Spatial Narratives and Normative Communication: A Case Study of Radicalization Awareness Network

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Abstract: Since 2011, the European Union has responded to dynamic security challenges by establishing the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) to combat radicalization and extremism across borders. This article examines the development of RAN through normative communication, viewing it as a localized approach to disseminating norms against terrorism. Using spatial narratives, the EU employs various strategies to construct discursive spaces, enhancing the public perception of urgency. These efforts promote community identification with RAN's norms, encouraging localized actions and practices.

Keywords: European Union; Radicalization Awareness Network; Normative communication; Spatial narratives

1. Introduction

Amidst global tensions, the EU confronts challenges like the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, cybersecurity threats, refugee crises, and disinformation. Extremism, including right-wing extremism and hate speech, jeopardizes EU stability, prompting preventive action. Established in 2011, the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) exemplifies EU efforts to combat radicalization and promote security.

RAN serves as a collaborative platform, uniting stakeholders to address extremism proactively. By fostering information sharing and cooperation, RAN integrates resources to combat radicalization. RAN seeks to transcend national boundaries, emphasizing community engagement to empower local authorities and communities in deradicalization efforts. The success of RAN relies on local ownership and participation, necessitating community endorsement of counterterrorism measures. Through normative communication strategies, RAN constructs spatial narratives to convey the immediacy of the terrorist threat to local populations. These narratives facilitate the acceptance of deradicalization norms and foster localized practices.

This study employs a normative communication lens and process tracing methodology to analyze

RAN's localization efforts. Grounded in spatial narrative theory, it proposes a framework highlighting the role of divergent spatial narratives in shaping local perceptions of terrorism. Leveraging storytelling and media dissemination, RAN aims to instill urgency among communities, garnering support for deradicalization initiatives tailored to local contexts.

2. Literature review

Early studies saw norms as independent constraints shaping actors' behavior and identities. Recent research shifts to norm diffusion, highlighting power, domestic structures, and ideas. Major powers use coercion like "reward" or "punishment" to spread norms [1]. However, norms propagated solely through power often lack stability in their dissemination effects. Once a hegemonic power experiences a decline in its influence, the norms it disseminates may consequently collapse [2]. EU governance mandates multilevel involvement, including local governments in RAN, highlighting its decentralized nature. Thus, RAN's norm localization defies mere power explanations.

Constructivist scholars stress cultural alignment's pivotal role in norm diffusion, asserting that new international norms must align with acceptors' existing cultural or normative frameworks for smooth dissemination [3]. Checkel's "cultural fit" concept links international norms with domestic discourses, legal systems, and bureaucratic institutions. As cultural fit declines, so does the likelihood of international norms being adopted into domestic policies [4]. Despite challenges such as difficulties in measuring cultural fit, this theory was quickly embraced by the academic community and sparked a series of specific research endeavors [5]. Acharya's framework of "localization" examines norm dissemination within the international system, illustrating how norms like "common security" gain rapid ASEAN acceptance compared to "humanitarian intervention." His findings underscore that norms aligning with local cultural structures tend to be more readily accepted, shaping his proposition on norm dissemination dynamics [6].

RAN spans all EU states and parts of the Balkans. Cultural differences are stark: Eastern Europe is superstitious and feudalistic, Western Europe is influenced by terrorism, and Southern Europe is less focused on security. Despite cultural integration, RAN's spread defies simple cultural fit explanations.

Scholars examine how norms shape national interests, suggesting they gain acceptance by aligning with them. Finnemore's lifecycle model explores international organizations' role in norm transmission and nation-building [7].

Norm dissemination hinges on aligning with regional interests, including non-core ones. Southern Europe, like Italy, prioritizes security minimally, yet RAN effectively spreads there, enhancing preventive extremism awareness beyond core national interests.

Scholars like Finnemore and Sikkink theorize norm dissemination pathways, with norms advancing through emergence, cascade, and internalization stages, driven by socialization and state acceptance [8]. Socialization is the process by which actors accept common norms and rules, with specific mechanisms including strategic calculation, role-playing, and normative persuasion [9]. Similarly, Checkel has delved into the dissemination of international norms at the systemic level and proposed three distinct mechanisms for international norm socialization: reward and punishment, role-playing, and normative persuasion [10]. Johnston identifies three socialization mechanisms used by the international community to socialize states: imitation, persuasion, and social influence, shaping China's acceptance of international norms post-reform era [11]. Huang analyzes three strategies

driving international norm dissemination: humanitarian framing, interactive supportive norms, and emotionalized propaganda, exploring persuasive approaches in norm spread [12]. This research provides us with insights into the methods and strategies of norm dissemination, particularly highlighting the importance of persuasive strategies. The findings of this research contribute to guiding international norm dissemination practices, enhancing their effectiveness, and promoting the implementation and spread of international norms across various domains.

