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Ensuring Security while Conducting Research and Fieldwork on Countering and Preventing Religious and Far-Right Violent Extremism: The Case of Southeastern Europe[1]

Arlinda Rrustemi[ab2]
[a]Lecturer, Leiden University, [b]Director of Peace Analytics

Abstract
Field research on preventing and countering (non) violent extremism (P/CVE) is challenging for researchers as it poses many risks to themselves and their participants alike. Risks are present during all three stages of fieldwork, namely: pre-, during- and post. However, there are some risks unique to religious or far-right violent extremism respectively. Oftentimes, these radicalization type-specific risks also differ based on the politicization of the research and based on whether the country has autocratic tendencies or not. Another subset of risks is more readily generalizable. These are linked to gender, collaboration vs. competition among civil society, trauma, and work-life balance. It behooves researchers to be aware of these risks prior to embarking on fieldwork, and to formulate mitigation strategies to account for them. Based on the results and experiences in the field from a research project conducted in Southeastern Europe – "Countering Radicalisation through Lifestories" (Rrustemi, 2020) – this article outlines a model for improving researchers' security before, during, and after fieldwork. In doing so, it aims to fill a significant gap in the literature. Few previous studies have provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges researchers face while conducting fieldwork, something which this study sets out to correct. By outlining a model for improving researchers' safety, it also aims to contribute to better the quality and quantity of research on the P/CVE.

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Introduction

Primary research into violent extremism is complicated by several variables, including the lack of access to information through primary sources (Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski, 2018),

[1]This academic article is based on the former project output from the "Countering Radicalisation through Lifestories" research report on the Countering and Preventing (Non) Violent Extremism: Research and Fieldwork Challenges (2020) by Dr. Arlinda Rrustemi. https://hcss.nl/sites/default/files/files/reports/Countering%20and%20Preventing%20%28Non%29%20Violent%20Extremism%20-%20Research%20and%20Fieldwork%20Challenges%20Final.pdf

[2] Corresponding Author Contact: Arlinda Rrustemi, Email: arlindar@gmail.com, Institute for Political Science, University of Leiden, Pieter de la Court, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, The Netherlands

the lack of access to participants, the topic being viewed as a taboo, researchers and participants alike being exposed to diverse security risks (Rrustemi, 2020), and interpretation problems (Winter, 2019).

This notwithstanding, some academics have managed to conduct empirical studies within the subject area. Interviews have been used to understand the prevention and countering of (non) violent extremism (P/CVE) within prison programs (Silke & Veldhuis, 2017), as disengagement drivers (Ferguson, 2016; Hamid, 2018; Hwang, 2018), as well as drivers for joining violent extremist groups (Bakker & Grol, 2015; Sieckelinck et al., 2019; Speckhard, 2016). The increased need for primary data (Schuurman, 2018) and the usage of primary data to inform P/CVE studies intensifies the risks faced by researchers and participants. This study attempts to address the risks P/CVE scholars using primary data face in the field by providing a holistic analysis of such dangers.

More concretely, this article outlines the security risks encountered by researchers over the course of the 'Countering Radicalization through Lifestories' research project, which ran from 2017 to 2020. The project made extensive use of primary data, as it engaged in the analysis of lifestory interviews. Such interviews ask participants to elaborate on "the time from birth to the present or before and beyond" regarding family, education, work, and other important events (Atkinson, 2002). A total of 307 interviews were conducted in six Southeastern European countries; namely: Albania, the Republic of Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. 155 of these interviews were conducted with individuals who were directly impacted by violent extremism (including family members and community observers), 28 were conducted with former extremist individuals, 15 with extremist individuals, 72 with non-governmental organization (NGO) officials, 39 with government officials, 32 with international organization (IO) officials, 25 with journalists, 17 with academics, and 8 with political party officials. The lifestory interviews were integrated into a database that serves the purpose of understanding radicalization, resilience, and disengagement.

The security challenges in the project were uncovered mostly throughout the research stages "during", and "post" fieldwork as shown in Figure 1 below. During the fieldwork, various types of insecurity were encountered, such as exposure to arms, blackmail, as well as

verbal and physical threats. The main sources of insecurity during fieldwork arose regarding gender, interaction with collaborators, politicization, work/life balance, and trauma. These dynamics impacted the security of both researchers and interviewees, particularly when the former attempted to access directly affected individuals, such as family members, violent extremists, and former violent extremists. With these first-hand experiences, this article discusses several insecurities in-depth, outlines a model for security preparedness to be employed by academics and practitioners in the field, and formulates a series of conclusions and recommendations.

