

**Conclusions from European Fair Skills' transfer of good practice –
in view of further work in preventing group hatred and violent right-wing extremism
in Central and Eastern Europe¹**

(Cultures Interactive e.V.)

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Throughout all EFS activities and countries the following observation and conclusions were reached:

- There is a great need in areas of youth work and education for approaches which deal with issues of group hatred and (right-wing) violent extremism more systematically and methodically in CEE countries. It was felt that prevent strategies were needed to safeguard the younger generations not only from the lure and recruitment of organizations or informal social milieus of group hatred – but also to enable them to withstand resentful, xenophobic and anti-human-rights populism of larger parts of mainstream population, lead productive and fulfilled lives and constructively participate in society.
- In particular the need was felt to acquire and further train and disseminate pedagogical methods for prevention settings which help to avoid the “argumentation trap” and the “moral appeal trap”. Group hatred and so-called political/ religious extremism, also populist resentment, is often erroneously held to be mostly a political/ religious issues. It thus tends to provoke political arguments and debate. Therefore, youth workers and other education professionals working with young vulnerable or radicalized people may feel the temptation to confront proponents of such social milieus in argumentative and rational manners and start a debate trying to convince them (assuming that they are honestly interested in an open debate which is most often not the case). Or else the youth workers implore in a moralistic manner, appealing to good manners, humanism, and empathy and the like. However, these intuitive strategies of debating and reasoning have regularly proven to not be effective and often backfire, causing cynicism.
- In turn, youth workers go out of such ill-fated encounters with a sense of failure, leaving them feeling helpless and frustrated. Hence, there is a need to make sure that youth workers are equipped with methods which also secure more gratifying work experience and a sense of empowerment as youth professional (cf. also the prevention of burn-out further down). Here, Fair Skill's youth cultural and creative methods – combined with the narrative approach – as well as with mediation and civic education exercises, were able to serve two purposes: For one, these methods provided new avenues for successfully engaging young people and having a more profound effect on their thinking and behavior – while avoiding the “argumentation and moral appeal trap”; and

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second, allow for a more gratifying and empowering work experience with youth professional both in education and youth work.

- Given this basic need, the Fair Skills approach and its methods were received very well with both the youth workers and the young people. Specifically, youth workers welcomed the approach for providing them a new sort of basis for communicating and working with young people (some of whom were vulnerable, disempowered/ disenfranchised young people) – a basis which doesn't depend on discussion, debates, persuasions, moral appeals and argumentations. This was met with a sense of relief and gratification in the actual work experience which reduced the degree of frustration experienced in the more ideological debate kind interactions.

As to the young people, they intuitively opened up towards the key offer of Fair Skills to be productive and creative in a context which provides (i) youth cultural activities (rap, break dance, comic strips, digital video/ music production, YouTubing etc.) and (ii) some new and intriguing exercises (team building, anti-bias, mediation, dealing with conflict and gender identity), as well as (iii) the opportunity of more personal exchange in a safe space (narrative circles, We-Amongst-Ourselves-Group). In fact, the young people in their response to the Fair Skills approach also sometimes showed quite existential personal reactions and effects of profound resilience building, as for instance one attendant did who in a letter expressed the feeling that EFS “gave back his life to himself” – which is not uncommon at all in contexts of creative, non-formal and narrative methods.

- One specific observation during EFS was that issues and behaviors of polarization, resentment and group hatred/ extremism, while seeming to be politically and rationally motivated, are essentially very emotional behaviors and group dynamic phenomena for the people involved – and for young individuals in particular who are vulnerable to such social milieus. Some EFS participants shared the experience that in the EFS countries' societies one can't really have much effect on the level of arguments, debates or education – because “it's all about feelings and affects”. All the more suitable are methods and approaches which do not emphasize arguments but allow for spaces in which creative self-expression and narrative self-awareness processes can unfold – and then be acknowledged and reflected upon.

The conclusion thus was that creative, self-expressive and open process reflective work settings, expressly including emotional issues – also in group dynamic settings – “are a must” in preventive educational work, as one participant said. Since these settings provide a safe space to reflect upon and articulate personal experiences, subjective perceptions, and impulsive affects, discuss individual and social grievances, develop a personal vision of the future of society – and of what to do about it concretely. As one participant in the Local Derad trainings put it, “since the 1990s we have been told what to say, what to think and what to do in order to be good democrats ... and valid reasons were given”. However, one doesn't become a democrat because somebody gives good reasons. There needs to be a personal and transformative experience – and projects should therefore focus on methods of emotional learning and self-awareness/reflection before going onto any more conceptual, political, and argumentative levels. “Especially in Eastern EU, in the new democracies we need to make and facilitate personal experiences of what diversity, free self-expression, democracy and human rights mean to people personally – and how it feels like as an experience” – and what happens in the absence of them.

