



GAMING
ECOSYSTEM AS A
MULTILAYERED
SECURITY THREAT



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GAMING STAKEHOLDERS MAPPING REPORT

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Gaming Stakeholders Mapping Report
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List of Abbreviations

AEVI	The Spanish Video Game Association
AMISTaDeS	The Study Center for the Promotion of International Culture
ANGI	The Association for the Nordic Game Industry
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BMBF	The Federal Ministry of Education and Research
BNED	The National Network for Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation in Austria
BuPP	Federal Office for the Positive Predication of Digital Games
BzKJ	The Federal Agency for the Protection of Children and Youth in the Media
CDE	The Center for Documentation and Counter Extremism in Denmark
CoE	Council of Europe
CSA	Coordinated Situational Awareness
CSI	The Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Croatia
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CVE Center	The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism in Albania
CYTREC	The Cyber Threats Research Center
DCU	Dublin City University
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies
DPRRI	The Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons
EGRN	Extremism and Gaming Research Network
ELIAMEP	Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy
e-Enfance	The Association of Public Interest in France
ENgAGE	The European Network against Gaming-related Extremism
EPAs	European Police Authorities
ESD	ENgAGE Stakeholders Database
EC	European Commission
EGDF	The European Games Developer Federation
EU	European Union
EUIF	The European Union Internet Forum
FIT	The Center for Advanced Studies
GEMS	Gaming Ecosystem as a Multilayered Security Threat
GNET	The Global Network on Extremism and Technology
ICCT	The International Center for Counter-Terrorism
ICSR	The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation
IDZ	The Institute for Democracy and Civil Society
IIDEA	The Association of Video Games Industry in Italy
ISD	The Institute for Strategic Dialogue
iSIGURT.al	The National Platform for Safer Internet in Albania
LKA	The Berlin Criminal Investigation Department
LMU	The Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich
MODUS ZAD	Center for Applied Research on De-radicalisation
MoH	Ministry of Health
Mol	Ministry of Interior
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
OSCE	The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PEGI	Pan-European Game Information
SGA	Serbian Games Association
SVEROK	The Swedish Gaming Federation
TCD	The Trinity College Dublin
ÖVUS	The Austrian Association for Entertainment Software
TU Berlin	The Technical University of Berlin

NCCVECT	The National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism in North Macedonia
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PRIF	Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
RadiGaMe	Radicalisation on Gaming Platforms and Messenger Services
RUSI	The Royal United Services Institute
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RUB	Ruhr University Bochum
UoW	The University of Warwick
UK	United Kingdom
UKCIS	UK Council for Internet Safety
US	United States
VGE	Video Games Europe
VGFN	Dutch Video Games Industry
VPN	Violence Prevention Network
WBs	Western Balkans
TWP	Working Party on Terrorism
ZTG	The Center Technology and Society

Executive Summary

In the domain of gaming and extremism, the engagement of state-level stakeholders across the European Union and associated countries is noticeably subdued. This scenario unfolds despite an acknowledged awareness of extremist activities within the gaming ecosystem. However, this recognition has not yet spurred definitive policy actions, nor has it clarified the responsibilities within national prevention institutions.

Public authorities in EU member states and associated countries demonstrate a limited commitment to addressing the challenges at the nexus of gaming and extremism. Contrarily, in the Western Balkans, the issue is treated with even greater indifference and lacks robust institutional support as part of national P/CVE action plans.

Non-state actors, notably from academic circles and civil society organizations, have taken a proactive stance, primarily contributing through research and awareness campaigns. These initiatives aim to elucidate the risks associated with gaming-related threats, targeting diverse audiences including students, media professionals, and educational staff across EU member states. Despite these efforts, the specific issue of the convergence of gaming and extremism remains underexplored in the Western Balkans, where the focus of research tends to gravitate more towards general online radicalisation.

In academic settings, the emphasis is predominantly placed on research over teaching. This skew towards research limits the broader discourse on the gaming-extremism nexus within student communities, a gap increasingly filled by CSOs. These organizations have emerged as crucial actors in the field, addressing the research void left by academia and exploring radicalisation that leads to violent extremism.

The European Union has recognised the significant potential for radicalisation through gaming platforms and has addressed this issue on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, a comprehensive strategy encompassing both prevention and intervention remains elusive. Within this framework, the gaming industry, including game developers, designers, and studios, is acknowledged as a pivotal partner in crafting prevention strategies. These strategies prioritise harm mitigation to enhance the safety of gamers by design.

However, the Western Balkans display a stark contrast, with a comprehensive industry response to extremism in gaming almost entirely absent. This lack of initiative not only impedes effective countermeasures but also shies away from addressing potential incendiary content that may fuel ethnic tensions in a region already sensitive to such issues.

The gaming industry in the Western Balkans urgently needs to foster discussions concerning the exploitation of specific video games by extremists, particularly those that could potentially stimulate real conflicts, such as those from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990's. Additionally, the industry should assess how discussions in forums related to these games could escalate ethnonationalism and inter-ethnic rivalries.

Moreover, the industry should launch tailored campaigns aimed at informing gamers about the risks posed by the presence of extremists in video gaming platforms and the available reporting mechanisms. Such initiatives would not only protect gamers but also contribute to the overall integrity and reputation of the gaming industry in the region.

All told, the current landscape indicates a significant deficit in the data and proactive responses needed to comprehensively address extremism within online gaming platforms. This highlights a critical area for EU legislators and policymakers to focus on, urging a more proactive and informed approach to bridge the prevailing gaps in engagement and effective response strategies.

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Introduction

I. Background and objectives

This mapping report has been produced as part of the project “Gaming Ecosystem as a Multilayered Security Threat” (GEMS), a Horizon Europe-funded project aimed at curbing the spread of extremism within the diverse world of online gaming. Building on key areas identified in the European Commission’s Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025¹ as well as on the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans (WBs)², GEMS aims to enhance joint work and advance a coordinated approach. GEMS will establish the European Network against Gaming-related Extremism (ENgaGE), which will have the aim of functioning as an umbrella initiative under which different stakeholders of the gaming ecosystem will come together to share knowledge, exchange experiences and best practices and suggest targeted activities and actions for meeting the relevant criteria outlined in the EU’s coordinated P/CVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism) approach. ENgaGE will bring together various stakeholders, including European Police Authorities (EPAs), the gaming industry, civil society, and academia.

In light of this, a stakeholder mapping was implemented between January-May 2024 by the GEMS research team³ of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) with the aim to serve as a knowledge and referral tool, informing in particular the development of ENgaGE. After identifying the relevant stakeholders, the mapping exercise focused on examining if and how they have implemented activities connected to the gaming ecosystem, the prevention of radicalisation and extremism, and the protection of users (gamers, youth, children) in digital spaces. The mapping also identified those authorities and actors that have the jurisdiction to protect the gaming spaces from extremist actors but have not as yet initiated or implemented any such activity. This included, among others, EPAs, security agencies, authorities dealing with digital safety and the protection of children (gamers), gaming/digital industry representatives (e.g., gaming developers, gaming adjacent platforms, gaming industry associations and other hardware and software-oriented companies), NGOs and other civil society organisations in the field of internet safety education and radicalisation prevention, comparable networks as well as universities that engage in gaming-related research and education. The geographical scope of the mapping encompassed the entire EU, the EU associated countries⁴ plus the United Kingdom (UK) and the Western Balkans, namely Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo.⁵

II. The Context

The exploitation of gaming platforms from extremists is a recognised concern across Europe. The focus has been largely driven by the risks generated from the use of technology and internet which constitutes a thematic priority of the European Commission’s (EC) Strategic Orientations for 2024-2025. This official document admits that “*gaming and gaming adjacent platforms plays crucial role in the radicalisation and recruitment process of individuals as well as in spreading propaganda*”

¹ European Commission. Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025. Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, February 2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-02/Strategic%20Orientations%202024-2025_en.pdf

² European Commission. Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, October 5, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/news/docs/20181005_joint-action-plan-counter-terrorism-western-balkans.pdf

³ The authors would like to thank Ms. Ioanna Giakoumopoulou for crucial research assistance provided for the data collection that accompanied this report as well as for editorial assistance in the drafting of the report; the authors would also like to thank Ms. Vasiliki Kotsikopoulou for providing expert feedback to versions of the report.

⁴ Norway, Switzerland and Iceland.

⁵ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. This disclaimer applies to all occasions when Kosovo is mentioned in this report.

material across the entire ideological spectrum”.⁶ In addition, the European Commission, through the research activity of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), has raised alarm about the nexus between gaming and extremism. Through the work of RAN, the European Union (EU) has taken notice of the potential impact of digital gaming environments in supporting various terrorist and extremist activities, including the radicalisation of young people. In a report published by RAN in 2021, gaming adjacent platforms have been classified as “hotbeds” for radicalisation.⁷ Similarly, recognising the evolving nature of extremist landscape in Europe, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has raised concerns about the intersection between video gaming and violent extremism.⁸

The rise of extremist activities in digital gaming spaces is a complex and multi-faceted challenge. As such, their prevention requires a multi-agency mechanism and a well-coordinated response from all the actors involved in the process. The non-coordination among respective authorities, the different perceptions about the extremist risks in the gaming platforms, the lack of trust between the research community and key stakeholders of the gaming world pose major challenges in advancing effective whole-of-society partnerships against extremism in online gaming spaces. Since all these challenges are closely connected to the stance of specific stakeholders on the issue, the mapping exercise followed an actor-centric approach. In doing so, it is possible to discuss the different contexts in which the various actors can contribute to P/CVE initiatives. The aim is not to evaluate the effectiveness of every project involving different stakeholders, but rather to provide a clearer image of their role and contribution, and to identify the context and needs under which each actor should operate.

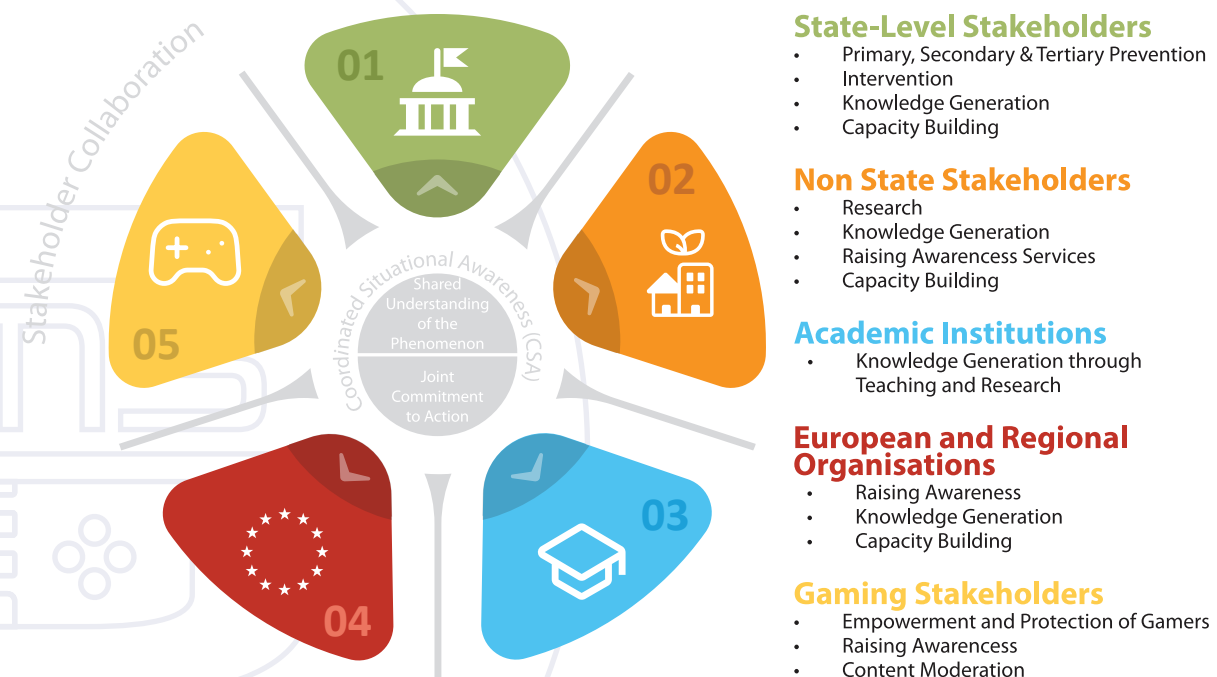


Figure 1 – Effective P/CVE Measures in Digital Gaming Spaces

⁶ European Commission. Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025, page 6.

⁷ Linda Schlegel. *Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures*. RAN Publications (Radicalisation Awareness Network: 2021).

⁸ Council of the European Union. Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism. General Secretariat of the Council, 2020. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9066-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

We argue that the prevention of radicalisation at gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms requires a tailored coordination among all stakeholders. Only this approach will secure a shared understanding of the phenomenon and joint commitment to action, two key parameters for securing a coordinated situational awareness (CSA)⁹ about extremist risks that could exist in the gaming ecosystem. CSA will be a significant tool in the hands of decision makers helping them make any P/CVE strategy for the prevention of violent extremism in online gaming platforms more responsive to the needs of the gaming community.