*Figure 1: Challenges Arising from Security Risks in the Field (*PF-post fieldwork)*

Methodology

The experience gained during this project is valuable for future P/CVE researchers and practitioners. The recommendations outlined in this report are derived from the lessons learned throughout the project. The author's personal experience as a project leader and interviewer, combined with the firsthand experience of (two) field researchers in the team, allows for the establishment of a framework for risk assessment and management in the field. The team benefitted from discussions on (among other challenges) experienced risks, and developed ad-hoc mitigation strategies which could be adjusted based on the nature of the incidents. The discussions were held every time an incident occurred. In each incident, the incident was discussed with the rest of the team and a joint mitigation strategy was devised. Therefore, the suggested work employs a bottom-up framework informed by firsthand experiences gained from the field over a lengthy period of time.

A clear methodology for the project – consisting of justification for data sources usage, lifestory interviews, collection of data through snowball sampling, identification of local partners and specific issues such as consent, ethical, legal, and security risks for the field – was developed prior to the initiation of the research. The methodology was developed by the research leader, professors at the University of Leiden and Columbia, and the staff of the think tank where the project was implemented, the Hague Center for Strategic Studies (HCSS). It was approved by funders of the project at The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. All the aforementioned parties were briefed on research progress and incidents. The methodology was altered as necessary as the project progressed, in consultation with the aforementioned parties. Therefore, while an Ethics Commission was not existent, all necessary steps for approval of the research methodology and alterations have been followed.

The following section will present a review of the methodological progress of P/CVE research as well as the literature on the recurrent concepts on the risks researchers and participants face while conducting field studies on P/CVE.

Literature Review

An evolutionary pattern can be observed in the academic literature on the methodological progress of terrorism research. Prior to Schuurman's (2018) assessment on the state of the field, scholars tended to argue that terrorism research was suffering from inaccuracies, biases, and lack of contextual knowledge due to the limited use of primary sources and the heavy reliance on secondary, easily accessible (open source) data such as media sources (Schmid & Jongman, 1988; Silke, 2001). Because of the scarcity of data, biases were likely to be amplified in the field (Sageman, 2014, p. 570). Furthermore, these arguments suggest that the few research that has collected primary data within the field had engaged in semi-structured interviews, meaning that their findings were limited by interviewer bias and by the low generalizability associated with opportunity sampling.

Schuurman (2018), however, reveals, as indicated by the emergence of seven new journals, that terrorism research is maturing with the increasing use of primary sources allowing to ground the field in empirical work. According to his analysis, although literature

reviews remain predominant, most scholars combine them with a second method of data collection, such as interviews. Nonetheless, the usage of statistics has shown little improvement over the decades. Despite a slight increase in recent years, quantitative analyses of terrorism continue to lag far behind their qualitative counterparts. Although the field still lacks a community of committed scholars capable of advancing knowledge of terrorism uniformly, Schuurman's analysis nonetheless proves that the use of primary data gathered through fieldwork has increased substantially. Accordingly, with an increase in the use and demand of primary data, risks associated with field research intensify as well.

Previous literature on the risks associated with the P/CVE field research identifies multiple issues related to the well-being and safety of researchers. Past P/CVE field research experiences have shown that exposure to extremism can create cognitive burdens and mental health issues on the researchers, such as PTSD-like symptoms and trauma (Ashe et al., 2020; Conway, 2021; Speckhard, 2009). Under the heavy barrage of hate and extremist content, studies can have an immense emotional toll on researchers, especially when the extremist ideologies specifically target the researcher's individuality or his/her identifying group. Even if maintaining a professional relationship with the subjects, researchers often deal with "the constant suppression of anger or fear" that can cause emotional and cognitive distress on the researcher (Conway, 2021; Ramalingam, 2020, p. 266).

