

CHAMPIONS Newsletter 02/2021

First-Line-Practitioner Trainings in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic

The CHAMPIONS project's main objective is to create offline working groups or "CHAMPIONS Roundtables" to train First-Line Practitioners (FLPs) who respond to radicalization and polarization. This newsletter highlights the strategies adopted by the consortium members in Hungary, Germany, Poland, and Romania to mitigate the challenges posed by Covid-19 in implementing these roundtables.

First, the newsletter outlines the challenges faced by project partners in 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was unfolding. Then, it discusses how project partners adapted the Roundtables in these difficult times, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. The newsletter concludes with an outlook on future activities.

The Challenge

CHAMPIONS had been designed as a project that engages FLPs in offline working groups, thereby relying on the personal and interactive element of group meetings and workshops. Since the partners in all the project countries (Hungary, Germany, Poland, and Romania) were affected in significant ways by the Covid-19 pandemic in the third quarter of the project cycle, the format of the "CHAMPIONS Roundtables" had to be adjusted based on the needs of the consortium partners and the participants. Furthermore, the workshops had to be organized in a manner that was in line with governmental regulations to ensure the safety and health of all participants. Finally, the adopted format of roundtables had to meet high quality standards to meet the goal of facilitating effective communication and collaboration among participants.

Innovative Mitigation Approaches

All project partners in their respective locations were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As governments around the world developed different strategies to manage the pandemic, the consortium partners were faced with different governmental regulations and constantly changing epidemiological situations. The consortium partners therefore agreed to implement different strategies in each country which would best reflect the local situation and could be adjusted to the needs and preferences of the participants. The three approaches that were adopted by the partners – the modified offline model, the online model, and the downscaled offline model - are discussed below.

The modified offline model

CULTURES in Germany implemented the roundtables offline in Berlin-Neukölln, while paying special attention to the hygiene and distancing rules. Following the first offline roundtables



(in November and December 2019), Roundtable 3 was held in March 2020. Due to concerns related to Covid-19, many participants cancelled and only 3 FLPs attended the event. Roundtable 4 (scheduled for March and April) had to be cancelled by the organizer, but was later implemented successfully in June 2020. During the roundtable, the participants made plans for awareness raising events, such as the planning of an exhibition on the topic of hate speech. Roundtable 5 on the topic of online radicalization was implemented in July, again in adherence to required hygiene and distancing rules.

Advantages and drawbacks

While the offline model had the advantage that only small changes had to be made to the training materials, and participants had the benefit of interacting in a more direct and personal way, the model also had drawbacks: The dates of the roundtables had to be postponed at the height of the pandemic, and some participants cancelled their participation, thereby limiting the reach of the trainings.

The online model

Both **BCMAP** and **PoICap** in Hungary and **PATRIR** in Romania decided to implement the roundtables in a strictly online fashion.

When Hungary issued a national lockdown in March 2020, public spaces and facilities, schools and workplaces were closed. While Roundtable 2 had still been held offline on 26 February 2020, the organizers, after consultations with FLPs, decided to continue the roundtables in an online format for the remainder of the year 2020.

The participants were split into two online working groups dedicated to the topic of polarization within the community of the VIII. District of Budapest. 10 FLPs participated in the online discussions. In the context of a continued lockdown, several online workshops were held in June and July on the respective topics of segregation in public schools and cohabitation of people with different social and cultural backgrounds. During the workshops the participants developed a plan of action (including community engagement activities) to counter problems in the district.

PATRIR also implemented its roundtables online. Following the initial kick-off events in the city of Cluj-Napoca in November 2019 and the trainings workshops in January and February 2020, PATRIR organized the first roundtable on the topic of crime prevention and prevention of drug addiction of youth at risk in July 2020 as an online event, attended by 8 FLPs. Two roundtables on inclusive education were held in July and August 2020, attended by 22 FLPs and 17 FLPs respectively. Finally, a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder roundtable was held in September 2020, attended by 13 participants.

Advantages and drawbacks

Hungary: While the online model allowed the FLPs to continue their cooperation even in the context of a strict lockdown, and succeeded in developing plans for local action to tackle



problems in the VIII. District of Budapest, the implementation of community engagement activities remains on hold.

Romania: PATRIR noted the varying degrees of digital literacy of participants and the time constraints of the online format. Some issues could be mitigated by organizing follow-up meetings. However, the level of interaction between participants who had not met in person before was lower than in offline roundtables, which hampered the building of trust between participants.

The downscaled offline model

IBS in Poland modified the planned offline roundtables and created a model of study visits, which were implemented with a smaller number of participants. While the initial workshops had been held with 22 participants from municipal departments, the police, civil society organizations and cultural institutions, the study visits were limited to 8 FLPs. The participants were invited to Warsaw in July and August 2020. During the study visits the participants met experts in the field of prevention and countering of radicalization.

Advantages and drawbacks: The participants had the advantage of meeting first hand with different experts in the field of prevention and countering radicalization and to discuss their experiences in the setting of a small group. Since the initial group of participants had been separated into two groups, a joint meeting of the entire group to engage ideas and conclusions is pending.

Outlook

As demonstrated above, consortium partners came up with creative ideas to continue the training of FLPs in online, modified offline, and downscaled offline versions of roundtables. While all approaches had their advantages and drawbacks, they were designed to best fit the local context. In adapting to the “new normal” of the Covid-19 pandemic, consortium partners demonstrated that FLP trainings can be implemented successfully even in very challenging circumstances of the pandemic. This is possible when organizers remain flexible and incorporate the needs of FLPs into the planning of the trainings. While the training of the FLPs continued, the planned community engagement activities can only be implemented once the Covid-19 pandemic is under control.

CHAMPIONS - Cooperative Harmonized Action Model to Stop Polarisation in Our Nations

The main objective of the project is to develop collaboration models for establishing working groups between first-line-practitioners. The offline approach is supported by collaborative online tools, practitioner trainings and digital services.

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