III. Methodology



Figure 2 - Methodology

The research was conducted with the aim to map the activities of five categories of stakeholders: state-level stakeholders, non-state stakeholders, academic institutions, European and regional organisations, and gaming world stakeholders. Several information gathering tools were used. The research team engaged in extensive online research using keywords for identifying the actors and their relevance with the issue of gaming and extremism. The desk research was followed by a phone consultation with the identified stakeholders and a request for information to secure the match of their activities with the objectives of ENgaGE, ensuring at the same time the accuracy of the information collected online. The team also conducted consultation meetings with all members of the GEMS consortium using their knowledge in their areas of expertise and their resources from standing partnerships they have established from their long-term engagement in the field.

After the confirmation of the data collected the research team formulated the ENgaGE Stakeholders Database (ESD). ESD contains key information about actors, networks, organisations and stakeholders who are responsible for the safety of gaming platforms or have implemented game-related research and education. The research team has put special emphasis in the working areas of each stakeholder to make their match with the objectives of EngaGE easier. In total, the research team identified and analysed the activities of 193 stakeholders, among them 68 state institutions and authorities, 44 gaming world actors, 45 non-governmental organisations, 20 European and regional organisations and 16 academic institutions. As part of their research, the team conducted more than 50 phone consultations to actively engage with the stakeholders and better understand their work and engagement with the gaming-extremism nexus. In addition, the

⁹ Coordinated Situation Awareness refers to the understanding of an environment, its elements, and how it changes over time or due to various factors. CSA involves integrating information from multiple sources to make informed decisions in complex environments such as the gaming and gaming adjacent platforms. It plays a crucial role in effective decision-making across different domains. See: J. Pöyhönen, J. Rajamäki, V. Nuojua, and M. Lehto, "Cyber Situational Awareness in Critical Infrastructure Organizations," in *Digital Transformation, Cyber Security and Resilience of Modern Societies*, ed. T. Tagarev, K.T. Atanassov, V. Kharchenko, and J. Kacprzyk, Studies in Big Data 84 (Cham: Springer, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65722-2_10.

research team sent 193 requests for information to ensure the accuracy of collected data and information.

This mapping report is based on the analysis of the data included in ESD. It consists of five different chapters, each one focusing on a specific type of stakeholders.¹⁰ Each one of the five chapters is divided into two sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter describes the role that stakeholders included in this category play in P/CVE. The main objective of this sub-chapter is to provide general information about the involvements of stakeholders in the already existing P/CVE mechanisms. The second sub-chapter puts under the microscope their specific engagement with the gaming-extremism nexus based on the findings of the mapping exercise. The five chapters of this report are structured to provide context-relevant and specific information on key areas of engagement in gaming and extremism as well as highlight actor-relevant findings for P/CVE.

¹⁰ State-level stakeholders, non-state stakeholders, academic institutions, European and regional organisations, and gaming world stakeholders.

1. State-Level Stakeholders

Abstract:

This chapter focuses on the role that governments and state authorities play in P/CVE and on their engagement with the gaming-extremism nexus. It is divided into two sections and a sub-section. The first section puts emphasis in the role that state-level actors play in the existing P/CVE mechanisms. The second section is dealing with the involvement of these respective category of actors with the presence of extremists in the gaming ecosystem, mapping those actors already engaged with the issue. A sub-section with key challenges identified by the consultations that the research team had with different stakeholders during the mapping exercise is followed.

Key Takeaways:

- Governments and state authorities have the responsibility to ensure security and implement P/CVE strategies.
- In a reaction to growing radicalisation and recruitment tendencies in different European countries, an increasing number of prevention and intervention measures have been taken in the last couple of years. Statutory mechanisms responsible for the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention as well as for the coordination of P/CVE actions and the development of strategies and action plans are in place in many countries.
- While there is a widespread consensus across state agencies that the video gaming ecosystem is significant in the process of radicalisation, these concerns have not been translated into concrete actions at the institutional level with concrete actions that will lead to the establishment of specific departments or working groups or the assignment of officers dealing with the security threats in the gaming spaces.
- This highlights certain weaknesses in the capacity of official institutions to understand the complex nature of gaming platforms and their chat box functionalities as well as the need for better inter-agency coordination and higher alignment among competent actors.
- The protection of gamers in digital spaces requires informed prevention measures targeted exclusively at gaming communities. While the threat of extremism in social media platforms has received increased attention by state authorities, challenges related to gaming are treated in an ad hoc manner.
- State authorities have reduced capabilities to recognise the respective risks as well as to assess the gamers' vulnerability towards any extremist content that circulate in gaming platforms. This is one of the gaps that state authorities may have to focus on when organising capacity-building trainings in the context of their prevention strategies.
- One other key challenge the research team identified is that state institutions have to deal with a diverse level of understanding of the core issues at stake when it comes to extremism and gaming as well as the different views that stakeholders hold about appropriate responses when identifying and analysing risk factors. This is making their efforts to respond to security threats more complicated.
- The prevention of radicalisation in online gaming spaces requires a well-coordinated response from all state actors involved in the process. In that context, it is of the utmost importance that the existing strategies and action plans are continuously reviewed and revised based on current needs assessments which takes into account the new local, national, European and international developments that could lead to the exploitation of these spaces by the extremists.

1.1. Stakeholder Role in P/CVE and Existing Mechanisms

Governments and state authorities have the responsibility to ensure security and implement P/CVE strategies. In a reaction to growing radicalisation and recruitment tendencies in different European countries, an increasing number of prevention and intervention measures have been taken in the last couple of years. Governments in all EU member states and EU-associated countries have employed several structural mechanisms to combat extremism and terrorism. To confront the new dynamics and the complex challenges of the online extremist landscape, all countries under investigation have followed a two-fold approach through the establishment of new units in charge of preventing and countering (violent) extremism and by strengthening the capacities of existing state institutions at the national and local level. Statutory mechanisms responsible for the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention as well as for the coordination of P/CVE actions and the development of strategies and action plans are in place in many countries.

At the top of these state mechanisms are the national prevention networks, bodies and agencies founded by the respective ministries and governments, such as the “National Network for Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation (BNED) in Austria, which has served as a point of reference for the country’s strategy to prevent and counter radicalisation.¹¹ Important state players engaged in tertiary prevention are also the Ministries of Interior (MoI), the Ministries of Justice (MoJ) and the Ministries of Health (MoH). In pursuing an anti-terrorism policy, the MoIs have established specific directorates for the investigation of terrorist and extremist acts, units which are usually under the direct supervision of the state police directorates. The mechanism is supported by the intelligence and law enforcement agencies which play crucial role in addressing extremist violence and terrorism.

Security authorities, such as EPAs, also play a key role in the state mechanisms for the prevention of radicalisation in all EU member states and the EU-associated countries. One other important actor of these prevention mechanisms are the Ministries of Education, engaged in primary and secondary prevention through the implementation of grassroots level measures for building young people’s resilience. Specific departments inside the ministries of education are responsible for training teachers, educators, and school psychologists to identify and respond to the signs of radicalisation, for early prevention of violent extremism at schools as well as for implementing initiatives to address socio-economic conditions conducive to radicalisation by providing skills and vocational trainings for at-risk youth.

The mechanism for preventing radicalisation in the Western Balkan countries has many similarities with those in EU member states. This is not unusual if we take into consideration the relatively extensive involvement of the EU and its member states in enhancing the region’s institutional capacities to successfully combat extremism. The Western Balkans have generally been a good student when it comes to the adoption of EU standards in this area. This reputation is reflected in the governmental engagement in P/CVE. Many countries of the region have adopted a multi-stakeholder P/CVE approach. An array of public institutions have implemented practices and policies that have produced a regulatory and institutional environment that is less favourable for action by extremist groups.

Indeed, many Western Balkan states have introduced new P/CVE mandates to existing state agencies. For instance, the Sector for Secondary and Adult Education in the Ministry of Education of Serbia is in charge of training teachers and youth leaders on P/CVE, while the National Committee for Combating Hate Speech on the Internet, affiliated with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, works on countering online hate speech. All Western Balkan countries have established mechanisms to

¹¹ Directorate of State Protection and Intelligence, *The Austrian Strategy for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation* (Vienna, 2019), https://www.dsn.gv.at/501/files/Praevention/767_Strategie_Extremismuspraevention_und_Deradikalisierung_publication_420x297mm_EN_WEB_20190115.pdf

deal with the problem of extremism. Indicatively we mention: a) the Coordination Centre for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE Centre) in Albania, a hub for the coordination and capacity development of local stakeholders and frontline practitioners involved in country's efforts to counter violent extremism, b) the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) in North Macedonia, a governmental body tasked to define country's priorities in regards to radicalisation, c) and the Division for Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalised Persons (DPRRI) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kosovo. The establishment of a multi-actor P/CVE mechanisms has made authorities in the Western Balkans more responsive to the threat of violent extremism and better prepared to address it.

Still, there are significant shortcomings and gaps that undermine the effective implementation of P/CVE initiatives especially in online spaces where extremist activity is detected with difficulty. As such, the operational and logistical capacities of national governmental P/CVE structures in Western Balkans remain limited and in need of strengthening.

1.2. Stakeholder Engagement with Gaming and Extremism

The overall assessment of state-level stakeholders in EU members states and EU-associated countries revealed a limited engagement by public authorities in the field of gaming and extremism. While there is a widespread consensus across state agencies that the video gaming ecosystem is significant in the process of radicalisation, these concerns have not been translated into concrete actions at the institutional level. None of the assigned bodies, agencies and institutions contacted by the research team have established specific departments or working groups or have assigned officers to deal with the security threats in the gaming spaces.¹² Possibly the single most powerful explanation for this weak response by the state institutions is the absence of a commonly shared perception and understanding of what constitutes a violent extremist threat in online gaming among the different bodies that constitute the prevention mechanisms in each country. This explanation points to the need for better inter-agency coordination and higher alignment among competent actors as well as between the security strategies of the countries and implementation at the operational level. Moreover, it highlights certain weaknesses in the capacity of official institutions to understand the complex nature of gaming platforms and their chat box functionalities.

The resilience of gaming communities is strengthened or negatively affected by several factors. One of these is the governments' response to the problem of extremism not only in online gaming platforms but also in other physical places where gamers are gathered to play their games. The research community has early on pointed to the risk posed by the increasing influence of radical personalities in gaming platforms. But, state authorities have not always reacted by initiating concrete actions at the institutional level, for example through the establishment of specialised bodies, tasks forces or expert groups capable of dealing with the complex challenges of the gaming ecosystem. As a result, gaming-related issues have often been left to the competencies of departments that focus on cybercrime and internet safety, which have not always proven to be the most adequate institutional points of reference for effective responses to the challenge.

Already, a few EU European states have established initiatives related to extremism and gaming, with Denmark and Germany being among the frontrunners. The Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism (CDE), a Danish governmental agency, has begun focusing on gaming. As part of Denmark's national plan against anti-Semitism, CDE has published a research study which investigates the current spread of anti-Semitism in online gaming environments.¹³ This study examines if young Danish gamers are coming across anti-Semitic content in the online gaming

¹² Conclusion from the mapping exercise and the phone consultation the research had with different stakeholders during the mapping exercise.

¹³ National Center for Preventing Extremism, *Antisemitisme i Gamingmiljøer* (Copenhagen: National Center for Preventing Extremism, 2022), <https://www.stopekstremisme.dk/publikationer/antisemitisme-i-gamingmiljoer>.

playground. At the time of writing, this is probably one of the few existing studies based on empirical research. More concretely, for the implementation of this study the research team conducted twenty-four interviews with young gamers divided into three focus-groups, six individual interviews and four interviews with field experts. The data collected confirmed the existence of anti-Semitic content in gaming platforms, with over half of the young gamers interviewed declaring that they have encountered such content.¹⁴

Germany is also investing in the generation of evidence-based research and knowledge around gaming with the aim to inform the country's efforts against radicalisation. For instance, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) is financing the RadiGaMe project which investigates radicalisation processes on gaming platforms and messenger services. Through narrative interviews with platform users, RadiGaMe seeks to shed light on the complex relationship between gaming platforms, communication, and radicalisation. Research results are then disseminated to relevant stakeholders (law enforcement agencies and policymakers) to enhance their ability to assess and address risks in the digital space or to develop relevant policies.¹⁵

National police authorities have also started to engage with the security threats in the gaming ecosystem even though their involvement in the area is at a very initial phase. For example, EPAs from Ireland, Spain and Belgium are part of the GEMS project which develops training curricula for first line security practitioners on the prevention and early detection of radicalisation in the online gaming world. In addition, the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department (LKA) is involved in the development and testing of practical solutions for analysing data on gaming-adjacent platforms and messenger services as part of the RadiGaMe project.

While in the EU members states and the EU-associated countries there is a limited engagement of public authorities in the field of gaming and extremism, in the Western Balkans this topic is very much a below-the-radar affair. The Kosovan police is the only national authority engaged in the gaming and extremism nexus through its participation in the GEMS project. The mapping exercise showed a lack of institutional support in addressing gaming-related extremism in the Western Balkans, as it is not included in national P/CVE actions plans, even though there is an extensive reference to online extremism and risks associated with the engagement of internet users in different online communities.