- Especially the EFS focus on “narrative methods and procedures” (of personal dialogue building) which spreads across all different modules, was found to be helpful to avoid the “argumentation” and “moral appeal trap”. It also made clear how to best meet the challenge of good practice in prevention on an inter-personal, dialogic level rather than on an ideological level of discussing and debating, since “narrative” means to exchange first-hand experiences which have been individually lived-through by participants – and are thus beyond arguments. In fact, introducing the narrative method to local practitioners arguably was one of the most important eye-openers on how to do EFS work. It effectively elucidated the importance of self-awareness processes on a personal level and paved the way for more complex middle term interventions as narrative circles or CI’s We-Amongst-Ourselves-Group setting.
- The EFS project has reconfirmed one key observation which CI practice and research has been making over the last years – and in particular since its WomEx project on Women and Gender in Extremism and Prevention. While men are often strikingly visible in contexts of group hatred, extremism and violence, upon closer view it becomes more apparent that not only men but also women play a crucial role in milieus of group hatred and anti-human rights attitudes (and violent extremisms); hence both men and women in their capacity as gendered youth workers may also contribute to prevention.

Secondly, the key observation was reconfirmed that gender issues – i.e. personal issues of young individuals in how they define themselves and subjectively feel well as being a man or a women, and what they thus think it takes to be a ‘real man’ and a ‘true women’ – are of crucial importance psychologically and practically in all dynamics of polarization, group hatred and rejection of human rights.

Hence, practitioners in the EFS activities in CZ, HU, SK have observed within their actual youth work practice how much gender issues are at the core of what they deal with in violent and polarizing impulses. It thus was realized how easily it happens that the very basic life duality of female and male, in each individual’s life and in her or his social context, is picked up on as a prime temptation to adopt thought patterns and behaviours of polarization and exclusion (devaluing the other/them and aggrandizing the value of the we/us) – which are an acknowledged element in virtually all forms of group hatred and violent extremism. Basically, the observation was that there is hardly anyone in social milieus of group hatred and hate crime – and also in contexts of xenophobic populism – who does not also hold sexist and homophobic attitudes to certain degrees, i.e. manifests conflictive gender issues (especially within the two major milieus of violent extremism, right-wing extremism and religious fundamentalism, both Moslem and Christian).

Conversely, as was also observed during CI’s previous EU project WomEx.org, talking and working with young people on issues of gender and gender roles is quite effective for their identity development and resilience building against group hatred and destructive life styles. In fact, working on issues of gender and gender roles seems to be much more effective than discussing ideology and/or religion. Hence, those elements of the EFS approach which provide pedagogical exercises on gender identity themes, on issues of gender role stereotypes and, in particular, on topics of sexism and homophobia, had an all the more profound impression on youth work practice in the local spheres – and should thus be further pursued and deepened.

- In light of the large number of refugees seeking asylum in Europe and beyond and in light of the populist discourses around this topic, the team at times also introduced methods around refugee issues which CI draws from its current national work settings which include refugees, as for instance the “refugee chairs” exercise (which provides a very simple but telling illustration about the distribution and flow of population and money around the globe). It was concluded that including refugee issues in the procedure is advisable and instructive even if including refugees in the work is not an option in the country.
- In view of the multiple challenges which practitioners of prevention and distancing/ deradicalisation work face, it was concluded that there is a need to incorporate some measure of “psychological support”, staff consultancy, supervision/ intervision, or self-help groups for the practitioners into the planning of projects and initiatives around this issue – especially if administrative victimisation and state based populism/ polarization are part of the challenge.
A somewhat related conclusion was that psychological resources and psychotherapy/ counselling skills (formally or informally acquired) may be very helpful even on the level of the actual intervention. Such counselling skills may for instance support the practitioners in the difficult task to facilitate a narrative mode of interaction (even under pressure of argumentative debate) and successfully maintain the much needed mentorship attitude of ‘critical supportiveness’ (even under pressure of conflict) – and generally strengthen the young people’s protective factors.
- Especially around the EFS Local Deard Seminars which were designed for wider groups of locally embedded youth practitioners working in a given community/ district in different sectors of education, youth work, law enforcement, family assistance, health services (teachers, youth and social workers, probation, prison staff, health and family support, etc.) the following base observation was made: Key to the success of prevention on a local level is to work in and with the community in a local interagency approach which includes numerous local actors and in so doing work from fully empowered communities which develop their own forms of participation in a way which is maximally bottom-up in its logic. An example of such local bottom-up prevention approach from other EU member states is readily spelled out in the current CoCoRa/ Community Countering Radicalisation project – which is an Erasmus+ activity that should appeal to youth organisations in principle). The community base bottom-up approach is a most suitable frame for the EFS methodology since EFS follows a peer-educational logic and thus is bottom-up from a youth perspective of self-directed prevention.
- In view of the international exchange and cooperation of the EFS project – especially in view of concrete perspectives of so-called transfer of good practice – it was realized that the project time which the international colleagues actually spent together and used for formal and informal exchange (facilitated by translation of different sorts) was highly needed and worthwhile. It was needed in particular in order to better understand each others’ local circumstances in terms of the differences in the youth work sector, in education, society, and political discourses and how these differences played out in the day to day work situation of the local practitioners. The time was also needed to develop a shared language and terms, often already on a very basic level of defining the subject matter (what is extremism, group hatred, civic education, the narrative approach? etc.).