Apart from the risks associated with emotional and cognitive well-being, previous literature also identifies issues related to researchers' physical safety. The inherent nature of P/CVE field research puts the researchers at risk of harm due to the possible criminal encounters and the high threat perception of subjects towards the scientists (Speckhard, 2009). Furthermore, interviewing potential violent extremists can lead to acquiring details of plots which can create ethical issues and put researchers in danger. Additionally, physical threats against researchers can even continue after the completion of the fieldwork through methods of "doxing" (i.e. sharing individuals' private information to be used for harassment), "brigading" (i.e. harassing individuals online by coordinating groups), and "swatting" (i.e. making hoax threat calls to individual's addresses) (Conway, 2021). Other scholars also touched upon security-related challenges, such as reactions from the public, police, and school staff to investigations and published material (Ashe et al., 2020). Even others point out to the

importance of calculating security risks for organizations conducting field-projects (Ritzmann, 2017), and the necessity of trust and security while researching far-right groups (Guest et al., 2012; Haugstvedt, 2020; Råheim et al., 2016; Seidman, 2006).

As discussed, in terrorism research, the safety of researchers and research participants has been thoroughly explored within the context of war zones (Baaz & Utas, 2019; Helbardt, et al., 2010; Nordstrom & Robben, 1996; Romano, 2006), whereas little attention has been awarded to the safety of researchers in non-war zones when conducting research on P/CVE. Given the need to research P/CVE outside of war zones, coupled with the rise of usage of primary data in P/CVE research outlined above, it is of critical importance to understand the security risks for field research better. Therefore, an in-depth explanatory analysis, as established in this article, is necessary for countering, mitigating, and preventing risks stemming from field research that engages with far-right and religious violent extremist groups.

To recapitulate, this piece attempts to assist P/CVE scholars in managing and mitigating risks in the field by sharing experiences and establishing a framework. Such a framework is strongly needed in view of the lack of coherent literature on the topic. Moreover, it has the potential of producing trickle-down effects, as improved researcher safety is likely to result in an increase of (accessible) primary data such as interviews, ethnographical observations, focus groups, and surveys. The next section introduces the risks associated with P/CVE research within different settings.

Security Risks During Fieldwork per Various Types of VE

Various types of insecurity may arise during fieldwork. The main risks reported on by researchers conducting interviews in both spectrums of violent extremism – namely religious and far-right – constitute threats, blackmail, and exposure to arms. However, my previous research has shown that there are also specific challenges that arise according to each type of violent extremism. This will be explored in the subsequent sections, starting with challenges researching far-right violent extremism and then moving towards the challenges researching religious violent extremism.

Security Risks due to Threats and Intimidation by VE Groups and Governments with Authoritarian Tendencies

During the process of accessing members of far-right VE groups and governments with authoritarian tendencies, the research assistants were predominantly exposed to threats and blackmailing.

Interviewing Serbian foreign fighters in Ukraine was troublesome. Initial contact was established online; however, it did not take too long until many withdrew from accepting an interview as trust between the researcher and the participant could not be established sustainably over distance. Government employees in Serbia refrained from discussing far-right extremism or Serbian fighters in Ukraine. Instead, they consistently denied the Serbian state's involvement in far-right movements. In such an instance, a researcher based in Belgrade was intimidated by unknown individuals, receiving phone calls several times – including at night. The researcher feared that the state was behind these calls and was required to terminate her attempts to contact far-right individuals (research assistant in Serbia, personal communication, April 24, 2019). Once the researcher did so, the calls stopped as well. Researchers conducting fieldwork on religious violent extremism were allowed to go about their business without being exposed to threats or intimidation attempts. This clearly indicates that there are efforts to control information regarding developments on far-right violent extremism in Serbia. A similar report from the EU Commission supports this finding as it concluded that threats, violence, and intimidation against journalists are present in Serbia (Serbia 2019 Report, 2019). Likewise, a group of civil society organizations pointed out that, in the absence of freedom of expression, civil society in Serbia is under serious threat (EWB, 2017).

Comparable challenges were observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Macedonia. The research team encountered difficulties accessing both Serbian foreign fighters originating from and residing in the country. Those situated abroad preferred not to speak; those residing within would only speak to researchers off record. Additionally, several potential interviewees were threatened not to speak up. In Northern Macedonia, far-right

violent extremism was a topic that had not been dealt with in public. Individuals connected to the cause preferred to refrain from speaking up; however, some were interviewed after trust had been established. Even though some parts of the movement were open, most were strictly closed and did not respond to interview requests. This indicates that the movement is separated from the public. Meanwhile, VE movements also seem to attempt to control the level of information transferred to the public.