1.2.1. Key Challenges

The protection of gamers in digital spaces requires informed prevention measures targeted exclusively at gaming communities. While the threat of extremism in social media platforms has received increased attention by state authorities, challenges related to gaming are treated in an ad hoc manner; this is despite evidence that it may amount to a major threat, due to the increased popularity that gaming platforms have enjoyed in recent years. Currently, several European states actively work to protect young people online through various programs and initiatives. Through the development of practical tools for governments, industries and educators, these initiatives play a key role in promoting children and young people's safety in the online world. Even though gaming constitutes a significant part of the online experience for this age group, extremist threats related to gaming platforms are not part of the agenda of most of these initiatives.

Even in the cases where information about gaming-related risks is included, the information provided is very basic. This is not due to the reluctance to provide such kind of information but because extremist risks related to gaming environments remain under-researched. The state practitioners responsible for providing guidance for the protection of young people in digital spaces lack the capacities to understand the complexities of online and offline gaming environments and the cultures associated with different gaming communities. As such, they have reduced capabilities

¹⁴ National Center for Preventing Extremism, *Antisemitisme i Gamingmiljøer*.

¹⁵ RadiGaMe, "RadiGaMe Project," accessed May 29, 2024, <https://www.radigame.de/>.

to recognise the respective risks as well as to assess the gamers' vulnerability towards any extremist content that circulate in gaming platforms. This is one of the gaps that state authorities may have to focus on when organising capacity-building trainings in the context of their prevention strategies.

One other key challenge that our research team has identified is that state institutions have to deal with a diverse level of understanding of the core issues at stake when it comes to extremism and gaming as well as the different views that stakeholders hold about appropriate responses when identifying and analysing risk factors. This could make their efforts to respond to security threats more complicated. Many state actors do not even have basic knowledge or understanding how the radicalisation process takes place in the gaming platforms. This is one of the main reasons that has led to different perceptions about the risk potential of the phenomenon, which as a result significantly affects its prevention efforts. Research is crucial for understanding the phenomenon and producing a comprehensive analysis of the linkages between gaming and extremism. Adequate analysis is also key bridging the divides among the stakeholders, advancing a common understanding of the issues at stake and for generating adequate responses.

Moreover, state authorities should create clear and comprehensive gaming-related policies and orientations. Once policies are developed, each authority needs to communicate them to relative stakeholders both within their institutions as well as with other agencies. Regular training and awareness programs can help ensure compliance in the field. The inclusion of gaming-related extremism as a separate thematic area will serve as a catalyst for improvement of the national frameworks on P/CVE in gaming spaces and also push for a regulation in the lower levels of administration.

There are a lot of video games communities in different Western Balkan countries, but there is noteworthy lack of understanding of the risks associated in the intersection between extremism and gaming. The risks are significantly high, especially among those gaming communities that engage with video games that stimulate real military conflicts in former Yugoslavia. In these games, members of different groups simulate real inter-ethnic fighting, while often lightheartedly adopting nationalist narratives, which in many cases mis-interpret recent history. The digital rivalry expressed in these games, together with the gamers' psychological load could increase their vulnerability towards any kind of extremist propaganda.¹⁶ In addition, having in mind the significant number of foreign fighters that the region has contributed to Syria and Ukraine¹⁷, the exploitation of gaming platforms for recruitment purposes should also be considered as a possible risk in the region. Online gaming playgrounds provide extremists with the necessary protection for their recruitment purposes that social media platforms are not anymore offering.

More generally, it is not uncommon in the Western Balkans to underestimate risks associated with extremism. For example, the Horizon 2020 PAVE project identified a sluggish response to the problem of extremism in North Macedonia, even though local communities had pointed early on to the risk posed by the increasing influence of radical personalities in their communities. The official state institutions mobilised only when the issue was raised by the international community (UN, US, EU) and/or in the context of the European integration process.¹⁸ In the case of gaming-related extremism, state-level stakeholders should exhibit higher levels of awareness and mobilise early on, without waiting to be pressured by their international and European partners.

In the Western Balkans, there is a need for the respective state institutions to operationalise gaming-related approaches in their existing P/CVE initiatives. For instance, information and raising-

¹⁶ Amalia Koleka. "Playing War: Pitfalls and Potential of Video Games in the Balkans," *BalkanInsight* (01 September, 2021), last accessed June 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/01/playing-war-pitfalls-and-potential-of-video-games-in-the-balkans/>

¹⁷ Samir Kajosevic, "Montenegro Reveals 31 Citizens Have Fought in Foreign Wars," *BalkanInsight* (09 November, 2020), last accessed June 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/09/montenegro-reveals-31-citizens-have-fought-in-foreign-wars/>.

¹⁸ Bledar Feta, Ioannis Armakolas, and Ana Krstinovska, "Community Resilience against Violent Extremism in North Macedonia: The Stakeholders' Perspective," *PAVE-ELIAMEP Policy Paper*, May 2023, https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Policy-Paper-136-PAVE-first-paper_FINAL-1.pdf.

awareness programmes for young people and family members continue to appear blind to gaming-specific dynamics and parameters. There is a growing need to understand the role these dynamics play in the radicalisation process not only in each country separately but also in the region as a whole. Several ideas for support activities could be mentioned here. Small-scale meetings and trainings for staff from P/CVE coordinators could focus on raising awareness for the need of a structured inclusion of the issue in the process design of P/CVE policies. Practical regional or country-focused workshops could help officials to understand how to involve other actors of the state machinery in P/CVE actions related to gaming and extremism. Some of the activities could also address the capacity gaps in law enforcement authorities through training and tailored learning. Such interventions could cover the lack of capacity that national and community police officers have in tackling challenges in the cyberspace in general and chat rooms, gaming platforms and other open and dark online spaces in particular. Finally, tailor-made information campaigns dedicated exclusively to gamers could be introduced.

The rise of extremist activities in digital gaming spaces is a new, complex and multi-faceted challenge for state-level actors, especially for law enforcement authorities which are asked to deal with the issue in a pre-criminal phase without legal regulations in their hands. As such, the prevention of radicalisation in these spaces requires a well-coordinated response from all state actors involved in the process. In that context, it is of the utmost importance that the existing strategies and action plans are continuously reviewed and revised based on current needs assessments which takes into account the new local, national, European and international developments that could lead to the rise of extremism.

2. Non-State Stakeholders

Abstract:

The main purpose of this chapter is to outline the role that non-state actors are playing in P/CVE mechanisms around Europe and to identify their involvement with the gaming-extremism nexus. This chapter consists of two main sections: the first one explains the involvement of non-state actors in P/CVE in general, while the second one puts under the microscope their engagement in the field of gaming and extremism as well as their work in providing information for the safe navigation of digital spaces to different audiences. The second section is divided into four sub-sections: the first and second subsections cover the activities of think tanks, research institutes and NGOs and respective challenges, while the third and fourth sub-sections focuses on the activities of civil society practitioners engaged in youth empowerment, parental education and respective challenges.

Key Takeaways:

- Non-state actors have been a fundamental pillar of P/CVE mechanisms in many EU member states and EU associated countries. Over the past decade, there has been an increasing awareness among national and European stakeholders that governments alone cannot prevent radicalisation that leads to violent extremism. One of the steps considered effective in overcoming radicalisation has been the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the P/CVE process.
- The so-called “gamification of extremism” has attracted the attention of the research community. However, there are still theoretical and conceptual gaps which have left many aspects of the phenomenon under-researched. These gaps need to be covered by empirical research with the participation of gaming communities and the overall industry.
- The non-inclusion of the community itself in the methodological approach of many of the existing studies could be seen as a key explanation for the skepticism that exists among many state actors and key stakeholders about the existence of the extremist factor in the gaming ecosystem.
- Another important problematic factor stands in the absence of a clear strategy concerning EPAs and representatives of the gaming industry as potential end users of the knowledge produced by the research community. Identifying and researching the gaming-extremism nexus is important but if this knowledge is not disseminated to the appropriate actors or has not taken into consideration their needs, then it cannot pave the way for effective P/CVE interventions. This lack of coordination among the triangle -research community-EPAs-gaming industry- is one other gap that needs to be covered.
- Non-state actors are also offering raising-awareness services. Education professionals need relevant information, knowledge, and skills to effectively engage with young people who are active on gaming platforms. The development of positive relationships between education professionals and young gamers is a fundamental need for building their resilience against any kind of extremist content that could meet in the online video gaming platforms.
- Even though the inclusion of CSOs in the P/CVE processes is considered an effective step in overcoming radicalisation in online gaming spaces, their inclusion is not guaranteed mainly due to the very centralised strategies with strong emphasis on security, which somehow has created obstacles in the cooperation between security practitioners and civil society.



2.1. Stakeholder Role in P/CVE and Existing Involvement

Non-state actors have been a fundamental pillar of P/CVE mechanisms in many EU member states and EU associated countries. Over the past decade, there has been an increasing awareness among national and European stakeholders that governments alone cannot prevent radicalisation that leads to violent extremism. One of the steps considered effective in overcoming radicalisation has been the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the P/CVE process. Non-state actors can address conditions conducive to violent extremism. This is because the sector acts as a facilitator between different population groups, and the government, especially in areas where communities lack trust in state institutions. Consequently, the civic sector has established itself as an important factor in P/CVE mechanisms implementing projects across the spectrum of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and de-radicalisation.

Among the non-state stakeholders involved in prevention strategies, CSOs such as community groups, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contribute significantly to preventing extremism. They engage in outreach, education, and awareness campaigns, promoting tolerance, dialogue, and understanding among diverse communities. CSOs often work directly with at-risk individuals, providing counselling, mentorship, and support to prevent extremism. Grassroots organizations engage directly with communities vulnerable to radicalisation. They foster social cohesion, promote inclusion, and address grievances. By building trust and resilience, they mitigate the appeal of extremist ideologies. Non-state actors collaborate with tech companies, media outlets, and social networks to counter extremist content online. They develop campaigns, monitor platforms, and promote positive narratives. Their efforts disrupt recruitment and propaganda dissemination. Schools, universities, and youth organisations play a preventive role by promoting critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and resilience. They equip young people with tools to resist extremist narratives. In summary, non-state actors complement government efforts by providing diverse perspectives, conducting research, engaging communities, and countering extremist narratives.

The governments in the Western Balkans were initially hesitant to include CSOs in the drafting process of their national strategies for P/CVE. Yet, once the framework was set, and the labour division among the involved ministries determined, the scheme opened up to multiple stakeholders. The inclusion of civil society in the process was thus considered essential at a local (bottom-up) level. As a result, civil society established itself as an essential actor inside region's preventive mechanism, and in many cases functions as a bridge between the authorities and the radicalised individuals. Non-state actors have been actively engaged at the P/CVE, both as researchers as well as service providers. Local and regional think tanks and research institutes are generating significant knowledge about extremism in the region, while local, national and regional CSOs are implementing a range of projects to build resilience within local communities. These projects offer inter alia digital skills, trainings and information campaigns for youth, opening youth centers, and other initiatives focused on bringing young people from diverse backgrounds together, improving the capacities of professionals and practitioners, and reintegrating returnees from conflict zones.

2.2. Stakeholder Engagement with Gaming and Extremism

2.2.1. *The Domain of Research*

When it comes to gaming and extremism, the main contribution of non-state actors is in the field of research.¹⁹ The so-called “gamification of extremism” has attracted the attention of the research community. The intersection of gaming and extremism has indeed been the subject of research and analysis in many EU member states and EU associated countries. Currently, the EU is home to only

¹⁹ This section covers the activities of think tanks, research institutes and NGOs.

one network, of more than 80 individuals and institutional members, which is explicitly concerned with the issue of abuse of online gaming spaces by violent extremists, the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN).²⁰ EGRN members have produced various publications covering radicalisation within gaming-related platforms and forums. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), United Kingdom's leading security think tank and a co-founder of EGRN, has also a research portfolio on gaming and extremism. RUSI's research team across the RUSI UK and RUSI Europe offices are working on the topic through a specific project that examines radicalisation through the socialisation process happening in online gaming spaces²¹. RUSI's research reviews the evidence around socialisation processes within gaming culture and their role in the radicalisation of gamers.

One other significant research institute working in this sector is the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). ISD's *Gaming and Extremism* series examines the role of online gaming in the strategies of far-right extremists.²² The *Gamers Who Hate* report, part of these series, highlights extremist mobilisation within gaming communities.²³ The series include reports exploring extremist activity on four gaming-related platforms: Steam, Discord, DLive and Twitch.²⁴ This study identified a wide range of extreme right communities and influencers operating across Steam, Discord, and DLive, as well as a smaller variety on Twitch.²⁵ One significant finding of this mapping is the disproportionate attention of the research community on the presence of extreme-right wing content in public spaces across the online gaming ecosystem, which has been at the expense of researching content related to Islamist radicalisation, anti-establishment extremism, ethnonationalism and incel violence. However, there are always exceptions to the rule. A publication released by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), reviews existing knowledge on the convergence between jihad and gaming, identifying areas that need further attention from academics and researchers concerned with the spread of transnational jihadi. The report investigates how jihadists contextualise and take advantage of various gaming spaces, providing examples of such conduct. The report concludes by emphasising the need for data collection, security measures, and multidisciplinary collaboration to prevent gaming platforms from being used for jihadist mobilisation.²⁶

An analysis published by the Hague-based International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), identified that comprehensive P/CVE responses to address extremism in video games are generally lacking. According to the authors, addressing extremism within gaming is a pressing need, arguing that P/CVE policies should principally empower gamers while also equally focusing on 'meta-gaming' issues such as gaming culture rather than the games themselves²⁷. "*Game Over: The Dangerous Nexus Between Gaming, the Metaverse, and Violent Extremism*" is a two-part publication published by the Study Centre for the Promotion of International Culture (AMISaDeS) in Italy and delves into the intersection of gaming, the Metaverse, and the potential risks associated with violent extremism and terrorism.²⁸

²⁰ Extremism and Gaming Research Network, "Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN)," accessed May 29, 2024, <https://extremismandgaming.org/>.