Furthermore, the various methods of Fair Skills needed quite some time to be well understood and tried out in terms of how to implement. The final feedback on this was that “we would need more of this on a more continuous basis”. The CI team in turn realized that much time was needed for adjustment and for breaking down the approach to a basic set of interventions and methods.

- One additional observation among some partners was that “we already practice some of what in the EU is called good practice in some way or method – and we have our own indigenous ‘tested approaches’”. Hence, the realization was that some of the local EFS partner organizations in CEE countries do not entirely depend on transfer of good practice from outside. They have already developed some versions and/or aspects of these good practices – or even entire methods – themselves over the last years and decades. These indigenous good practices are quite worthwhile to be exchanged and manualized. However, they are not sufficiently known, recognized, and supported/ developed in the country and in the EU, since such activities of exchanging and manualizing have not been happening for various reasons – one of them being that the erroneous expectation in EU programs is that the East benefits from good practice from the West/ North, and not vice versa.
- In particular, there is a need for a national infrastructure and a national pool of practitioners to do trainings for other practitioners (in native language) on the basis of the manuals-in-process – and secure quality on a national scale. This pool of national practitioners would then effectively bridge both the language gap and the culture gap in that it would generate national experience and absorb the feedback from national trainings and use it to further refine and adjust what has been the substance of transfer of good practice from another country.
- A general sense of disheartenment and depression was shared among the EFS participants in CEE states (in HU in particular) about the difficult political circumstances in view of preventing group hatred and right-wing extremism – and also in establishing a trustful interagency cooperation between NGO’s and governmental representatives. The increase of populist, anti-European and anti-human rights discourses in CEE countries and the fact that major political parties and policy makers have only little awareness about the risks, dangers and social cost of subcultures of resentment and group hatred (in particular among young people), also the general lack of recognition for prevent work – this all makes any work in prevention and resilience building difficult to maintain, practically and psychologically.
- This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that the EU counter terrorism departments and prevention programs – and even the Radicalisation Awareness Network – are predominantly using a quite one-sided Islamism/ Salafism awareness rhetoric, hardly mentioning hate crime, hate groups, militias and rightwing extremism at all. To be sure, so-called Islamism arguably was the very key motivation to begin with, when the RAN was built up, after the Madrid and London attacks. Nobody would have built such network because of rightwing militant movements throughout Europe (which had caused some 170 deaths in East Germany alone since reunification) – although commissioner Malmström from Sweden who brought the RAN on the way had certainly had it on her mind given the situation in Sweden in the 2000s.

This is all the more unfortunate since the Islamism focus of the EU and RAN is routinely abused by CEE countries' populist governments and xenophobic parties in order to support a defamatory anti-refugee rhetoric and launch an anti-human rights and anti EU propaganda under the cover of preventing violent extremism. Here, the issues of indigenous hate crime and group hatred (also militias) are obfuscated while an external enemy images of the "Islamist refugee" is projected – thus frightening, making aggressive and thus 'radicalising' the population, once again: under the cover of following the EU "internal security" and prevent policy. Clearly, such political maneuvering is producing "added EU damage" as it were (instead of the often mentioned "EU added value"). Also this damage is quite significant, indeed, since the new democracies in Eastern Europe are still more volatile. As has been quoted above, the "personal experiences of what diversity, free self-expression, democracy and human rights mean to people personally – and how it feels like as an experience" is not yet as ingrained and the build-up of democratic societies is in process – and currently in crisis.

