project and after its implementation period.



The purpose of policy-maker roundtables

The policy-maker roundtables had a number of identified aims. Firstly, informing policy- and decision-makers about CHAMPIONs, the main objectives, activities planned, outputs produced and the deliverables of the project was one of the goals, as well as the dissemination of the project activities. Furthermore, one of the key aims of the roundtables was to receive feedback on the project and its activities, with a particular focus on identifying any practical advice that could benefit the implementation of the activities planned. It was also imperative to get the support of the interviewed policy- and decision-makers. Lastly, we believe that the roundtables also served to facilitate current and future implementation of the project.

Introduction



Methodology

The implementation of the task differed from country-to-country, due to contextual issues that were not foreseen. In the case of Hungary, the campaign before the local elections of the 13th October posed problems for the organisation of a roundtable, therefore, individual interviews were conducted with policy-makers. Similarly in Romania, instead of a roundtable being arranged, interviews were carried out. In Poland, altogether five meetings were held with a number of different stakeholders, while in Germany, in the spirit of creating synergies, the roundtable took place in collaboration with a similar project.

For the purposes of the roundtables, we were primarily interested in policy- and decision-makers at the international, national and local level, especially politicians, consultants, assistants to politicians and members of the public administration. However, representatives of NGOs, educational and social facilities, officers of authorities were also present in the German and Polish roundtables. The composition of the interviewees and roundtables per country is as follows:



- ▶ In Germany, representatives of educational institutions, the city council, NGOs, as well as experts, researchers, social workers and teachers attended the roundtable.
- ▶ In Hungary, three Members of Parliament, one former Member of the European Parliament, one former mayor and a local politician were interviewed.
- ▶ In Romania, representatives interviewed included two Members of Parliament, one Senator, a former candidate for the European Parliament currently Vice President of a political party; and two local politicians. Effort was made to interview policy-makers from across the political spectrum, and for Romania the interviewees came from both the opposition as well as the current government.
- ▶ In Poland, representatives of various specialist units of municipalities (e.g. security, education, communications), civil society organisations, media outlets, the police, experts, academics and researchers took part in the five meetings in total organised in the country.

Introduction

In line with the aims of the roundtables outlined above, the following agenda was proposed to the consortium:

- ▶ **Part 1:** Welcome and short introduction to the agenda and the aims of the event
- ▶ **Part 2:** Introduction to the topic - Short presentation of the state of polarisation, radicalisation and the importance of collaboration among stakeholders of a different kind
- ▶ **Part 3:** Presentation of the CHAMPIONS project - General aims, target groups, concrete activities, locality chosen to implement the project, benefits of the projects for the respective community, the national and European society and for the policy- and decision-makers themselves
- ▶ **Part 4:** Q&A session, discussion - Questions of the participants regarding the project, questions prepared by the CH implementing partners to receive concrete suggestions and/or feedback related to some particular issues
- ▶ **Part 5:** Feedback (Monitoring & Evaluation) - On-the-site feedback form or follow-up feedback questions via email

It is worth noting that the structure of the roundtables/interviews was slightly modified and adapted by each partner in order to tailor it to the needs of the partner organisation. Furthermore, an emphasis was put on Part 4, the Q&A session, as this served to receive feedback and advice on the best implementation of the project. Context- and need-specific questions were formulated by each partner to gather insights that serves the local and contextual implementation of the project.



Key take-away messages and overall recommendations



State of polarisation and radicalisation in the project countries

The state of polarisation and radicalisation and contextual circumstances differ significantly in the implementation countries. In Germany, there is a relatively steady proportion of people who hold anti-democratic opinions. Yet, right-wing radicalisation is gaining ground in Eastern states, also on a party-political level, especially since 2015. In addition, various other strains of extremist movements can be found across the country, such as Jihadist and Turkish nationalist, but sexist and homophobic movements are also existent. In Hungary, radicalisation has intensified over recent years, especially since it is uniquely fuelled by the governing parties and the government. Radical ideas and values are being mainstreamed by the governing political forces, and hence, hate speech, stigmatisation and discrimination became widely accepted. Radicalisation spreads in a top-down manner. Similarly in Poland, the present government plays a role in advancing radicalisation in the country and mainstreaming such ideas in the political discourse. This is done by not acknowledging radicalisation as a phenomenon to be addressed and by condoning the behaviour of far-right parties and movements. At the same time, the media and the Church also play a significant role in spreading radical rhetoric. In Romania, and especially in Cluj-Napoca, where the interviews took place, the division of society on ethnic grounds is disappearing. However, there are still tensions between Romanian and Hungarian people in some parts of the city and the country. On the other hand, the exclusion of Roma people is still one of the most pressing issues and increasingly, division based on socioeconomic grounds is becoming discernible.



