

## Key dilemmas in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism

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### Abstract

Work on preventing radicalization, and violent extremism (PRVE) is beset with dilemmas, difficult considerations and pitfalls. Based on a synthesis of previous research and original data, this article conceptualizes and discusses three key dilemmas present in PRVE practice and policy: that of civil liberties versus security, that of too soft versus too hard measures, and that of intention versus outcome. The article illustrates how these dilemmas play out and are deliberated upon by PRVE practitioners and policymakers in Nordic countries. The exploration of these dilemmas and the different action pathways they involve can function as “sensitizing tools” to encourage reflexivity around the complexity and unintended consequences of PRVE. The dilemmas also reflect broader issues of societal and scholarly importance, as they make evident several critical ramifications of PRVE.

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## Introduction

During the last two decades, efforts to counter terrorism have changed dramatically across the globe. In Nordic countries, the emergence of policies and practices to prevent radicalization and violent extremism (PRVE) marks a new stage in counterterrorism, characterized by a pluralization of measures and actors involved (Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022). National policies in the Nordics emphasize prevention through mobilizing a range of actors from the state, civil society and private spheres, as well as using a multitude of measures, ranging from hard coercive approaches to softer responses by actors outside the criminal justice system (Lindekilde, 2012a; Sivenbring & Malmros, 2021). The wide variety of actors given PRVE

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tasks reflects the state's intention to increase responsiveness to radicalization and violent extremism across all sectors in Nordic welfare states (Johansen, 2018).

Despite the rapid expansion of Nordic PRVE policy and practice during the last decade, a noticeable lack of scientific knowledge exists about the effects of the measures being employed, as well as the wider societal ramifications of the initiatives. The emergence of PRVE has meant that security policies increasingly influence policy areas that were previously outside national security concerns (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). While Nordic welfare states have traditionally combined care and control in their governance of citizens (Smith & Ugelvik, 2017), PRVE represents a relatively new element in this dualistic approach (Johansen et al., 2021). Scholars have argued that PRVE involves the securitization of welfare state domains such as education and the social services alongside the “welfarization of security” (Mattsson, 2018; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020). As a result, PRVE is inherently hybrid in nature, involving both security logics and non-security logics (Clubb et al., 2021).

The increasingly cross-sectoral nature and broad societal spread of PRVE have created complex dilemmas for the actors tasked with this type of work. There are more options for how to act, but with increased contention over what logics, ends, and means should guide their efforts. Complex dilemmas are thus characteristic of professional practice in which practitioners navigate between different actions and interventions for which there are different outcomes and consequences. That said, public discussion about PRVE has been less intense in Nordic countries than in many other Western democracies (Kundnani, 2014; Sivenbring & Malmros, 2020). The Nordics differ from the UK, France, Germany, and other large European countries in two important respects: the number of domestic citizens linked to extremism and terrorism has been much lower and trust in government authorities is markedly higher, which is expected to increase support for counterterrorism measures (Solheim, 2019, p. 24). Both these factors may have contributed to there being less public discussion and scrutiny about the emergence and nature of PRVE.

This said, the dilemmas we attend to in this article are present in policy debates and studies about PRVE in the Nordics and beyond. The high visibility of the dilemmas, in particular in research on Nordic countries, may be related to the fact that cross-sectoral PRVE is still in a relatively “early phase” and evolving, which makes the region an interesting case

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to study (Wahlström, 2022). However, most research only scratches the surface of how PRVE practitioners reflect about and act upon these dilemmas. Moreover, research on extremism in Nordic countries is rarely undertaken specifically for the purpose of analyzing key dilemmas within PRVE. In response, this article argues for the need to synthesize previous research and original data on key dilemmas concerning PRVE work in the Nordics. Even as we take the Nordic countries as the starting point, we argue that these dilemmas are of a general character and thus transferable to other countries.

Against this background, we seek to answer two research questions. First, what key strategic dilemmas face PRVE practitioners in the Nordics? Second, how are these dilemmas deliberated upon by practitioners and policymakers? To answer these questions, we conducted a strategic review of literature that raises dilemmas in Nordic PRVE and analyzed empirical data from interviews with practitioners. In the article, we conceptualize and discuss three overarching dilemmas. These are the issues of *civil liberties versus security*, of *too soft versus too hard measures*, and of *intention versus outcome*. Knowledge about these dilemmas can function as “sensitizing tools” for practitioners and policymakers by highlighting the complexity and possible unintended consequences of PRVE (see Cherney & Hatley, 2017).

### **Strategic considerations, action and interaction**

In this article, we examine the PRVE field and its related dilemmas using a strategic interactionist approach (Jasper, 2006; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015). This lens is particularly useful for exploring strategic multi-actor interactions within complex societal fields, like that of PRVE. In line with this perspective, the central concept of *strategy* consists of efforts “to get others to do what you want” or to prevent them from doing what you do not want them to do (Jasper, 2006, p. 5). This implies that strategy is manifested in the interaction between different actors. A strategic actor has goals and employs means to attain them, while usually also recognizing that other actors may put up some form of resistance and have their own goals and means (Jasper, 2006). In relation to PRVE work, it becomes clear how different actors cooperate with, constrain, or are in conflict with each other, and that the external

constraints experienced by one actor often result from the strategic actions of others who have different goals and interests (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015).