²¹ Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), "Examining Radicalisation Through Socialisation in Online Gaming Spaces," <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/examining-radicalisation-through-socialisation-online-gaming-spaces>.

²² Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), "Gaming and Extremism: Extremists Evade Mainstream Restrictions in Corners of Gaming World," https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/gaming-and-extremism-extremists-evade-mainstream-restrictions-in-corners-of-gaming-world/.

²³ Jacob Davey, "Gamers Who Hate: An Introduction to ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series," Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), August 2021, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/20210910-gaming-reportintro.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Firas Mahmoud, "Playing with religion: The Gamification of Jihad," DIIS Report 06, 2022, accessed May 29, 2024, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/9007170/The_gamification_of_jihad_DIIS_Report_2022_06.pdf.

²⁷ Menso Hartgers and Eviane Leiding, "Fighting extremism in gaming platforms: a set of design principles to develop comprehensive P/CVE strategies," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), July 2023, accessed May 29, 2024., <https://www.icct.nl/publication/fighting-extremism-gaming-platforms-set-design-principles-develop-comprehensive-pcve>

²⁸ D. Lauretta and S. Senno, Game Over. The Dangerous Nexus between Gaming, the Metaverse and Violent Extremism (Parts One and Two), AMISaDeS, January 3, 2023, <https://shorturl.at/pOTIK>, and <https://shorturl.at/i1WQH>.

A working paper published by the Centre for Applied Research on De-radicalisation (modus|zad) in Germany sheds light on the complex relationship between gamification and radicalisation processes. The paper explores how gamification manifests in extremist contexts, examining the psychological mechanisms that underline it. While the paper acknowledges that empirical evidence is lacking, it suggests preliminary possibilities for applying gamification to prevent and counter extremism.²⁹ In the context of their RadiGaMe sub-project, the research team at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is addressing current deficits in the understanding of the relationship between gaming and extremism.³⁰ PRIF collaborates with the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) to address radicalisation on gaming platforms. They recently organised a webinar featuring the RadiGaMe project, which explores intervention measures and collaboration with law enforcement to identify high-risk users and illegal content on gaming-adjacent platforms.

2.2.2. Key Challenges

However, there are still theoretical and conceptual gaps which have left many aspects of the phenomenon under-researched. These gaps need to be covered by empirical research with the participation of gaming communities and the overall industry. The non-inclusion of the community itself in the methodological approach of many of the existing studies could be seen as a key explanation for the skepticism that exists among many state actors and key stakeholders about the existence of the extremist factor in the gaming ecosystem. This lack of credibility in the eyes of actors responsible for taking measures for the protection of gamers is one of the key challenges the research community is asked to deal with.

Yet, another important problematic factor stands in the absence of a clear strategy concerning EPAs and representatives of the gaming industry as potential end users of the knowledge produced by the research community. Identifying and researching the gaming-extremism nexus is important but if this knowledge is not disseminated to the appropriate actors or has not taken into consideration their needs, then it cannot pave the way for effective P/CVE interventions. This lack of coordination among the triangle -research community-EPAs-gaming industry- is one other gap that needs to be covered.

One aspect that further complicates the P/CVE work in gaming platforms is the lack of coordination among these actors, undermining joint activities and interventions, which are necessary in gaming spaces and chat rooms where monitoring and moderation are difficult to be implemented. RAN's 2020 report on the narratives and strategies used by extremists in the gaming ecosystem suggests the need of EPAs and first line practitioners to "familiarise themselves with gaming environments," and of an "open exchange and cooperation amongst the police and other first-line practitioners".³¹

Likewise, in their 2021 report on grooming tactics, RAN highlights the need for "cooperation between practitioners, policymakers, and gaming platforms, industry and companies to discuss the problem of grooming through video gaming and adjacent communication platforms."³² Already, two projects are currently working to bring together all relevant actors in order to develop effective countermeasures across all-sectors: the Horizon Europe research project GEMS – Gaming Ecosystem as a Multi-layered Security Threat which operates at the European level and the RadiGaMe -

²⁹ Linda Schlegel, "The Role of Gamification in Radicalisation Processes," Working Paper 1/2021, Centre for Applied Research on De-radicalisation (modus|zad), <https://modus-zad.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/modus-working-paper-12021.pdf>.

³⁰ N.A. "RadiGaMe - Processes of Radicalization and Prevention Measures on Gaming Platforms: Analysis and Knowledge Transfer," *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt PRIF* (n.d.), last accessed June 06, 2024, <https://www.prif.org/en/research/projects/projects/radigame-processes-of-radicalization-and-prevention-measures-on-gaming-platforms-analysis-and-knowledge-transfer>

³¹ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), "Extremists' Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives," Conclusion Paper, European Commission, November 2020, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-11/ran_cn_conclusion_paper_videogames_15-17092020_en.pdf.

³² Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), "Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities," Conclusion Paper, European Commission, May 2021, <https://shorturl.at/zT4Ec>.

Radicalisation on Gaming Platforms and Messenger Service operating at national level in Germany. In the context of GEMS, the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), a think tank based in Athens, is establishing the European Networks against Gaming-related Extremism (ENgaGE) to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and knowledge sharing. At RadiGaMe this mission is taken up by the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society (IDZ) in Germany which works to transfer knowledge about gaming and extremism to other sectors and actors.

While radicalisation and its online aspect is a very-well research topic in the Western Balkans, the intersection of gaming and extremism has not won the hearts of the region's researchers even though the concerns expressed by many societal groups. This lack of involvement can in part be explained by the non-address of the issue by the European and international donors which determine the research agenda. The issue has not been raised by the region's international partners. This consequently has not led to any mobilisation of official state authorities. The only exception would be the school shooting which took place in an elementary school in Belgrade in 2023. For a brief period, the government of Serbia was talking about violent video games as an issue which led to what was the first ever US style school shooting in the region. While state and some international actors pay zero attention to the consequences that the exploitation of gaming platforms could have in the different ethnicities of the Western Balkans, many local independent researchers underline the need for investigating the role that video game platforms play in the rise of ethnonationalism and the recruitment of foreign fighters from the region. Due to the lack of state funding resources, civil society is mainly functioning with international financial support. As a result, this high dependence on external donors is limiting their abilities to set their own research agendas on the topic.

2.2.3. Raising Awareness Services

Non-state actors are also offering raising-awareness services.³³ The mapping exercise identified a few initiatives tasked to provide key information about the gaming-related threats to targeted audiences such as the staff of counselling centers, youth workers in youth leisure facilities, professionals in media competence centers, educators in schools or similar places. Among the competences of these actors is the provision of information and guidance to the gamers and their parents to secure their safe navigation in online gaming platforms. Education professionals need relevant information, knowledge, and skills to effectively engage with young people who are active on gaming platforms. The development of positive relationships between education professionals and young gamers is a fundamental need for building their resilience against any kind of extremist content that could meet in the online video gaming platforms.

The Gaming and Right-Wing Extremism project, initiated by the Violence Prevention Network in Germany and funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education is developing and implementing an e-learning platform for multipliers in political education. This platform provides information and practical approaches related to current developments on right-wing extremism within the gaming scene. The project caters to multipliers in political education work, including actors in educational practice, youth workers, team leaders, and political educators. By promoting the ability of professionals to act, the project encourages them to be proactive in the digital realm, protecting young people from extremist approaches.³⁴

One very significant initiative which combines educational purposes, community engagement and playing experience is the mobile game *HATE HUNTERS* developed with the involvement of young people in the context of GameD project. This project is a collaborative effort between research and youth organisations, a university, and a gaming company from Austria, Germany, and

³³ This section covers the activities of civil society practitioners engaged in youth empowerment, education and related actions.

³⁴ N.A., "Gaming and Right-Wing Extremism: How right-wing extremists abuse gaming platforms." *Violence Prevention Network* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://violence-prevention-network.de/angebote/projektuebersicht/gaming-und-rechtsextremismus/?lang=en>

Denmark. The game developed in the context of this project not only offers a unique approach to education through gaming but at the same time it constitutes a significant tool in the hands of youth workers and pedagogues for addressing hate speech, online radicalisation and extremism targeting youth.³⁵ The creation of meaningful counter-narratives and acting in the very same digital spaces where extremists operate, but with positive storylines was the main idea behind the creation of this game.³⁶

Digital parenting for guiding youth's video game use in a positive direction is one of the thematic areas where non-state actors are engaged. For instance, the Association of Public Interest (e-Enfance) in France, focuses on the protection of children on the internet and their education in digital citizenship. The official website of the association has a dedicated section to video games, providing parents with advice concerning their children safe navigation of gaming platforms. The association, in cooperation with the Jeuxvideo.com, offers guidance for parents on topics such as controlling video game usage, protecting children from inappropriate content, and understanding the risks associated with this activity.³⁷ Jeuxvideo.com is a French website specialized in video games. It plays a crucial role in providing information and fostering gaming community in France. This kind of synergies between civil society actors and stakeholders of the gaming world are in the right direction for building resilience against extremism among the different gaming communities. However, there is a need to strengthen these formats for cooperation both in quantity by expanding their cooperation scope to other actors and quality by involving the risks associated with extremists' presence in gaming platforms into their thematic priority areas.

There are currently many initiatives that provide guidance on games and disseminates knowledge and materials about children and young people's use of digital media. For instance, the Media Council for Children and Young People in Denmark plays a crucial role in shaping the digital experiences of young individuals. It serves as the national awareness center collaborating with educators, parents, authorities, and organisations to inform and advise on children's and young people's digital media usage. The council provides advice to children and their parents regarding the use of computer games. In February 2024, the Council published an updated version of their guide for parents entitle "Children Gamer!". The new additions of this guide are about game retention. In general it offers a lot of content to parents and professionals to better understand their children's gaming habits.³⁸ jugendschutz.net is an initiative run by the sixteen federal states of Germany and funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth aimed at raising awareness about online safety for children and young people. jugendschutz.net checks internet content for violations of youth protection laws. They focus on topics and services specifically attractive to children and young people. They address various aspects of online safety, including the intersection of right-wing extremism and gaming.³⁹

In the same direction, the Center for Missing and Exploited Children (CSE) in Croatia has implemented activities to inform parents about the dangers and risks that exist in video gaming. For example, in one of their articles are counselling parents on how to be sure about the suitability of the video games their children are playing.⁴⁰ In one other article, they advise parents about the risks multiplayer platforms that have chat options, such as Roblox, entails for their children.⁴¹ Video

³⁵ N.A. "The Game." *Scenor* 2020 (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.scenor.at/the-game>.

³⁶ N.A. "Gaming for Democracy in the Context of Contemporary forms of Extremism." *Scenor* 2020 (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.scenor.at/gamed>.

³⁷ N.A. "Jeux video: Des informations pratiques pour les parents." *e-Enfance* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://e-enfance.org/informer/jeux-video/>.

³⁸ N.A. "Sikker Internet Dag 2024." *Medierådet for Børn og Unge* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://medieraadet.dk/sikker-internet-center/sikker-internet-dag>.

³⁹ Bernd Zywiets ed. *Tagungs-band: Rechtsextreme & Gaming-Kulturen Digitale Spiele und Communitys im Fokus von Propaganda und Prävention* (Mainz: jugendschutz.net, 2021) <https://shorturl.at/uaaSC>.

⁴⁰ N.A. "Kada PEGI ne vrijedi – online video igre i User generated content." *Csi.hr* (14 March 2024), last accessed June 2024, <https://csi.hr/2024/03/14/kada-peg-i-ne-vrijedi-online-video-igre-i-user-generated-content/>.

⁴¹ Sini.hr. "Roblox." *Sini.hr* (7 December 2023), last accessed June 2024, <https://sini.hr/2023/12/roblox/>.