General recommendations for the project

In the area of polarisation and radicalisation prevention, one of the key recommendations was community engagement in finding solutions and involvement in the political decision-making process. This principle should be used for the project as well. Concrete issues, conflicts specific to the area in which the implementation is carried out, should be identified. It is important that the participants can associate themselves with these issues and conflicts. For this reason, the way in which the project is presented to them is highly critical. Instead of using the terms polarisation and radicalisation, the project communication should concentrate on conflicts and tensions and on concrete cases and problems. The communication, hence, should reflect the needs of FLPs on the local level. The aim of the project then should be to find concrete actions, methods and solutions to these local problems, and not just providing theoretical input or experimental activities. During this process, participants should be actively involved in the solution-finding process and the development of joint answers.

In terms of choosing locality for the implementation of the roundtables, a number of recommendations were made. Firstly, as mentioned above, clearly identifiable issues, tensions or conflicts should be present at the local level. Secondly, finding local allies, having a strong civil society presence and the support of the municipality and local leadership would also significantly benefit the completion of the project outputs. Thirdly, and especially in the case of Germany, the overabundance of projects should be considered when deciding on the locality.



Key take-away messages and overall recommendations

- ▶ In terms of the content of the roundtables, it is also important to provide guidance and assistance to FLPs in order for them to become aware of their role and responsibility in countering polarisation and radicalisation. A specific focus on skill building, especially in communication and dialogue, should be made and a platform provided for them to be able to self-reflect on their own assumptions and actions and exploring their motivations. Having an inclusive and non-judgmental atmosphere during this process is key. This should also be reflected in the project communication, as it should include the skill-building aspect of the project, as well as the emphasis on safeguarding youth and strengthening civil society. Nevertheless, recent research findings and trends and good practices from other EU countries, where similar local-level collaboration structures exist, should also be presented. At the same time, an operational definition of polarisation, radicalisation and (violent) extremism should be adopted for the project and shared with FLPs.

The online outputs of the project should be trialled by the participating FLPs and they should be consulted on how to make these platforms genuinely functional for them, before they become fully operational. It was recommended that concrete structures and options for emergency actions shall be made available, in case urgent interventions are needed with a specific individual.

Lastly, the sustainability of the impact the project may have should be considered. Therefore, other projects may take over some of the activities started by CHAMPIONS or carry out new, but similar initiatives to ensure the continuation of impact.



Recommendations for creating and maintaining local-level collaborations

For creating and maintaining successful local-level collaborations, one of the main considerations is which stakeholders to involve and engage in the project activities. Apart from inviting people from different fields and professions who may find the project useful for their work, it may also prove to be beneficial to identify people who are committed to the cause at the local-level, representatives of marginalised groups and opinion leaders of the community. Furthermore, involving political actors, politicians, policy-makers may also help to alleviate political divides, build trust between the different stakeholders and advance the cause of the project. Lastly, involvement of media outlets may also be an option to draw attention to the project activities and amplify the impact the project may have.

On the other hand, it is imperative that the implementing partners keep their independence from political actors, the authorities and the local council. The community should perceive the implementing partners as primarily working with and for the community. The role of the implementing partners is of a facilitator, thus, helping the realization of collaboration through dialogue and working together for a common goal. Therefore, trust towards the implementing partners from all different actors within the collaboration is highly important. The implementing partners, hence, should treat stakeholders with respect and empathy and strive to build strong connections with them. To achieve this, regular and in-depth contact and exchange is necessary with the FLPs involved in the collaboration.



Key take-away messages and overall recommendations

- ▶ Building trust is important not only between the implementing partners and FLPs, but between the different stakeholders, as one of the goals of the project should be community building and cohesion. Finding common values and goals and sharing experiences through dialogue helps create unity. For this, it is imperative to map the conflicts of the community and work together with stakeholders to find a joint solution. If this can be done in the early stages of the development of the conflict, it is more likely to yield a positive outcome. However, mapping the tensions of the community must be done with care and considerations, as the locals may deny the existence of such tensions.

In terms of the content of the roundtables organised for FLPs, it is recommended that the information transfer is adapted to the needs of the participants. Building a strong basis of in-depth knowledge should be done keeping in mind the practical use, the long-term approach and the effectiveness of it.



Recommendations for public advocacy

In order to make CHAMPIONS attractive to local, national and EU-level policy- and decision-makers and to encourage their participation in the project, concrete and practical benefits need to be identified for them. If politicians can see the direct advantages for their own work, they will be more likely to advance the goals of the project. Such concrete benefits may be the successful implementation of a pilot project, which could be transferred to different localities. Moreover, collaboration between the third sector and policy-makers are often founded on individual level connections. For this reason, building trust and maintaining personal connections with interested policy-makers on a local, national and EU-level is paramount.

The language used for public advocacy, policy-making and political communication was also deliberated over: focusing on one type of radicalisation and extremism, based on religion, nationality or any other factor, could unduly stigmatise groups of people and create divisions. A non-polarizing and non-political language, thus, needs to be adapted for the advocacy and communication of the project. It needs to be highlighted that the issue of radicalisation is a cross-partisan problem, not limited to only one end of the political spectrum or to one type of radicalisation. With such framing of the issue, NGOs also may be more likely to engage with policy- and decision-makers to a larger extent. Lastly, as emphasised by German policy- and decision-makers, the current project-landscape in the country with an overabundance of projects, public advocacy should focus on finding synergies and striving for cooperation between different initiatives.



CHAMPIONS

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