While researching far-right violent extremism in the Republic of Kosovo, specifically in the northern area – which is mainly inhabited by the Serbian minority – researchers and research participants alike were threatened. Participants reported a high level of fear when engaging in the study and taking part in interviews. In many cases, they indicated that they had been threatened by members of far-right groups which are also linked to criminal organizations. Similarly, researchers were also threatened not to delve into the issue at stake as "it could be life-threatening" to them. Finally, taking into consideration the potential nexus between crime and far-right VE, the research was immediately stopped after sufficient material for the analysis was collected.

Instances of far-right VE were also present in the Southern part of Albania; however, since their group members did not wish to speak up due to the fear of being subjected to arbitrary state persecution, no security risks were present for the research team.

Security Risks due to Politicization of VE in Territories with Authoritarian Tendencies

Research teams also needed to be mindful of state actors throughout the research process. Particularly in states with autocratic tendencies, researchers could – depending on the subjects they were exploring – be subjected to intimidation by state actors. This can be attributed, in no small part, to the politicization of some forms of violent extremism and of far-right extremism in particular.

For instance, Serbia's government refused to collaborate on the project due to its "inconvenient timing" (Serbian government representative, personal communication, July 18, 2018). This resulted in potential security risks to researchers in the field while postponing both the data collection and analysis process. Additionally, the politicization of the matter was clearly present amongst several international officials. They opted not to collaborate on

uncovering the topic even though their role formally suggested that they should be committed to supporting democracy and independent reporting. Moreover, it was observed that Serbian state personnel collaborated with international officials. If the latter group exhibits their skepticism towards the research, it may create further insecurity for the researchers and participants in the field.

Researching Religious Violent Extremism

Threats, Blackmail and Exposure to Arms

During fieldwork delving into religious violent extremism, several types of security risks were encountered: namely threats, blackmail, and exposure to arms. Whereas researchers in Albania and Serbia encountered no threats, researchers in Kosovo and Northern Macedonia encountered threats.

Interestingly, while conducting research in Serbia, the researchers did not face any threats by either state actors or VE groups while researching religious violent extremism, as opposed to conducting fieldwork on far-right violent extremism. Similarly, researchers in Albania conducted the fieldwork without encountering severe risk, as gatekeepers were trusted. Likewise, even though access to new interviewees was quite difficult in Bosnia and Herzegovina, no security incidents were reported (research assistant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, personal communication, April 24, 2019).

Security Threats posed by Collaboration with Local Partners

Researchers can also face security threats due to a lack of long-term collaboration with local partners in the field. While local ownership and transfer of knowledge are crucial in post-conflict countries, collaboration also poses challenges due to the political agendas of local partners. In Northern Macedonia, the threat to researchers' security was reported to be high in some cases. For instance, when elections were held in 2019, a researcher was threatened and forced to leave the country. To counter this, a high level of trust needs to be sustained with local gatekeepers. Good relations with gatekeepers are crucial in assessing the actual level of threat in the field. Furthermore, study participants feared to speak up due to concerns that the

researcher may represent governmental interests, the international community's interests, or the interests of intelligence agencies. This led to serious security risks throughout the entire interview process. Accordingly, trustful collaboration with local partners is of major importance to mitigate such perceived threats by participants.

Security Threats posed by Being Potentially Followed by Intelligence Agencies

During the research, intelligence agencies' attempts to engage with the project created significant threats for the researchers. The team was requested to share sensitive details (i.e.: locations, names, etc.) by donors of the project. This posed challenges because access to participants would be hampered if such knowledge became known, as the protection of participants and the independence of the research is key to maintaining access to the field. Sharing such information also held the potential of placing the team and the participants at risk.

Additionally, researchers could be followed by local intelligence agencies. The participants in the study, namely Albanians living in Northern Macedonia, expressed similar fears of potential arbitrary persecution by state authorities, such as imprisonment because of politically driven agendas. Therefore, it is important to also protect participants' identities if such cases are noticed. However, once trust was built, interviews could take place in closed settings (i.e., houses); yet, with the downside that this would put the researcher in increased danger.

In that regard, the independence of the researchers needs to be emphasized in the field. Researchers have an ethical duty to create a secure environment for participants. Moreover, researchers need to work independently where possible and to avoid being traced by governmental/intelligence structures. In this way, the independence, confidentiality, and security of participants can be maintained in the field. This also contributes to the security of the researchers and to the academic integrity of the larger study in the long run. Independence and confidentiality are of high significance to participants, as threats from violent extremist organizations, governmental structures, and/or the general population (due to stigma) may follow. The same principles also apply to former violent extremists who have not (sufficiently) de-radicalized, whose anonymity should be ensured (G. Clubb & Tapley, 2019).