This paper critiques norm dissemination research for neglecting bottom-up, network-based approaches and focusing on top-down methods between international organizations and states. It overlooks how regional organizations engage directly with sub-national actors, limiting understanding of full dissemination dynamics.

Legro highlights ideas' role in norm dissemination, emphasizing their collapse and consolidation. New ideas require old ones to collapse, but if they lack appeal or fit poorly with social psychology, they may fail [13]. Norm dissemination necessitates obtaining the target country's endorsement. Studies often overlook diverse persuasive tactics and narrative strategies, essential for comprehensive understanding. Spatial narratives immerse people in contexts, enhancing presence and fostering identification, crucial for effective dissemination.

In EU norm dissemination, the narrative is crucial amid deepening political divisions over integration and cultural consensus, exacerbated by multi-speed Europe reforms [14]. In a divided EU, narrative shapes shared cognition, promotes consensus, and coordinates collective action among members, crucial for norm dissemination and collective identity.

3. Spatial narrative and norm dissemination

Spatial narrative emphasizes the socio-constructivist nature of geographical space, viewing it as socially constructed with symbolic meanings. It helps individuals express identity, cultural heritage, and social relationships. This paper argues that a new analytical framework integrating spatial narrative and norm dissemination can be constructed.

Space is a practiced place, a crossroads of activities, encompassing all activities that occur at that location, and possessing temporality. Michel de Certeau posits that space differs from a place in its singularity and stability; rather, it is multidimensional and variable, constituted by the intertwining of places, practitioners, and practices. For instance, city streets in urban planning are places, but when people walk along them, the streets transform into spaces [15]. According to de Certeau, "walking" is primarily conducted through narrative, transforming places into spaces and organizing their relationship. Narratives connect spatial elements, forming a coherent whole. The narrative also exercises power, distributing and creating space. Without narration, collectives or individuals may regress into an unsettling state, losing their spatial coherence.

Narrative involves storytelling through logically connected events or experiences, including characters, plot development, settings in time and space, and expression of emotions or themes [16]. Narrative spans oral language, text, and images, and interprets events, fostering connections, cultural understanding, and global knowledge. In politics, it forges collective identity, aligns norms with shared values, and spurs action.

Narrative shapes space's meaning, constructing a "theater" for actions and legitimizing spatial significance beyond legalities. It integrates emotional, experiential, and cultural elements, evoking

emotional resonance in the space [17]. Narrative deeply embeds space in social practice, directing attention, influencing perceptions, and guiding actions. Emphasizing spatial features and experiences shapes understanding and prompts actions to alter the space, driven by emotions, values, and goals depicted in events [18]. Characters immersed in space develop a sense of presence in the perception and engagement of spatial meaning construction, thereby stimulating identification, and subsequently engaging in actions aligned with their identification of spatial significance [19].

Narrative mode involves how storytellers present stories, including strategies, narrator establishment, perspective selection, and technique utilization, varying across different media [20]. The narrative mode includes "showing," influencing through content and techniques, and "telling," shaping attitudes directly. The narrator's perspective, strategy, and style depict events, characters, time, and space in the narrative.

4. The spatial dissemination of RAN

The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) began in 2008 with the EU's "Radicalisation Issues Expert Report," targeting extremism and terrorism [21]. The European Commission's 2010 review found initial efforts in fostering counter-radicalization networks, yet called for more exploration of member states' experiences to determine the "most effective" methods against radicalization and recruitment [22]. Furthermore, the European Security and Defence Policy Institute (ESDP) tends to adopt a collaborative and multi-agency civil society approach to addressing terrorism issues, laying the groundwork for the creation of RAN within the EU [23]. Established in 2012, RAN includes experts endorsed by the European Commission, covering terrorism and extremism across governmental agencies, law enforcement, scholars, and NGOs [24]. The network aims to connect Europeans addressing radicalization, promoting knowledge exchange and forums to combat violent extremism [25]. Since 2014, RAN has expanded via training, seminars, and meetings, with four networks and nine working groups on counter-radicalization. Emphasizing info sharing, it broadens EU counterterrorism with crime prevention and a transnational local network.