Gaming is one of the main areas of the Austrian Safer Internet Center - [Saferinternet.at](https://www.saferinternet.at).⁴² The Center has published a guide entitled "What Parents Need to Know About Roblox" which informs parents about the possible risks that this gaming platform entails.⁴³

The vast majority of projects in Western Balkans focus on hate speech, online bullying and crimes in social media platforms and in internet in general. For instance, the National Platform for Safer Internet in Albania (iSIGURT.al) work closely with professionals in schools and public spaces where children are present to raise awareness on risks children and young people face while online, and how to protect themselves, and where to report incidents.⁴⁴ It also engages with politicians and MPs of the Parliamentary group "Friends of Children" at the Albanian Parliament to improve the legal framework regarding online crimes against children and young people. The Safer Internet Center in Bosnia and Herzegovina offers resources, awareness campaigns, and educational materials related to online child safety. In their website there is a specific section which provide information about the threats in online video games platforms as well as recommendation on how to reduce the existing risks.⁴⁵

The Center for Advanced Studies (FIT) provides such kinds of services in Kosovo. FIT promotes the safe and responsible use of the internet by young people through a sustainable strategy of informing and raising the awareness of parents, teachers, and children through various techniques, such as lectures, workshops, online courses, brochures, reports, and modules. The center has published a number of guides for safer use of the internet by youth and children in order not to be manipulated by the propaganda of different extremists and not only groups.⁴⁶ The Digital Guide 'Children and the Internet – Smart from the Beginning' is a valuable resource in the Serbian language, designed primarily for parents, caregivers, educators, and teachers of children aged 4–8. It also benefits children themselves and anyone involved in the upbringing and education of the youngest population. This digital guide was developed as part of the Family Safety Net project, initiated by UNICEF and Telenor Company. It's a collaborative effort involving the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development and the Užice Child Rights Center NGO. The specific objectives of the project are to empower parents to get involved in the education of children on digital safety, as well as to build capacities of teachers and educators to raise awareness and knowledge of parents of lower-primary and preschool children about the risks and safe use of the Internet. The guide has a dedicated section which covers gaming. It describes the positive and negative aspects of playing games and advises parents on how to protect their children from threats related to the video gaming and the respective platforms.⁴⁷ However, references about the risks created by the extremist presence in gaming platforms are missing from all documents and guides created by the above-mentioned initiatives in Western Balkan countries.

2.2.4. Key Challenges

Dealing with highly complex and variable online gaming spaces is one of the key current challenges in Europe. These are spaces with limited mechanisms for content control. As such, the responsibility for monitoring online activities falls on young gamers, with parents playing a crucial role in overseeing their internet usage. Since young people could be the preferred target for extremist propaganda and recruitment, there is a desperate need for generating knowledge about the ways that extremists are infiltrating gaming platforms and chatrooms. One common characteristic of all the above-mentioned initiatives is their main focus is on the intersection of

⁴² N.A. "Digitale Spiele." *Saferinternet.at* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.saferinternet.at/themen/digitale-spiele>.

⁴³ N.A. "Ratgeber: Was Eltern über Roblox wissen müssen." *Saferinternet.at* (23 February 2022), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.saferinternet.at/news-detail/ratgeber-was-eltern-ueber-roblox-wissen-muessen>.

⁴⁴ N.A. "Home." iSIGURT.al (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.isigurt.al/>.

⁴⁵ N.A. "Games." *Safer Internet Center* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.sigurnodijete.ba/en/awareness-center/category-parents/surf-safely/games/>.

⁴⁶ N.A. "Home." *Fit-ks.org* (n.d.), official website down <https://fit-ks.org/>, archived pages here, <https://shorturl.at/V2KiD>.

⁴⁷ Dobrinka Kuzmanović. "Playing video games – gaming." *Užice Child Rights Centre* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://digitalni-vodic.ucpd.rs/en/playing-video-games-gaming/>.

gaming and cybercrime. They tend to overlook the risks associated with the extremist presence in online gaming platforms and to pay very little attention to research-based understanding of the dynamics involved in the promotion of extremism through games.

As a result, the current state of awareness among young people, parents and educators about the radicalisation processes in the gaming ecosystem could be described as meagre to non-existent. There is a need this trend to change. Civil society practitioners should start addressing also the risk associated with the extremism presence in online game platforms. By building on the existing knowledge and experience, and by putting the gaming-extremism nexus under their microscope, civil society organisations could become significant actors for prevention in gaming spaces. The youth focus of these projects is one other challenge that we need to deal with. Adult and older gamers are also at risk of radicalisation on gaming platforms, but these age groups remain outside the scope of any raising awareness and information campaigns for now.

The focus on the risk related to the extremist presence in gaming spaces is also missing from the agenda of Western Balkan civil society practitioners. One shortcoming when it comes to the role of non-state actors in raising awareness about the gaming-extremism nexus in the region lies in the fact that their agendas are not created as a local necessity (bottom-up) but rather by donor organisational insistence or central government direction (top-down). This is one of the main reasons why civil society efforts and activities lack the necessary sustainable societal impact. The CSOs, mostly depending on international donors, have not been able to take ownership of the projects in P/CVE and develop capacities needed for that endeavour. As such, civil society in the Western Balkans does not have enough capacity to engage with the gaming community and function as a bridge between them and the respective state institutions. This is one gap that needs to be filled. One other serious problem is the lack of coordinated activities between the government and their non-governmental counterparts including various international actors in the field. The exchange of information is either too slow or not happening. It leads to the lack of a synergetic approach to P/CVE.

To sum up, even though the inclusion of CSOs in the P/CVE processes is considered an effective step in overcoming radicalisation in online gaming spaces, their inclusion is not guaranteed mainly due to the very centralised strategies with strong emphasis on security, which somehow has created obstacles in the cooperation between security practitioners and civil society. This kind of collaboration and coordination among these two significant actors of the P/CVE mechanism is a necessity, especially if we take into consideration the very complex nature of the online gaming platforms. The prevention of radicalisation in these areas cannot be done only repressively through police actions, prosecutions and content moderation. The protection of gamers in these environments requires actors who are seen by gamers themselves as reliable for addressing their needs, concerns, and their understanding of the problem. This consequently facilitates their relations with state institutions. One of the reasons for the possible success of CSOs in fostering resilience among gaming communities in Europe is the fact that these non-state actors do not take a securitised approach in dealing with the issue of gamers' vulnerability towards radicalisation in gaming platforms.

3. Academic Institutions

Abstract:

This chapter is dedicated to the role of education as a strong community resilient factor in online gaming platforms. The education system has certain attributes that make it unequally placed for building gaming communities' resilience against radicalisation due to its ability to serve as a critical hub for information sharing and critical thinking. The first section of this chapter analysis the involvement of academia and its contribution to P/CVE, while the second chapter focuses on the involvement of academic community in the field of gaming and extremism.

Key Takeaways:

- Academia plays a crucial role in preventing and countering violent extremism in Europe by contributing knowledge, research, and expertise.
- The academic community has a two-fold contribution around P/CVE which combines teaching and research. On the one hand the mapping exercise identified a significant number of teaching programmes. On the other hand, it revealed the efforts of many universities to establish research institutions inside their departments to further elaborate on the issue.
- Starting from the domain of research, there are some academic initiatives that have radicalisation or gaming in their focus, but a small proportion of them is dealing with gaming-extremism nexus.
- The fact that a significant part of the academic community is working on the issue is a clear indication that there is awareness within academia about the issue. The main challenge is the knowledge created by the academic community to reach the actors responsible for the formulation of P/CVE policies. There is a desperate need for knowledge sharing.
- Turning to the other dimension of academic institutions, the academic community has by and large focused much more on research and less on teaching. This is a significant limitation because it has left the debate about the gaming and extremism outside student communities. This is a significant gap that should be taken into consideration by the academic communities.
- Integrating the study of extremism within gaming platforms into university curricula is seen as a necessary step to empower students to be informed and responsible citizens.
- The mapping exercise identified many graduate programmes on video games development that could incorporate the dimension of extremism in gaming in their curricula. Their academic staff as well as their students should be aware of the rising presence of extremism in online gaming platforms. Game developers play a crucial role in shaping the gaming experience and ensuring that it remains enjoyable and safe for players. As such, there is a need for the students of these programmes to learn how to create robust content moderation systems that will identify and remove extremist content, hate speech, or harmful ideologies within games.

3.1. Stakeholder Role in P/CVE and Existing Involvement

Academia plays a crucial role in preventing and countering violent extremism in Europe by contributing knowledge, research, and expertise. Academics conduct research on radicalisation, extremism, and related topics. Their studies provide insights into the underlying causes, recruitment methods, and risk factors associated with the phenomenon. Through empirical research, researchers contribute to evidence-based policies and strategies for P/CVE and incorporate evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of P/CVE programs and mechanisms. By evaluating these interventions, researchers are able to identify what works and what not in addressing violent extremism.

Universities and research institutions offer courses, workshops, and training programs on P/CVE. These educational initiatives equip practitioners, policymakers, and law enforcement personnel with the necessary skills and knowledge. Academia also trains mental health professionals, educators, and community leaders to recognise signs of radicalisation and implement effective interventions. The academic research allows practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to assess changes in attitudes, behaviours, and relationships resulting from localised interventions. This understanding informs program design and implementation. Their expertise helps shape national, regional, and European strategies to prevent radicalisation and promote community resilience.

By involving academia, the P/CVE initiatives benefit from rigorous research and interdisciplinary perspectives. Academics explore ethical dilemmas related to P/CVE, such as balancing security measures with human rights and privacy. In summary, academia's role in P/CVE encompasses research, education, policy recommendations, community engagement, and ethical considerations. By leveraging their expertise, researchers contribute to building safer and more resilient societies in Europe.

The academic community has a two-fold contribution around radicalisation which combines teaching and research. On the one hand the mapping exercise identified a significant number of teaching programs such as the master programme for the governance of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. On the other hand, it revealed the efforts of many universities to establish research institutions inside their departments to further elaborate on the issue such as the academic research centre based in the Department of War Studies at King's College London.

3.2. Stakeholder Engagement with Gaming and Extremism

Starting from the domain of research, there are some academic initiatives that have radicalisation or gaming in their focus, but a small proportion of them is dealing with gaming-extremism nexus. The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative convened and led by the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), based within the Department of War Studies at King's College London.⁴⁸ While GNET focuses on various aspects of technology and extremism, it has also delved into the intersection of online gaming and extremism in close cooperation with EGRN.

Three German-based universities, and one in the UK and Ireland are exclusively researching the extremist presence in the gaming ecosystem in the context of RadiGaMe and GEMS projects respectively. The Center for Technology and Society (ZTG) at the Technical University of Berlin (TU Berlin) is researching the connection between online communication and real-world action orientations in the context of radicalization processes.⁴⁹ The research conducted by the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU) intends to create the basis for screening procedures that will predict criminally relevant dynamics in messenger communication through analysing this activity

⁴⁸ N.A. "Home." *Global Network on Extremism & Technology* (2024), last accessed June 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/>.

⁴⁹ N.A. "RadiGaMe - Radikalisierung auf Gaming-Plattformen und Messenger-Diensten." Technische Universität Berlin (2024), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.tu.berlin/en/ztg/research/projects/current-projects/radigame>.

in instant messenger services and gaming-adjacent platforms.⁵⁰ The Ruhr University in Germany is researching the legal aspect connected to the collection and processing of data from non-public and semi-public channels and the potential criminal behaviour that typically occurs on gaming-adjacent platforms as part of radicalisation processes.⁵¹ The Trinity College Dublin (TCD) which coordinates the GEMS project is researching the sociology of gaming, in particular how it pertains to the phenomenon of radicalisation in the gaming ecosystem, developing a new academic field of Sociology of Gaming and Radicalisation.⁵²

In the context of this extensive empirical research, the University of Warwick (UoW), is working to identify normative and legal issues arising from the topics of substantive social science research in GEMS. Researchers at the Swansea University and the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom have also engaged with the topic. A study entitled “Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames” explores the intersection of violent extremism and video gaming supporting that game-based interventions remain significant. These interventions include the adoption of gaming-based iconography in extremist and terrorist social media campaigns, as well as the activity of modders and supporters who continue to create games that champion extremists and terrorists.⁵³

The fact that a significant part of the academic community is working on the issue is a clear indication that there is awareness within academia about the issue. The main challenge is the knowledge created by the academic community to reach the actors responsible for the formulation of P/CVE policies. There is a desperate need for knowledge sharing. The European Network against Gaming-related Extremism (ENgaGE) that will be created in the context of GEMS project could fill this gap bringing under the same umbrella all the actors engage with gaming and extremism to share knowledge and best practices. Universities need to intensify their cooperation with tech companies and provide technical support and mentorship programs to improve their policies to better protect their gamers. Already there are established academic research initiatives such as the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC) at the Swansea University and the VOX-Pol research network on online extremism and terrorism at Dublin City University (DCU), that can expand the scope of their activities to gaming also and provide this kind of services.

When it comes to the Western Balkans, the mapping exercise did not identify any academic institution researching the gaming-extremism nexus. In general, the academic involvement in researching radicalisation that leads to violent extremism in the Western Balkans is limited. CSOs that provides research services have emerged as important actors in this field, filling the gap left by the academia.

Even though the experts engaged in research provided by CSOs have a significant academic knowledge on the topic, the omission of academic institutions from the total picture of P/CVE efforts is a significant gap. As extremism increasingly extends into more complicated spaces, such as the gaming-adjacent platforms, there is a need for the academic community to enter the field, joining forces with CSOs. Academic researchers possess specialised expertise and rigorous methodologies that ensure the quality of studies and increase the reliability of research findings in the eyes of difficult audiences such as the gamers and the gaming industry. While both academia and civil society play vital roles, academia’s research expertise, commitment to ethics, and influence on policy make it a more valuable contributor to P/CVE efforts.