This is due to the fact that such individuals often alter their allegiances. It is also important to note that legal protections should be extended to journalists, sources, and – in some cases – academics. This ensures the "do-no-harm" principle for researchers and within the researched communities.

Security Threats posed by VE Groups

The religious VE situation in Syria changed, which led to changes among some groups in Kosovo. This exposed the research team to significant risks. Among the most common types of insecurity was exposure to arms while interviewing. In other cases, exposure to physical threats caused the researchers to halt interviews. Such risks were increased as the majority of interviews were conducted without 3rd parties present. In the cases of no 3rd party present, interviews were held in public spaces to minimize potential security risks to the interviewer.

It is important to keep in mind that risks posed to interviewers are the main driving factor for a lack of evidence-based P/CVE research. As pointed out in an anonymous interview, "VE is a very important topic, but people [violent extremists] can sometimes be dangerous. So even us, we are trying to move away from radicalization research. Our researchers are putting themselves at risk" (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2017). Generally, in the Southeastern Europe region, a high degree of blackmailing is present. The research team themselves did not experience blackmail due to their taking of heavy precautions. Blackmail took various forms, including video surveillance, phone software bugs, and so on. Since the researchers witnessed blackmail being used against other actors, they were careful in how they interacted with people in the field – especially when it came to revealing sensitive (personal) information. The cyber security training assisted in countering this challenge. Therefore, it is essential to refrain from engaging with these types of individuals during the fieldwork and be cautious in every engagement.

Sources of Insecurity During and Post Fieldwork

The previous sections have outlined a series of risks – blackmail, threats, exposure to arms, politicization, difficulties working in a territory with authoritarian tendencies – which

commonly present themselves during fieldwork in connection to the nature of the research at hand. This section outlines security risks which, though they can arise during fieldwork, can also occur *post*-fieldwork. These risks stem from gender, collaboration networks that become competitive, work-life balance, and trauma.

Gender

Inequalities exist between male and female researchers. Interviewees often take more time to talk to female researchers, and the frequency of interview meetings was found to be higher with female researchers. Interviewees were also more likely to engage in private conversations with female researchers than they were with their male counterparts. This means that female researchers were generally able to collect more data, at the concession of being subjected to uncomfortable conversations more frequently.

The research team mitigated this by including a second (male) person in as many interviews as possible but found that doing so causes interviewees to stiffen and share less. Another mitigation strategy to countering uncomfortable conversations for female researchers would be to wear a ring to showcase relationship commitment and initiate discussions on family and children.

Furthermore, female researchers can be confronted with sexist views during personal deliberations, such as discussing the potential of being raped by violent extremists. The fact that such discussions do not occur among male researchers indicates the presence of sexist beliefs among both international and local communities. If these sexist beliefs and lack of commitment to the research are expressed by gatekeepers in both networks (local and international), then this may prolong the research and even implant ideas in the minds of the violent extremists that the female researcher lacks institutional support. This reduces the barriers to engaging in intimidation or rape. Additionally, female researchers may continue to be exposed to violent-extremist individuals upon leaving the field, given that these individuals are likely to keep in touch frequently. This can also take the form of threatening the researcher, especially in cases where findings are revealed not to be in line with their expectations.

Therefore, female researchers should be aware beforehand of potential sexist beliefs. Ignoring such beliefs is the preferred mitigation strategy. Furthermore, more awareness needs to be fostered among the VE circles regarding gender equality and their potential misconceptions, necessary for lowered security risks for female researchers.

Collaboration vs Competition with Partners

Researchers are also endangered by competitive international and local civil society networks. Disinformation regarding the research can be spread among communities, which in turn can endanger researchers in the field. Researchers can be threatened and forced to leave the field solely due to the competition for funding. Instead, collaboration would need to be fostered within civil society networks.

Reporting can pose threats to the researchers as well. If reporting takes place on unsafe internet platforms, then the data regarding participants or dynamics could be revealed to unwanted partners, such as VE organizations or local autocratic governments. Therefore, reporting activities should be delayed until the end of the fieldwork and the use of safe communication channels should be ensured.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject and the potential security risks associated with the research, access to research findings should be kept limited to only a few individuals. In this way, the independence of the research and the researchers' safety can be upheld, avoiding the personal preferences and biases of individuals - in line with countries' or IO's strategies - jeopardizing them. It is therefore important to emphasize that the researchers' independence is crucial despite countries' or international organizations' strategies on P/CVE.