4.1. Inspiring frame resonance

Specifically, the construction of RAN relies primarily on a profound understanding of local living spaces to meet public demands and align with social realities. If the narrative information can resonate with the issues of concern in the real space for the audience, it is more likely to inspire frame resonance, attracting their attention and involvement. Increasing the degree of resonance helps ensure the widespread acceptance of frames in society.

Inspiring frame resonance hinges on analyzing local realities, and deeply classifying radicalization trends and types of extremism. Through narrative techniques, RAN highlights these issues, fostering a sense of threat to local security. By understanding local dilemmas, RAN tailors its counter-radicalization framework, making it more relevant and guiding public attention effectively. By integrating narratives into various aspects of local life, RAN presents a vivid picture, enhancing resonance and encouraging active participation in preventive measures. This customized approach enhances RAN's persuasiveness in constructing counter-radicalization frameworks.

As RAN expands across EU cities, it focuses on developing diverse preventive radicalization mechanisms tailored to local urban threats. In Eastern and Southern Europe, RAN highlights unique

challenges such as right-wing extremism, nationalism, democratic instability, authoritarian resurgence, and sports violence groups [25]. In Western European regions, however, radicalization challenges mainly involve issues related to immigration and refugees, social polarization, violent Islamist extremists, and the management of repatriated foreign terrorist fighters [26]. For many Southern European countries like Portugal, Cyprus, and Malta, radicalization and extremism are not immediate threats. Except for Spain, the region lacks urgency in combating these issues. Therefore, at the EU level, RAN must tailor a preventive radicalization framework that aligns with local threats upon integration into the region. This approach can strengthen ties with local stakeholders and secure policy support from city councils and politicians, ensuring adequate funding and backing for RAN's operations [27].

4.2. Assigning narrative roles

RAN assigns diverse roles to combat extremism, involving professions like police, psychologists, journalists, and communities. It stresses inter-agency collaboration and the involvement of governments, NGOs, and educational institutions in deradicalization [28]. RAN POL fosters community interaction, while RAN PRISON addresses radicalization in prisons, involving officers, psychologists, and chaplains. RAN HEALTH unites stakeholders in deradicalization efforts, emphasizing collaboration among law enforcement, psychologists, judiciary, prisons, schools, and communities [29]. RAN emphasizes local community involvement in deradicalization efforts, assigning roles to governments, educational institutions, and NGOs. Law enforcement facilitates interactions with preventive institutions. The Prison Workgroup, comprising prison officers, governors, psychiatrists, and chaplains, addresses radicalization in prisons through intervention, assessment, and rehabilitation efforts.

RAN facilitates regular workshops and knowledge training sessions through the establishment of the RAN POL Workgroup and the RAN PRISON Workgroup, inviting local professionals to discuss various topics and share local practices. For instance, during the RAN Expert Workshop held on March 23rd and 24th, 2022, experienced experts from police, military, and prison sectors discussed preventive measures against radicalization within their organizations. Attendees from different member states shared their experiences and insights on the rise of right-wing extremism through speeches and reflections [30].

4.3. Empowering narrative engagement

Inspiring practices in RAN use narratives to motivate specific activities. Everyday actions in daily life spaces aid deradicalization and benefit youth. Art and culture stimulate creativity, foster dialogue, and improve self-awareness, breaking stereotypes and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Sports are also considered a practical activity that can bring about positive changes in a social and familiar environment. Sports activities promote unity and cooperation among individuals, instill a spirit of fair competition, and cultivate discipline and teamwork. RAN suggests that through sports activities, young people can build social networks, gain physical health, and achieve self-esteem. Additionally, sports activities can connect young people with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures, broaden their horizons, strengthen social cohesion, and foster citizenship.

5. Conclusion

Amidst escalating global tensions, the European Union (EU) faces significant challenges impacting its security landscape. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict, cybersecurity threats, the refugee crisis, and the

spread of disinformation pose risks to EU stability. Extremism, notably right-wing extremism and hate speech, threaten economic development and social cohesion. In response, the EU prioritized preventive measures, exemplified by establishing the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) in 2011.

RAN serves as a collaborative platform, uniting stakeholders to address extremism proactively. By fostering information sharing and cooperation, RAN integrates resources to combat radicalization. Emphasizing community engagement, RAN transcends national boundaries, empowering local authorities and communities in deradicalization efforts.

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Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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