There is a need for the research community in the Western Balkans to start generating knowledge not only about the gaming-extremism nexus but also about any dimension linked to video games as one of the region’s evolving industries. One very interesting finding of the mapping exercise is

⁵⁰ N.A. “Research Alliance.” *RadiGaMe* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.radigame.de/en/research-alliance>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² N.A. “Home.” *Projectgems.eu* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.projectgems.eu/>.

⁵³ Nick Robinson, Joe Whittaker. “Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), 1-36, <https://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa55769>.

that while universities in the region, especially the private ones, are investing in the establishment of game design programmes to push the development of region's industry, the same enthusiasm is not seen for the development of academic programs that will examine social or cultural aspects of video games. There is a need for these two processes to go in parallel as a prerequisite for the creation of healthy games and the protection of gamers.

Turning to the other dimension of academic institutions, the academic community has by and large focused much more on research and less on teaching. This is a significant limitation because it has left the debate about the gaming and extremism outside student communities. This is a significant gap that should be taken into consideration by the academic communities in EU member states and EU associated countries. Investigating extremism within gaming platforms has significant societal dimensions. Incorporating this topic into university curricula could be beneficial. By studying this phenomenon, students can learn to evaluate information, recognize biases, and differentiate between legitimate discourse and harmful ideologies. These skills are essential in an era of misinformation and digital echo chambers. As possible gamers, students need to grapple with ethical dilemmas related to these spaces. Investigating extremism in online gaming spaces helps them understand the balance between free speech, privacy, and safety, encouraging discussions about responsible content moderation and platform governance. In addition, the investigation of the phenomenon requires collaboration across disciplines. University curricula can foster interdisciplinary learning, encouraging students to approach the issue from various angles. Integrating the study of extremism within gaming platforms into university curricula is seen as a necessary step to empower students to be informed and responsible citizens.

The mapping exercise identified many graduate programmes on video games development that could incorporate the dimension of extremism in gaming in their curricula. Their academic staff as well as their students should be aware of the rising presence of extremism in online gaming platforms. Game developers play a crucial role in shaping the gaming experience and ensuring that it remains enjoyable and safe for players. As such, there is a need for the students of these programmes to learn how to create robust content moderation systems that will identify and remove extremist content, hate speech, or harmful ideologies within games. At the same time, they should be sensitised to the need to design gaming characters, storylines, narratives and themes, that do not promote extremist ideologies or glorifying violence. This would be the way to minimise the exploitation of their games by the extremist factor.

4. European and Regional Organisations

Abstract:

European and regional organizations have been actively involved in the prevention of radicalisation. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of their contribution in the field of P/CVE in general and the second sections elaborates on their involvement with the gaming-extremism nexus.

Key Takeaways:

- The European Union has been actively involved in countering violent extremism through various institutions and initiatives. The European Commission is at the forefront of P/CVE efforts through policy implementation, research, and resource allocation, paving the way for EU member states to follow.
- EU membership perspective continue to play a role for countries in the Western Balkans to align with EU policies, including in particular in the area of rule of law, which has contributed to progress in the harmonisation of P/CVE programmes. When it comes to regional organisations, the P/CVE field in the Western Balkans is dominated by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE).
- The European Union recognises the significance of gaming platforms in the context of radicalisation and is one of the few organisations, if not the only one, that has raised the issue on several occasions.
- The Radicalisation Awareness Network has been actively researching the intersection of gaming and extremism generating significant knowledge and shaping stakeholders understanding. Their research raised the stakes and mobilised EU officials.
- The protection of online gamers from the extremist presence in gaming platforms is not only the concern of the EU. Other organisations such as the OSCE, the CoE and bodies such as the Europol's Internet Referral Unit focus on different aspects of the wider problem of combating terrorism and violent extremist propaganda on the internet; as such they could extend their focus to exploring how to prevent radicalisation in online gaming platforms.
- When it comes to the Western Balkans, the EU, OSCE and the CoE are well-placed to push for mobilising stakeholders in the region to deal with the gaming-extremism nexus. This cannot remain an overlooked sector any longer.
- The EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation will also be able to focus on this challenge, building on the previous work done in the Western Balkans by RAN.
- The EU Knowledge Hub may reinvigorate the discussion about the prevention of radicalisation in both the EU and the Western Balkans investing significant capital in the formulation of a P/CVE that will exclusively deal with the prevention of extremism in gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms assessing the risks and defining the responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in the process.

4.1. Stakeholder Role in P/CVE and Existing Involvement

The European Union has been actively involved in countering violent extremism through various institutions and initiatives. The European Commission is at the forefront of P/CVE efforts through policy implementation, research, and resource allocation, paving the way for EU member states to follow. The Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025 outline key priorities and actions for addressing radicalization within the EU. These orientations cover a transition period, including the establishment of the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation, expected to launch in September 2024.⁵⁴ The EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation is a new body initiated by EC's DG Home with the mission to support EU Member States and other stakeholders in developing and implementing effective strategies to combat radicalisation. The Knowledge Hub aims to strengthen EU policies that prevent and counter radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism.⁵⁵ It will build on the achievements and the knowledge produced by the Radicalisation Awareness Network. The Commission emphasise a whole-of-society approach, involving civil society, practitioners, and research experts. Specific actions include awareness-raising programs, training for first-line practitioners, and sharing best practices to develop exit programs. While online gaming is not explicitly mentioned as a stand-alone priority, there is a reference to gaming, and gaming-adjacent platforms in the context of the thematic area that deals with the online dimension of radicalisation and the new technologies. The strategic orientations aim to enhance prevention efforts, foster cooperation, and address radicalisation challenges in third countries too. The document recognises that radicalisation in the EU can be influenced by external factors. The limited power of the EU and its member states to deal with the undesirable foreign influences creates the need for cooperation with priority third countries such as the Western Balkans. The prevention of radicalisation beyond the EU is seen as a necessity for the security of the EU and its member states.⁵⁶

EU membership perspective continue to play a role for countries in the Western Balkans to align with EU policies, including in particular in the area of rule of law, which has contributed to progress in the harmonisation of P/CVE programmes. The region's P/CVE mechanism could not be functioning without the financial and institutional support of European donors and regional organisations. The EU is one of the most important external actors on P/CVE in the Western Balkans, financing both national and regional projects. The EU is one of the main donors providing sub-granting schemes to encourage grassroots organisations and local CSOs to engage in P/CVE projects. The projects funded are mostly capacity-building and community-based initiatives, striving for resilience, social cohesion, and cooperation. In some countries, such as in BiH, the EU delegation has worked with prison staff as well as with religious community leaders.⁵⁷

When it comes to regional organisations, the P/CVE field in the Western Balkans is dominated by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE). The OSCE has worked in the establishment of local prevention councils in different municipalities and has its contribution in countering terrorist financing through trainings for units that deal directly with the early detection and prevention of violent extremism and terrorist acts. The local communities play a central role in resilience-building efforts through their responsibility to contribute to the system of institutional P/CVE measures. Municipal authorities can effectively coordinate at a local level the work of various stakeholders relating to P/CVE efforts. As the main

⁵⁴ European Commission. Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. *Strategic Orientations on a Coordinated EU Approach to Prevention of Radicalisation for 2024-2025*. European Commission, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-02/Strategic%20Orientations%202024-2025_en.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid, page 11

⁵⁷ Adnan Pečković and Jasmin Jašarević. *Trends of Radicalisation Bosnia and Herzegovina/3.2 Research Report July 2021*, last accessed May, 2024, <https://hope-radproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Peckovic-Jasarevic-2021-Trends-of-Radicalisation-in-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina.pdf>.

P/CVE supporter in the country, the OSCE works across several fields such as online P/CVE, counter-messaging, youth engagement, and capacity building.

The CoE is active in countering violent extremism and radicalisation in prisons through the appropriate training of prison staff in many countries of the region. Further, the international sphere includes foreign embassies and developmental agencies as well as international foundations. Most active in this field are the Embassies of the US, several EU countries including the EU Delegations, as well as Switzerland and Norway. All of the European and regional actors active in the field of P/CVE in the Western Balkans function primarily as donors, although most of them also actively support and monitor the initiatives

4.2. Stakeholder Engagement with Gaming and Extremism

The European Union recognises the significance of gaming platforms in the context of radicalisation and is one of the few organisations, if not the only one, that has raised the issue on several occasions. The Radicalisation Awareness Network has been actively researching the intersection of gaming and extremism generating significant knowledge and shaping stakeholders understanding. Their research raised the stakes and mobilized EU officials. In 2000, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator highlighted the potential impact of digital gaming environments on extremist activities in a note send to the delegations of the Council of the European Union asking for the further discussion of the issue in Council's relevant bodies such as the Working Party on Terrorism (TWP).⁵⁸ The European Union Internet Forum (EUIF) is working to tackle the misuse of video gaming and adjacent platforms by violent extremists and terrorists. According to the EUIF's agenda for 2024, the forum is assessing the use and the impact of the EUIF handbook released in 2023 to tackle extremism in video gaming.⁵⁹ This handbook provides guidance to video gaming platforms on how to empower their users to identify, report and counter harmful content on their platforms.

The EUIF is already in a dialogue with gaming platforms representatives but there is a need for further intensification of their cooperation. The EUIF should also engage the game developers and the associations that represent them into the dialogue, expanding the agenda of discussions to other issues such as recruitment in the context of the war in Ukraine. Russian operatives are aggressively pushing pro-Kremlin propaganda on online video game sites.⁶⁰

As such, there is a need to investigate if this propaganda and disinformation could lead to radicalisation, recruitment or inspire individuals in Europe to commit terrorist attacks. This cannot happen without the cooperation of gaming platforms and their willingness to open their platforms for independent research. This is why the dialogue between EU institutions and the gaming industry should take place in other levels taking into consideration the new challenges created by the recent geopolitical developments. The protection of online gamers from the extremist presence in gaming platforms is not only the concern of the EU. Other organisations such as the OSCE, the CoE and bodies such as the Europol's Internet Referral Unit focus on different aspects of the wider problem of combating terrorism and violent extremist propaganda on the internet; as such they could extend their focus to exploring how to prevent radicalisation in online gaming platforms.

When it comes to the Western Balkans, the EU, OSCE and the CoE are well-placed to push for mobilising stakeholders in the region to deal with the gaming-extremism nexus. This cannot remain an overlooked sector any longer. The EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation will also be able to focus on this challenge, building on the previous work done in the Western Balkans by RAN.

⁵⁸ EU-Counter Terrorism Coordinator. *Online gaming in the context of the fight against terrorism* (2020), last accessed June 2024, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9066-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁵⁹ EU Internet Forum 2024 agenda is available online at, <https://shorturl.at/0uGAZ>.

⁶⁰ Steven Lee Myers and Kellen Browning. "Russia Takes Its Ukraine Information War Into Video Games" *New York Times* (30 July 2023), <https://shorturl.at/Y8KuN>.



All in all, the EU Knowledge Hub may reinvigorate the discussion about the prevention of radicalisation in both the EU and the Western Balkans investing significant capital in the formulation of a P/CVE that will exclusively deal with the prevention of extremism in gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms assessing the risks and defining the responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in the process.



5. Gaming Stakeholders

Abstract:

The sixth chapter of this publication puts under the microscope the gaming world stakeholders. It consists of two main sections. The first section provides key facts about the gaming industry in the EU and Western Balkans. The second chapter is dealing with industry's involvement in tackling extremism in online gaming platforms. This second chapter is divided into three separate sub-chapters: the first one covers the activities of gaming studios, platforms and tech companies, the second one is dealing with the gaming industry associations that operates at European level and the third and last sub-section focuses on the associations that operates at national level.

Key Takeaways:

- Industry level involvement is needed to tackle the underlying drivers of extremist activities in digital gaming spaces. Collaborative networks and practices that encompass the incorporation of various stakeholders from the gaming world are seen as the most effective for the development of comprehensive P/CVE strategies.
- Among the different stakeholders of the gaming industry, game developers, designers and studios that create games are seen as crucial partners in setting the principles of any prevention strategy through harm mitigation efforts that will secure the safety of gamers by design. The mapping exercise showed an extremely low level of engagement in this direction.
- One of the limitations that hinders their effective work and collaboration with governments is the relatively low attention given to them by state authorities which undermines their potential for P/CVE.
- There are also research-related knowledge gaps that limit the understanding of the role industry actors play in establishing healthy and inclusive gaming communities. Hence, these stakeholders currently represent an underused resource, the potential of which should be better exploited.
- Moderation, safeguarding and content reporting/removing efforts have dominated the agenda. The mapping also identified different views between the gaming platforms and gaming developers on who is responsible for the problematic content. For example, gaming platforms support that they are responsible for moderating their own discussion pages, while the moderation of games' community forums is the responsibility of those who have created each game. This lack of common ground has largely left harmful communities and content featuring violent posts unmoderated.
- The cooperation of game studios with high tech companies that provide moderation services is in better shape. Even though these positive examples of cooperation, there is a need for intensification, especially in information sharing.
- Game companies need to share data giving tech companies the know-how to tailor their tools to fit the needs of every gaming community. On their part, tech companies need to expand their scope to different forms of extremism that could be present in online gaming platforms, including recruitment.
- The exploitation of gaming and its related places has so far not been the focus of gaming industry associations. The nexus between gaming platforms and extremism needs to be addressed in the context of these associations as the only bodies having the power to shape narratives and impact industry dynamics. One of the main practical challenges is the recognition of the problem and its dimensions by the gaming industry.
- This gap can only be covered through the mobilisation of associations that represent the gaming industry. These associations need to create the necessary conditions for engaging the main gaming platforms, publishers, and developers in an internal dialogue on the issue. The recognition of the importance of this issue by the gaming industry will be a significant step that will open the way for cooperation with other stakeholders.
- This development not only will increase the accountability of the industry in the eyes of the general public, but at the same time will eradicate any stigmatisation risk.