Work-Life Balance and Trauma

Trauma of participants can be transferred onto researchers, particularly if extended time is spent together during the interviewing process. Personal stories, experiences in the field, or watching too much online material showing violent content can sometimes cause trauma to researchers. This also relates to the emerging literature about the difficulties of conducting P/CVE research. For instance, one researcher became uneasy over dinner and had to leave because of a discussion about the ethics of eating meat and slaughterhouses, which he

associated with an ISIS propaganda video showing prisoners like animals waiting to be slaughtered. Another researcher shifted from watching online extremist propaganda to analyzing court reports just to 'clear the mind' (Allam, 2019). Long exposure to stressful situations correlates with mental (Maroun & Richter-Levin, 2003), cardiovascular, immune, gastrointestinal, neurohormonal, and musculoskeletal health (D'Andrea et al., 2011). This in turn may result in less attentive researchers, worsening immediate security risks in the field but also in the long run. Therefore, it is of high importance to be able to access the weekly briefings as well as lengthy de-briefing sessions along with psychological assistance, if necessary, upon return.

The work-life balance of VE researchers is also disrupted. The high workload involved in maintaining local networks, abiding by the "do-no-harm principles", spending long hours with transcriptions, as well as the traumas experienced in the field, all contribute to this. Alienation arises upon return due to disconnects between the field and headquarters as well as between the developing world and the developed world. These factors reduce researchers' alertness, rendering both the researcher and the participants more vulnerable to security risks upon return to the field. It should also be noted that previously contacted networks typically continue engaging with researchers upon their return to their countries of residence. It is therefore crucial for the researcher's mental wellbeing to maintain strict working hours and create distance from work.

Towards a Model for Researchers' Security Preparation for Fieldwork

Regarding the risks explored and the main experiences gained in the project "Counter Radicalisation through Lifestories" a model for security preparation for research in the field can be developed. The proposed model of security preparation for fieldwork consists of different types of preparations pre-, during-, and post-fieldwork, as shown in Figure 2. In the pre-fieldwork phase, all researchers are encouraged to conduct three types of training: security, field, and legal. During the fieldwork, weekly briefings should take place. Lastly, in the post-fieldwork phase, de-briefings and psychological assistance are important. Putting

these processes in place would increase researcher security in all phases of the study while improving the quality and quantity of findings as well.

To begin, the pre-fieldwork phase demands close attention to security training. Content should be made available that explains online and physical security but also communication/information security. Generally, tips and tricks on how to de-escalate situations, deal with disinformation, threats, and blackmail, as well as how to communicate with violent extremists and secure authentic stories need to be covered within the training. In addition, several technical steps online as well as through one-to-one meetings need to be conducted to protect the safety of interviewers. More practically, interviews that are requested to be set in secluded areas, or that are to take place in isolation, should be avoided. If interviews take place inside domiciles a trusted local companion should always accompany the researcher. It is vital to always drive with a second person (a trusted gatekeeper or a taxi driver) that can deter interviewees with bad intentions. It should be noted that finding trusted partners in these areas is a highly complex task, and that it is also crucial to ensure researchers' safety while doing so.

Furthermore, online communications need to be protected. As a result, researchers are recommended to make use of end-to-end encrypted apps such as Signal, to always make use of a VPN, and to purchase a separate phone for the sole purpose of engaging with the research project. These steps increase the likelihood of meetings being able to take place in safe environments, without the awareness of violent extremist groups or governments.