All the more important, this should long have been corrected, since the responsible sections of the EC have been informed and alerted about it for years now.

- In this respect the conclusion was reached that there is a need to develop commonly shared terms and a suitable language about the topics of the EFS project and about Prevention of Violent Extremism in general. This language needs to be more adequate to each of the CEE countries' and regions' challenges in the field of group hatred and violent extremism – and allow for reaching out to various different groups of people, regardless of their party political affiliation. This was particularly true for the exchange on the EFS roundtables since these encompassed a greater variety of stakeholders from different professions and within a different political spectrum – and therefore need a more inclusive, precise and less politicized language. Only if such language and commonly shared terms have been developed then these roundtables may sometimes also develop into "governmental advocacy" initiatives (as it occurred during EFS in Hungary and Slovakia) – since these advocacy initiatives are of a political nature and therefore are highly sensitive in terminological respects.

Hence, to begin with, it was found to be of paramount importance for EFS activities to steer free of any rhetoric and terminology which is or may be viewed as being (party-)political. It seems to make a big difference whether one calls for combatting, fighting, countering, tackling ... extremism, radicalization, racism, or any such isms, or whether one instead calmly speaks about safeguarding young people from social risks of violence, hatred, organized crime, drug addiction, mental health problems and violent extremism which have been found to be intricately interlaced. The most basic ground rule, when approaching the topic of violent extremism in the narrower sense, has turned out to be to never ever speak about only one sort of violent extremism.

Moreover, EFS participants often times realized that it makes a difference – and is important – to be prepared to talk to a maximally wide array of different stakeholders/ authorities from the whole political spectrums and find the appropriate terms and narratives for these conversations. It therefore proved advisable in EFS contexts of preventing group hatred/ violent extremism to always talk about more than just one sort of group hatred. Since political discourse on extremism often has

the tendency to single out one sort – right-wing extremism versus Islamism for instance – which is unhelpful, even radicalizing since it inadvertently polarizes the discourse. More helpful it has proven in EFS contexts to use wide concepts as “group hatred”, “aggressive prejudice”, in schools: “mobbing” (also re gender: beauty fetishism, homophobia, restrictive masculinity(ies) etc.) which pertains to all sorts of group hatred. This terminology also comes with an overall perspective on “safeguarding young people” not only from recruitment in violent and criminal milieus but also, more generally, from becoming resentful and anti-social personalities which is a life style that limits their skills development.

- All the more promising was the observation that, in spite of the political difficulties in countries which experience wide spread anti-European and anti-human rights populism, some proactive and quasi-diplomatic initiatives of dialogue building and “(local) governmental advocacy” can and should be pursued. These diplomatic and dialogic networking initiatives of “governmental advocacy” may proceed in low-profile manners on many levels, following the objective to identify and reach out to local and national government contact persons. They would specifically aim at individuals in and around governmental functions who may be personally willing and apt to understand well and contribute to EFS and prevention issues (understood as issues of prevention of group hatred, right-wing extremism and other subcultures of resentment, polarization and violence). These individuals would do so on an informal level because they have realized that these issues harm societal resilience and productivity across the board – regardless of any specific ideological issues.

The initial experiences with this “governmental advocacy” approach were quite promising. The option to connect this advocacy with the shared management of the Internal Security Fund was helpful in this. One particular conclusion thus was to further pursue the innovative approach to governmental advocacy which was developed in HU and SK mostly in order to create further inter-institutional and bottom-up dialogue. A related conclusion was to make the objective of building dialogue and dialogic advocacy strategies between practitioners and administration the focus of further project applications, aiming at better communicating with difficult to engage right-wing populist governments.

However, any such quasi-diplomatic initiatives of dialogue building and governmental advocacy needs to carefully pay attention and find mitigation strategies to not being abused for political maneuvering (for instance to support anti-refugee sentiments under the cover of PVE which, as mentioned above, seems to be happening on a systematic level in CEE countries).

- One general observation has been that it was particularly challenging – but also rewarding – in the setup of the EFS project to include an informational seminar on exit facilitation which were then implemented in the context of the second roundtable. Challenging this was because in the EFS countries there is only little, and beginning awareness of group hatred and violent extremism, especially of rightwing extremism, as being a serious societal risk – and even less awareness there is about what exit interventions are, and respectively: how certain young people are at risk and easily recruited by hate groups and extremist organizations and that it may be very difficult to exit any such hate group (for practical and psychological reasons) once being a member of it, which is why exit facilitation is needed as one key element of a comprehensive prevention action plan.