5.1. Key Facts about Gaming and Gaming Industry

The gaming industry represents one of the fastest growing industries on a global scale and is on its way to supersede the movie and music industries in their culture shaping roles. In 2021, the EU was home to 5,500 game developer studios and more than 250 game publishers.⁶¹

In 2022, Europe had approximately 126.5 million video gamers.⁶² 53 per cent of Europeans aged 6 to 64 years old actively engage in video gameplay, making it an integral part of their leisure activities.⁶³ 76% of video game players are 18 years or older, with the average age being 32 years. With a sector worth €24.5 billion and 110,000 employees Europe's video games industry contributes significantly to the global gaming landscape.⁶⁴

Videogames have become an integral part of everyday life for Austrians also. A recent study conducted by the GfK on behalf of the Austrian Association for Entertainment Software (ÖVUS), revealed that seven out of ten Austrians play video games, which amounts to approximately 5.8 million gamers in the country.⁶⁵ Gaming is an integral part of Danish children's everyday lives since 46% of them play digital games daily or almost daily.⁶⁶ According to a report published by Video Game Europe, 53 per cent of population aged 6-64 played video games in 2022. The revenue generated by the video games industry in 2022, across five key markets, was €24.5 billion.⁶⁷

The gaming industry in the Western Balkans is on the rise, and it's becoming an emerging hub for game development. Serbia, in particular, has a rapidly growing game development sector. There are currently around 150 teams and companies actively working on game development and related services in the country. The video game sector in Serbia employs over 4,300 professionals, with a 98% increase in the number of employees compared to 2022.⁶⁸ In terms of revenues, the top fifteen gaming companies in Serbia generated a total revenue of 175 million euros in 2023.⁶⁹

5.2. Industry's Involvement in Tackling Extremisms in Online Gaming Platforms

Industry level involvement is needed to tackle the underlying drivers of extremist activities in digital gaming spaces. Collaborative networks and practices that encompass the incorporation of various stakeholders from the gaming world are seen as the most effective for the development of comprehensive P/CVE strategies.

5.2.1. Gaming Studios, Platforms and Tech Companies

Among the different stakeholders of the gaming industry, game developers, designers and studios that create games are seen as crucial partners in setting the principles of any prevention strategy through harm mitigation efforts that will secure the safety of gamers by design. Game companies need to consider safety mechanisms during the development of the game to secure effective responses against any threat.

The mapping exercise showed an extremely low level of engagement in this direction. However, it seems that there is not a lack of willingness for further engagement on the part of game producers and developers with many of them exhibiting some level of awareness of the issue. For instance, Serious Games Interactive, a Copenhagen-based company, developed the Hate Hunters game,

⁶¹ European Game Developers Federation. *2021 European Video Games Industry Insight Report*. (European Games Developer Federation, Video Games Europe, 2021), <https://shorturl.at/Kun15>.

⁶² Video Games Europe. *All About Video Games. Culture-Creativity-Technology. European Key facts 2022*. (Video Games Europe, European Games Developer Federation, 2023), <https://shorturl.at/0sJxx>.

⁶³ Video Games Europe. "Women and video games." *Video Games Europe* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://shorturl.at/5hAaq>.

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ N.A. *Gaming in Austria: Eine Studie der GfK im Auftrag des Österreichischen Verbands für Unterhaltungssoftware ÖVUS*. (2024), <https://shorturl.at/fGChm>.

⁶⁶ Medierådet for Børn og Unge, DR og Det Danske Filminstitut. *Børns spilletvaner 2023*. <https://shorturl.at/ZzSCn>.

⁶⁷ Video Games Europe. *All About Video Games*.

⁶⁸ Serbian Games Association. *Serbian Gaming Industry Report* (2023), available at <https://shorturl.at/xFrtr>, last accessed June 2024.

⁶⁹ Ibid

aiming to raise awareness about hate speech and online extremism.⁷⁰ One of the limitations that hinders their effective work and collaboration with governments is the relatively low attention given to them by state authorities which undermines their potential for P/CVE. There are also research-related knowledge gaps that limit the understanding of the role industry actors play in establishing healthy and inclusive gaming communities. Hence, these stakeholders currently represent an underused resource, the potential of which should be better exploited.

Gaming and gaming adjacent platforms have gained the most attention in the context of preventing and countering extremism as the main spaces targeted by ideological extremists. The mapping exercise identified a wide range of online platforms where users buy and play video games and discuss gaming such as Steam, Minecraft, Discord, Twitch, Odysee, Roblox etc. One of the key challenges in dealing with the extremist presence in these platforms is the fact that they operate in a legal vacuum which has not left them adequately supervised. In addition, working in the chatrooms of games is – contrary to messenger services – also not regulated, due to the absence of EU-wide legislation on encryption. As such, there is definitely a need to think legally about this aspect in order to fill the existing gaps. The lawful access of law enforcement officers in criminal communications on gaming platforms is one of the key measures for P/CVE, but it still remains a key challenge. The discussion around this issue is in its infancy and cannot be successful without the participation of platforms' representatives and the gaming industry and gamers themselves of course. The involvement of the gaming industry ought to be done in a way that will not disturb their relations with the gaming community.

Moderation, safeguarding and content reporting/removing efforts have dominated the agenda but, in many of the identified platforms appear to be largely ineffective with problematic content easily accessible to any user. Some platforms mainly ignore these things trying to keep these issues on the down-low because they do not want to get unwanted attention, while other companies are not aware of the issue. There exists a combination of resistance to regulating, and not being aware of the need for it. As such, there is a necessity for more transparent reporting on the moderation infrastructure and content reporting mechanism used by the gaming platforms.

The mapping also identified different views between the gaming platforms and gaming developers on who is responsible for the problematic content. For example, gaming platforms support that they are responsible for moderating their own discussion pages, while the moderation of games' community forums is the responsibility of those who have created each game. This lack of common ground has largely left harmful communities and content featuring violent posts unmoderated. Gaming platforms and game developers need to cover this gap by finding a common solution that will moderate the problematic content in both spaces. The EU and state institutions could facilitate this approach in the context of their P/CVE mechanisms, thus helping the gaming industry to deal with the technical challenges that represent the identification of illegal content. On their part, gaming platforms could inform game producers about the moderation options they offer and provide training on how to use them. Therefore, closer cooperation among state authorities, the EU and the gaming industry is essential.

The cooperation of game studios with high tech companies that provide moderation services is in better shape. Modulate, a company specialising in AI voice technology for online gaming communities, has taken significant steps to address violent radicalisation and extremism in voice chat.⁷¹ Their solution, ToxMod, is a proactive, voice-native moderation system deployed in games and console platforms.⁷² ToxMod includes a violent radicalisation detection category. This feature enables real-time identification of toxic interactions. Community moderators can take immediate

⁷⁰ See their official website here: <https://www.seriousgames.net/en/>

⁷¹ See their official website here: <https://www.modulate.ai/>

⁷² Modulate. "ToxMod Levels Up Its AI Voice Chat Moderation To Take On Violent Radicalization in Online Gaming." *Modulate* (15 June 2023), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.modulate.ai/press-releases/toxmod-voice-moderation-violent-radicalization>.

action based on these detections. Counterstrike, Call of Duty, Nintendo, Celtic Games, Riot Games etc. have already integrated this tool.

The SambaNova Systems, a computing start up, is developing, as part of the GEMS project, an AI moderation tool that will be capable to recognise extremist presence in gaming ecosystem and interrupt recruitment attempts in real time. This innovation tool will be available to EPAs to improve their capacities in dealing with extremism in the gaming ecosystem. In the context of RadiGaMe project, Munich Innovation Labs is training AI models for radicalisation processes in the gaming sector that can identify relevant multimedia files to support researchers analyse and visualise large amounts of data. EGRN also collaborates with gaming platforms. They act as a bridge between gamer communities, small organisations developing games, and international policymakers.

There is no doubt that tech companies should occupy a significant position in any P/CVE efforts in online gaming spaces. Even though there are positive examples of cooperation, there is a need for intensification, especially in information sharing. Game companies need to share data giving tech companies the know-how to tailor their tools to fit the needs of every gaming community. At the same time, they ought to remain up to date with the existing regulations to ensure that can become or remain compliant. On their part, tech companies need to expand their scope to different forms of extremism that could be present in online gaming platforms, including recruitment.

5.2.2. Gaming Industry Associations at European Level

Important stakeholders for P/CVE in gaming spaces are also the gaming industry associations. These stakeholders ensure compliance with regulations, set industry standards, and promote responsible gaming practices. One of the main reasons why the role of gaming industry is increasingly emphasised in countering extremism and implementing community-oriented initiatives is that the representatives of these associations are seen as the agents that have the closest day-to-day contact with both the industry and the gaming communities.

The analysis of the data from the mapping exercise showed that the gaming industry in Europe is quite organized and dynamic. Video Games Europe (VGE) is a prominent industry association that represents the European video game sector. VGE represents 19 European and international video game companies and 13 national trade associations across the continent. Their mission includes advocating for the video game industry, promoting responsible development of AI technologies, and addressing legal and policy matters related to video games.⁷³ Engagement with the gaming community and raising awareness about issues related to the industry are two of VGE's main competences.

Video Games Europe has been at the forefront of raising the bar in harmonised self-regulation and responsible gaming. In 2003, VGE founded PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) as a self-regulatory age rating system for video games. The system is part of the industry's commitment to protect minors and to build trust with consumers by ensuring that reliable information about video game content is provided in a responsible manner.⁷⁴ VGE collaborates with the European Games Developer Federation (EGDF) based in Sweden. EGDF unites 23 national trade associations representing game developer studios based in 22 European countries. Through its members, EGDF represents more than 2,500 game developer studios.⁷⁵

The exploitation of gaming and its related places has so far not been the focus of gaming industry associations. The nexus between gaming platforms and extremism needs to be addressed in the context of these associations as the only bodies having the power to shape narratives and impact industry dynamics. One of the main practical challenges is the recognition of the problem and its

⁷³ See their official website here: <https://www.videogameseurope.eu/>

⁷⁴ See here: <https://pegi.info/>

⁷⁵ See their official website here: <https://www.egdf.eu/>

dimensions by the gaming industry. There is a significant trust gap between researchers, state institutions and the gaming industry. The entities responsible for creating and publishing games are often skeptical of researchers due to fear of the stigmatisation of their community and of potential legal actions. Due to the gaming industry's previous experiences of legislative driven initiatives, which pushed for a causal relationship between in-game and real-world violence, despite continuous lack of scientific evidence. The same issue is present in the relationship between gamers as the end users, and other stakeholders.

This gap can only be covered through the mobilisation of associations that represent the gaming industry. These associations need to create the necessary conditions for engaging the main gaming platforms, publishers, and developers in an internal dialogue on the issue. The recognition of the importance of this issue by the gaming industry will be a significant step that will open the way for cooperation with other stakeholders and the adoption of more comprehensive and proactive strategies for the protection of gamers in digital spaces. This development not only will increase the accountability of the industry in the eyes of the general public, but at the same time will eradicate any stigmatisation risk.

Any P/CVE efforts should be context-specific, culturally sensitive, and adaptive, but this is an unaccomplished mission without the participation of gaming communities. Getting gamers on board is the key challenge for successful P/CVE in online spaces. Most gamers do not report what they see inside these platforms, they simply disengage or ignore. As such, it is a need to empower gamers to become self-protectors of their spaces by reporting the extremist presence.