Second, the pre-fieldwork phase must include field training. This is different from the technical security training discussed above, nonetheless, it enjoys similar importance. The main topics that need to be addressed are trust, confidentiality, and independence of the researcher while engaging with local and international networks. Independence is a key concept during this training as it helps to prevent security risks that may arise from collaboration with governments. Since there is a widespread perception that researchers are affiliated with the state or with intelligence agencies, it is crucial to establish beforehand and communicate with the interviewee that this is not the case. By reassuring participants of researchers' independence, potential security risks are reduced. Moreover, in times of fake news and disinformation spread by various actors, practitioners must maintain needed levels

of trust as well as a strong connection with the target audience via messaging based on alternative stories. Crucially, this needs to happen outside of government control, thereby ensuring researchers' strict separation and independence from government influence and manipulation (Pizzuto, 2013). It is also important to address the collaboration and competition of these networks. To protect interviewees' privacy and the long-term security of both researchers and participants, a 'confidentiality and consent agreement' should be taken into consideration to ensure mutual consent and security in the long run.[3]

Furthermore, researchers' work-life balance may also affect their security and alertness. As a result, researchers should aim to take time off to maintain their effectiveness. If trauma becomes a factor during the fieldwork, it is important to stop and recover prior to re-entering. Furthermore, gender also needs to be addressed to ensure safety for the researcher and participant. For instance, this can be achieved by providing female researchers with assistance from male colleagues (and vice versa) as referrals/assistants to make clear that a women researcher is unavailable for a sexual relation. Risks deriving from various sources and alterations in the field need to be considered as well. These can be either at the governmental level, violent extremist groups level, and/or the international community level. Meanwhile, context specific based risks regarding these levels need to be considered in the field research as well.

Lastly, in the pre-phase of fieldwork, legal training is necessary. It should cover freedom of expression, control of information, protection of academics and journalists, and protection of sources. This provides the researcher with the legal background to avoid security risks in the field. For example, it provides the researcher with the legal knowledge to refuse the disclosure of participants' identities to intelligence agencies – something which would blowback on the research and the researcher at late stages.

During the fieldwork period, it is important to have weekly briefings with donors and employers in order to assess the researchers' security risk level and decide on how to move forward with the fieldwork. This guarantees the security of study participants and researchers alike. Discussions can evolve around the perceived level of threat based on the researcher on

[3] The agreement outlined among other things how the privacy rights are protected, such as by blurring the voices if allowed to be audio recorded, removing dates, names of individuals or streets, altering genders, the length of the data maintained in the database, etc.

the field, perceived level by other parties involved in the discussion, and lastly deciding whether to continue the interview leads, or stop for a short period and re-start again once the situation changes. Any decision should be taken if all parties agree based on consensus. This inclusive and informed decision-making framework protects researchers from being pushed to a dangerous zone.

Lastly, the post-fieldwork phase should incorporate debriefing for at least three months up to six, as well as psychological assistance if necessary. Discussions could evolve around topics on the level of re-adjustment to the office environment, managing the contacts with the field, the progress of research, and other topics that the researcher may like to raise. If difficulties arise in any of these areas, then a referral to more specialized counseling should be pursued.