However, the interest in learning about how to practice exit facilitation work – and what the principles/ conditions and limits of such work are – was great. And while this interest was mixed with some scepticism about whether exit work can be implemented at home in the respective EFS country, the project’s final conclusion was: It was most advantageous to have the exit seminars included in the EFS project activities since this meant to look at group hatred and violent extremism at its sharp end and thus make the nature and challenge of this phenomenon most graspable for roundtable attendants.

Moreover, the exit facilitation seminars were seen as providing instructive key information, for instance about the fact that exit work is highly cost-effective, given the reduction of general crime which is achieved with each person who exits a violent extremist organization which always also overlap with organized crime. This reduction of crime and related damages regards offenses as detrimental as armed robbery, violent assault, drug trafficking, money laundering, human trafficking – not to speak of the costs for victim compensation, health care and imprisonment.

- One key conclusion on the part of CI’s EFS team in retrospect was: No matter how complex and complicated the organisation of the EFS project was, in that it set out to systematically engage four different sorts and levels of activities (in two countries even five sorts of activities) with four to five different, only partially overlapping participants groups – this complex structure was well worth it and it was necessary in order to have a lasting impact on the local area. This conclusion was of key importance. Since it was not easy to organize and maintain these four/ five levels of activities in parallel – i.e. organize (1) Local Deard Seminars for locally embedded youth practitioners of different sectors (teachers, youth and social workers, probation, family support, etc.) in order to spur a local interagency approach, (2) Train-the-Trainer Seminars for youth workers in view of implementing the youth workshops, (3) Youth Cultural Workshops with the young people, and (4) the Regional Development Roundtables with local/ national stakeholders to raise awareness about the challenges/ approaches and to support the logic of bottom-up, self-directed, community immersed prevention work (as spelled out in the CoCoRa/ Community Countering Radicalisation project from the Erasmus+ activities stream). This fourth level expanded into an unforeseen sort of activity (5) the quasi-diplomatic activities of “(local) governmental advocacy”.
- On the level of structure building, organisational development and national NGO politics it was a striking experience for the EFS team how much EFS partner organisations in CEE countries were going through restructuring and organisational change, even more: how much the lack of general stability in the NGO world in CEE countries would hamper implementation in the area. At the end of the project two of the three EFS partner organisations had effectively changed, after different sorts of organisational and political challenges – and thus two new, highly suitable and dedicated organisations had come into being or were identified by EFS (and introduced to other EU networks, as the RAN).

However, on the (difficult) way to this most valuable outcome of local structure and capacity building, all sorts of unexpected hindrances had come up: In one instance a highly engaged EFS coordination team lost support of its carrier organisation due to leadership deficits and then proceeded to found its own NGO; in another EFS country the whole NGO scene was suffering from

increasing state oppression resulting is the closure of various NGO structures; in yet another EFS country (which is affected both by corruption in social services and by oppressive state measures against independent NGOs) the coordinator had to deal with the fact that the CEO of her NGO effectively closed the NGO, stopped paying EFS bills, took the money and went abroad.

It was concluded that working on prevention in CEE countries implies some additional attention for issues of organisational development. For one, there usually aren't any NGOs around which are already experienced in issues of preventing group hatred and violent extremism; secondly the whole NGO area is increasingly instable these days; thirdly, some remaining NGOs are quite professional in acquiring all sorts of EU funding (including Erasmus funding) but are not very suitable for – and dedicated to – handling the sensitive issue of group hatred.

- The observation was made that it was quite helpful to have some guidance on issues of “quality assurance and standards” and at the same time be able to further develop and adjust to CEE country context what is perceived as criteria and standards of good practice. The “EFS self-evaluation tool” thus served as a means of self-assurance about some key standards, especially those standards which tend to meet with scepticism by local stakeholders and policy makers (for instance the standard of working with independent NGO practitioners, even in state institutions as schools or prisons, who provide confidentiality for their participants). It was concluded that the “EFS (Self-) Evaluation Tool for Quality Assurance”, while it was largely drawn from prior voluntary action research in the context of RAN Derad workshops between 2011 and 2016 and were formulated in the “RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice”, was a suitable and helpful basis but needs to be continuously reworked in light of further experiences and also be practiced and owned by local practitioners (currently on <http://cultures-interactive.de/en/articles.html>).