5.2.3. Gaming Industry Associations at National Level

National associations tasked with the protection of gamers, such as the Austrian Association for Entertainment Software (ÖVUS), could perform these services through the provision of trainings that would guide gamers to properly use the reporting mechanisms of online gaming platforms. ÖVUS provides parents with the know-how to set up child and youth protection settings on PCs and consoles, among other things. Their initiative GemeinsamSpielen.at platform, which translates to "Play Together" in English, is an initiative that encourages safe and responsible gaming. Through this initiative, Austrian gamers can access resources, information, and guidelines to promote responsible gaming practices.⁷⁶

One other association that could provide such kind of services is the Association for the Nordic Game Industry (ANGI). ANGI was formally constituted as a Nordic association in 2012 from the 4 local organisations FIGMA (Finland), MUF (Denmark), NSM (Norway), and MDTs (Sweden).⁷⁷ The PLAY SAFE campaign implemented by ANGI provides parents with age rating and family setting information to secure healthy gameplay inside families.⁷⁸ ANGI has also developed a handbook for teachers with information to help them understand the educational benefits of games and learn how to use them as educational and motivational resources.⁷⁹

Youth protection is one of the areas the German Games Industry Association focuses on.⁸⁰ The German games industry actively campaigns against right-wing radicalism, extremism, hatred, and discrimination. Initiatives like "Hier spielt Vielfalt" (translated as "Here Plays Diversity") promote diversity and work toward creating a working environment free from discrimination and fear.⁸¹

⁷⁶ See their official website here: <https://www.gemeinsamspielen.at/>

⁷⁷ See their official website here: <https://angi-nordic.com/>

⁷⁸ The Association of the Nordic Game Industry. "Play Safe – A Guide for Parents: Safe and Healthy Video Gameplay." *Angi-nordic.com* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, https://angi-nordic.com/?page_id=732.

⁷⁹ The Association of the Nordic Game Industry. "Games in Schools Handbook." *Angi-nordic.com* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, https://angi-nordic.com/?page_id=570.

⁸⁰ See their website here: <https://www.game.de/>

⁸¹ N.A. "Hier spielt Vielfalt" – the diversity initiative of the German video games industry." *The German Games Industry Association* (n.d.), last accessed June 2024, <https://shorturl.at/S9Pvm>.

Tuttosivideogiochi.it is a project carried out and funded by the Association of Video Games Industry in Italy (IIDEA) in collaboration with PEGI S.A. It is a portal dedicated to parents, educators and all those who want to learn more about the world of video games.⁸² The portal provides free information and resources to understand video games and make the most of them to their full potential: guides, tutorials and recommendations to choose the most suitable titles according to the age of the players, to set parental controls in the main platforms used for video games, and to monitor usage. In addition to this, it is possible to find "parent-friendly" cards of the main video games on the market suitable for an audience of minors.

The Spanish Video Game Association (AEVI) is implementing the Good Gamer Project in cooperation with the Spanish Ministry of Sports and Culture. The project targets young gamers, parents, educators, doctors, and the entire gaming community, as well as society at large. Users can find tips for responsible game use, educational content, and insights beyond mere entertainment purposes.⁸³ Responsible gaming is a significant focus for Dutch Video Games Industry (VGFI).⁸⁴ They have established the platform Rule the Game, which provides information and tips to keep gaming enjoyable for the whole family. This includes setting limits, having conversations with children about gaming, understanding PEGI age ratings, and configuring parental controls on game consoles.⁸⁵

National associations representing the gaming industry of their countries have been active in providing information about possible risks to protect gamers and build the reputation of their industry. Extremism-related risks however are missing from their agendas. The integration of these risks into the information agendas of these associations should be the next step due to the already trustful relationship these bodies have established with gamers. In case these threats are addressed by other stakeholders then the possibility of losing credibility in the eyes of gamers is high.

The Swedish Gaming Federation (Sverok)⁸⁶ a Swedish nationwide umbrella organisation that brings together various gaming clubs, is one of the few actors on the gaming world embarked on a project which aims to address the radicalisation of young people within the gaming ecosystem.⁸⁷ They have secured funding of nearly a million kronor for a project aimed at tackling radicalisation in the video gaming world. This initiative recognises the potential link between racism in gaming environments and subsequent radicalisation among young people. The study, which is set to begin in 2025, will involve interviews with gamers aged 12 to 20. Researchers will inquire about their experiences on gaming platforms, seeking insights into the dynamics that may contribute to radicalisation. By understanding these factors, Sverok aims to develop effective strategies to prevent violent extremism within the gaming community.

The gaming industry in EU members states and EU associated countries has shown some awareness about the extremist presence in online gaming platforms. However, this is not the case in the Western Balkans where comprehensive response to address extremism in video games by the industry is totally lacking. The region is more concerned about sector's development and avoids engaging in any discussion that could affect the reputation of their community. While most initiatives focus on game development, it's essential that the industry also considers how gaming platforms can inadvertently contribute to extremist activities. The popularity of video games that simulate military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia for example raise questions about how historical events are portrayed and what potential impact could have on players' perspectives in the region.⁸⁸

⁸² See project's official website here: <https://tuttosivideogiochi.it/>

⁸³ See their official website here: <https://thegoodgamer.es/>

⁸⁴ See their official website here: <https://nvpi.nl/nvpi-interactief/>

⁸⁵ See the official website here: <https://www.rulethegame.nl/>

⁸⁶ See their official website here: <https://sverok.se/>

⁸⁷ Radio Sweden. "Project aimed at tackling radicalisation in the video gaming world." *Sveriges Radio* (28 December 2022), last accessed June 2024, <https://shorturl.at/E3atV>.

⁸⁸ RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "Gamifying Extremism: Refighting (And Rewriting) The Balkan Wars as A Video Game", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (19 December 2020), last accessed June 2024, <https://shorturl.at/A3fzg>.



It will be useful, gaming industry representatives such as the Serbian Games Association (SGA) which represents region's biggest video games sector to set up a discussion on the issue and examine if these games are exploited from extremists for their own purposes or to what extent the discussions in forums related to these games can increase the rise of ethnonationalism and the rivalry among the different ethnicities of the region. The available data is limited in the region, so additional knowledge would be very valuable for fighting the extremist abuse of online gaming. In addition, the region's gaming industry should launch campaigns to inform gamers about the risks from the presence of extremists in video gaming platforms and the existing reporting mechanisms. There is also a need for the industry to cooperate with state authorities and international partners for the establishment of more effective structural mechanisms that will protect gamers. One significant upshot is that local measures regardless of their effectiveness need to be harmonized with their counterparts on the European and global level. Recently, Nvidia, the biggest manufacturer of chips needed for AI, introduced a new tool which help gamers in beating their games more efficiently.⁸⁹ What the tool does is analyses all on screen activity and suggests actions to the player. This can be co-opted for the protection of gamers as well. The AI companion records and analyses everything on screen, including chats. Given that AI assistants will now be "baked in" into all major operating systems one of the key, if not the key element in P/CVE will be the widespread adoption of AI in digital spaces.

⁸⁹ Andrew Burnes and Guillermo Siman. "Introducing Project G-Assist: A Preview Of How AI Assistants Can Enhance Games & Apps." *NVIDIA Corporation* (02 June 2024), last accessed June 2024, <https://www.nvidia.com/en-eu/geforce/news/g-assist-ai-assistant/>.

Conclusion

An effective P/CVE approach against extremism in the gaming ecosystem remains a key challenge for European societies. The different stakeholders responsible for protecting and building gamers' resilience inside the online gaming platforms have not managed to build a common understanding of the phenomenon yet, with many of them still struggling to understand the role they could play in the process. This weakens the prospect of producing much-needed unified and cohesive approaches, while it also undermines efforts for joint actions and common strategies to address the issue at its root. But the flip side is that many stakeholders have already started working on the topic of extremism even though their involvement with the issue is at initial stages.

Among the five stakeholders under investigation in the context of this mapping exercise, the research community and academia are among the most active actors in the field, contributing significantly to advancing the knowledge about the issue. Currently, the EU is home to two projects, one implemented at European level and the other at national level, and one network which are explicitly concerned with the issue of abuse of online gaming spaces by violent extremists. These initiatives have not only a research-oriented dimension but also develop solutions for EPAs and the representatives of the security community who will be the end users of the knowledge produced. Researchers are working to understand the methods and instruments that extremists use in the online gaming platforms, and the vulnerabilities of and threats to gaming communities. They also provide education and resources to the government stakeholders and the games industry, equipping them to better address these threats. This approach is in the right direction for raising awareness among state actors and mobilising them to establish collaborative initiatives to disrupt the video games-based radicalisation.

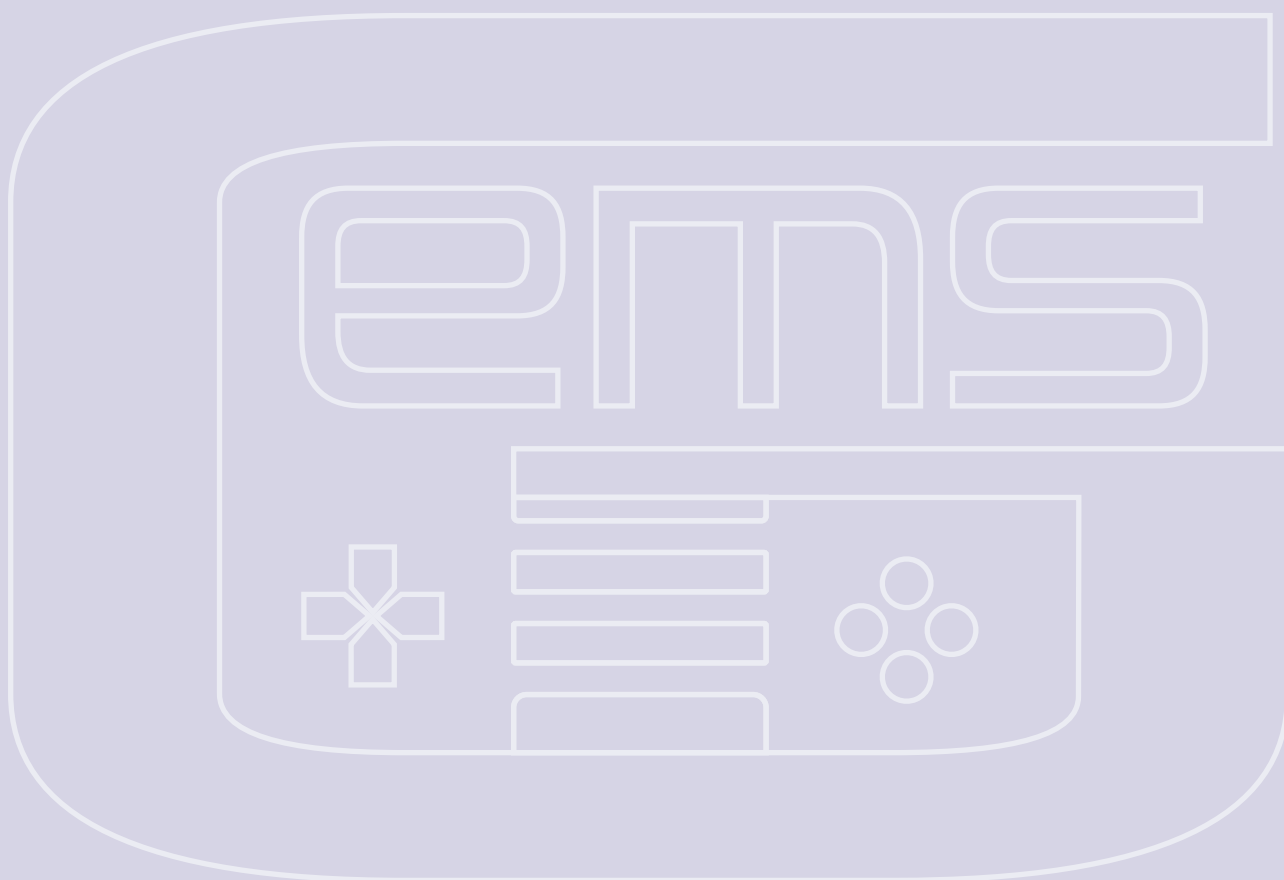
State actors have the lowest level of engagement with the problem of gaming and extremism. Only few governments and institutions are offering resources for researching the different dimension of the issue, among them the Germany and Denmark. One contradictory point when it comes to state actors is that even though they agree on the overall importance of the gaming ecosystem in the contemporary processes of radicalisation, they have not translated this acknowledgement into concrete actions and interventions. The extremist presence in gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms not only is missing from the national agendas for the prevention of radicalisation but at the same time national authorities have not clarified which bodies or agencies inside their prevention institutions have the responsibility to deal with the issue. This is not in line with the EU's orientations.

The EU often raises awareness about the misuse of gaming platforms by extremists through the research work of RAN, the warnings of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and the yearly orientations for the prevention of radicalisation which render extremism in gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms as a significant threat in the context of the thematic priority of online radicalisation and new technologies. EU institutions are taking proactive steps beyond awareness-raising by mobilising their agencies to act. The EUIF is collaborating with the gaming industry to enhance their anti-extremist resources. However, the industry's involvement is not yet at the desirable level, while its understanding of the need to create games and gaming communities that are resilient to extremism remains limited. Civil society actors' engagement in raising awareness about the extremist threats among both youth and elderly audiences is also limited.

These stakeholders, have a specific role to play in order to counter the extremist presence in the gaming ecosystem, empowering Safer Gamers for Safer Societies. Only through their cooperation can a coordinated situational awareness about the risks associated with the extremist presence in gaming be ensured. This kind of awareness is necessary for the implementation of effective joint P/CVE measures. This is why all the above-mentioned stakeholders should be a constituent part of



the prevention mechanisms in digital gaming spaces. Any P/CVE initiative isolated from them would hamper efforts to build gamers' resilience against the extremist presence in online playground places.



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