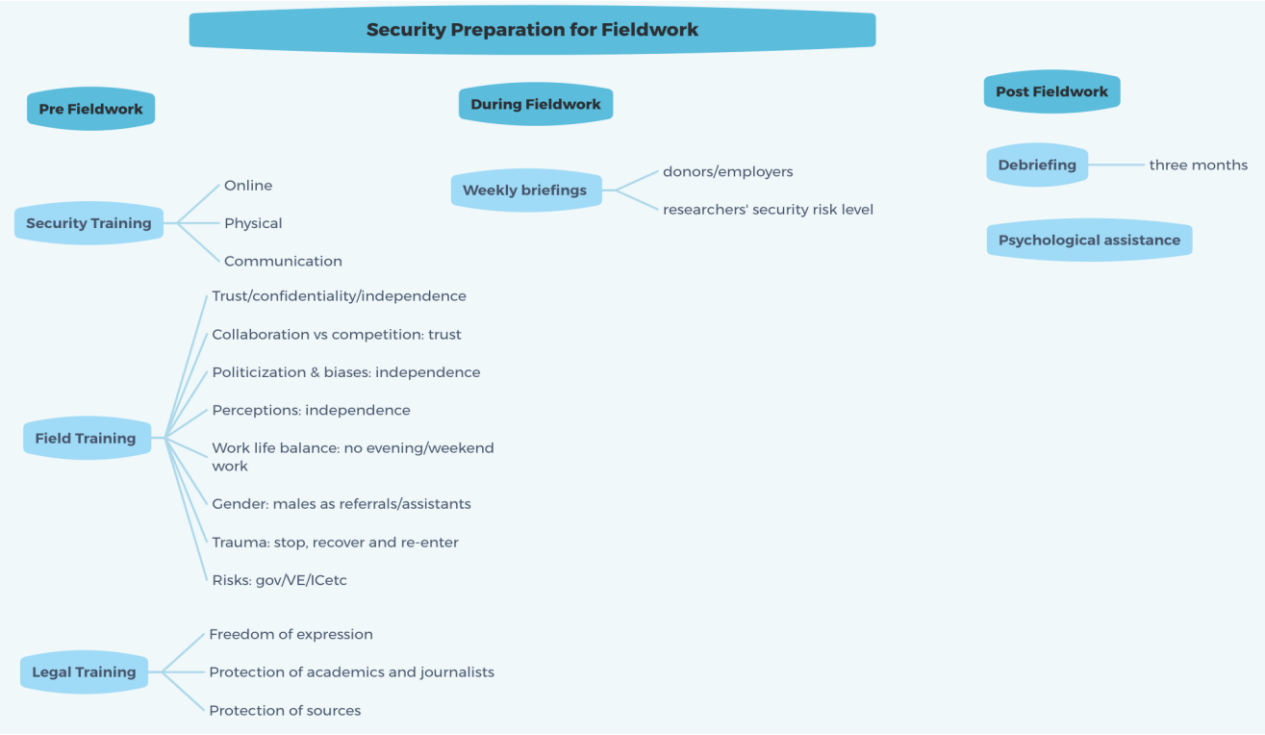

Figure 2: Researchers' Security Preparation for Fieldwork Model

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article discusses a variety of research challenges and their impacts on researchers and their subjects observed during a long-term study on VE in South-Eastern Europe. This is relevant, given that the risks of VE research on researchers' and research participants' security are rarely documented and understood holistically. The paper confirms the conclusion brought forward in the paper "Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival" (Nordstrom & Robben, 1996) that while fieldwork is a complex task with many challenges, it is feasible and worthwhile.

Several security risks, applying both to interviewees and interviewers, became evident during the research project 'Countering Radicalization through Lifestories'. Due to sensitive and sometimes dangerous interviewees, some interviews were canceled in instances where individuals requested to meet alone. Whilst interviewees often fear reprisals by governments (e.g., imprisonment) and/or VE organizations, researchers tend to be confronted with threats such as attacks, blackmail, manipulation, and exposure to intimidation (e.g., being threatened with arms during an interview). Politicization and perceptions of the researcher may also increase the security risks posed to researchers and participants. Moreover, both during and after the fieldwork, common challenges are uncovered that increase insecurity. These challenges constitute gender, trauma, work-life balance, and competitive collaboration networks.

Further, the project uncovers that security risks are experienced differently by researchers and take different forms in different countries, depending on whether violent extremism is grounded in religious factors or the far-right. Regarding far-right extremism, the countries that seem to be most difficult to conduct research in (and where, as a result, the risk to researchers was higher) are Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republic of Kosovo. Interestingly, this phenomenon is more present in countries with a declining level of democracy in recent years (Global Freedom Scores, 2021). When conducting research on religious violent extremism, the countries such as Northern Macedonia and the Republic of Kosovo present greater risks for scholars.

In view of the experienced risks, this article creates a safety model assisting researchers in conducting more grounded and reflexive VE research, particularly when gathering primary data in the field. Moreover, it provides in-depth recommendations regarding the safety of researchers as well as participants and guides research on far-right and religious violent extremist groups in non-conflict zones.

The security preparation for fieldwork consists of various types of actions. In the pre-fieldwork phase, all researchers are encouraged to conduct three types of training: security, field, and legal. During the fieldwork, weekly briefings should take place. In the post-fieldwork phase, de-briefings and psychological assistance are important. Putting these processes in place would increase researchers' security in all phases of fieldwork, improving the quality and quantity of research as a result. Further, the proposed model allows for reflexivity in the field given the unknown terrain that the researcher is stepping in. It also acknowledges the need to mix and match data collection methods (Ashe et al., 2020) in an iterative form.

Finally, the proposed model will ultimately assist in further deepening academic understanding of political violence by expanding the scope of existing research beyond the explanatory. Increasing the security of researchers and participants alike will allow for the collection of more and better data, as well as the creation of more committed scholars. The lack of the latter has been widely reported upon within terrorism studies (Sageman, 2014). This article aims to assist in countering this phenomenon by providing a framework of engagement in the field of VE research. This would also benefit people in need, crucial for an ethical engagement in the field (Jok et al., 2013).

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