Multiple studies on PRVE have highlighted how policies and local conditions steer state, civil society and private efforts to prevent specific actions from happening, and to encourage people to do (or refrain from doing) certain things (Ellefsen & Sjøen, 2023; Jore, 2020; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2022). The translation of national PRVE policy into local practice clearly involves both strategic *considerations*, strategic *action* and *interaction* among several actors, which produces a number of strategic *dilemmas* for those involved.

In multi-actor PRVE, planning and coordination is necessary and involves *strategic considerations*. The actors involved are often guided and influenced by different institutional logics, including what their societal functions are, what interests and values they have, and by what authority these logics are held in society (Solhjell et al., 2022). When representatives of different public agencies come together to decide what action to take in relation to an individual or group of people, the preferred option may reflect a certain professional norm, value or duty (Haugstvedt, 2021). Thus, some actors might try to convince or pressure others that their aims are the same, or that certain approaches are more appropriate than others. If actors disagree on these matters, decisions can be hard to reach. It usually happens, however, that some actors have a more prominent role than others, which gives them greater influence in the decision-making process (Bourdieu, 1996). In the PRVE arena, the norms, interests and values connected to a security-oriented logic often dominate (Mattsson, 2018), potentially giving the police and secret services primacy over other professions in multi-disciplinary collaboration and decision-making processes (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016).

Organizations and agencies tasked to carry out PRVE initiate *strategic action* as part of their missions (Jasper, 2006, p. 16). During interventions directed at a target person, these actors will often have a plan, and expectations about how the target will react to it – this is a core feature of strategic action. This does not mean that strategic action is necessarily fully conscious, but tacit or implicit strategies are more commonly found among individual actors than in agencies and other collectives, which often have explicit strategies (Jasper, 2006, p. 5). The main actors in Nordic PRVE, such as the municipal agencies, including, but not limited to health care workers, educators, social workers, the police and the security services, are

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influenced by the different national and local policy documents that steer their decisions and actions, but local actors nonetheless exercise a great deal of discretion and creativity when implementing these policies locally (Haugstvedt, 2021; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020a; Malmros, 2021; Mattsson, 2018; Sjøen, 2020). Organizational cultures or daily routines may take certain ways of acting and making decisions for granted, while other approaches need to be extensively discussed and prepared. Strategic action may thus differ along a continuum, from a high degree of imagination and creativity at one end of the spectrum, to more routine responses at the other.

Actors tasked to do PRVE frequently engage in *strategic interactions* because much of their work is about anticipating actions and deciding on steps that could be taken to influence other actors and future events (Malmros, 2021). Most strategic interaction involves a range of actors, such as targets, partners, supporters, opponents, and spectators (Jasper, 2006, p. 6). Hence, during strategic interaction, actors come up against others who regard them strategically and engage in actions in relation or response to each other through, for example, resistance or cooperation (Jasper, 2006, p. 6). The interaction among those who develop and deploy PRVE measures and between these actors and their targets can be cooperative and conflictual at the same time, with the nature of interaction changing over time. This means that a strategic interactionist approach to PRVE focuses on streams of interaction between the different actors involved in PRVE work, including their targets, and on how this interplay develops and produces changing outcomes over time (Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022).

In PRVE work, the interactive and often unforeseeable dynamics within and between these different types of actors, both those who develop and deploy PRVE measures and those who are targeted, are what create many of the *strategic dilemmas* and pitfalls existing within this field. Actors face difficult choices between several options for how to act. A trade-off is often necessary, with the actor forced to choose between different approaches, thereby sacrificing one consideration or interest for the sake of another. For the actor facing the dilemma, one of the available options for strategic action may, for example, be perceived as being more cost-effective, but less attractive in terms of professional ethics (Lindekilde, 2012b). Strategic dilemmas inevitably involve this type of trade-off, and which course of action appears the most attractive alternative will depend on whether the actor is primarily

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guided by considerations to do with pedagogy, social justice, security or other areas of concern.

In this article, we do not provide prescriptive advice on how PRVE actors should act when faced with the strategic dilemmas we outline. Our aim is, rather, to identify and describe key dilemmas that feature in PRVE practice and to use empirical data to further explicate how practitioners reflect and act upon them. By doing so, we demonstrate the complex and unpredictable nature of PRVE work. We also contribute to the literature on preventing radicalization and violent extremism by conceptualizing key dilemmas that apply to PRVE in the Nordic countries and internationally.

### **Dilemmas in PRVE literature**

Based on a synthesis of existing literature, we identify three core dilemmas that practitioners and policymakers face, all of which are important in the wider public debate about PRVE and its ramifications. In this section, we introduce these dilemmas by drawing mainly on Nordic research. The dilemmas concern core features of PRVE work, namely the trade-offs between *security* and *civil liberties*, the balancing of *soft* and *hard measures*, and the deradicalizing *intentions* of PRVE work versus its unpredictable *outcomes*.

In the Nordics, counterterrorism measures have traditionally been perceived as involving a trade-off between security and liberty, which means that, in order to achieve enhanced security, certain civil liberties had to be sacrificed, and this was viewed as highly controversial (Husabø, 2021). However, the dilemma inherent in this trade-off has been given less attention with the emergence of PRVE as a new stage in counterterrorism (Jore, 2012). In Norway, for example, the narrative justifying PRVE has presented it as being a continuation of – and in line with – the core attributes of the Norwegian welfare state model: PRVE has become integrated into the public services and thus does not involve only the police and security agencies. As a result, there has been limited public discussion about this type of trade-off in Norwegian PRVE (Jore, 2020), a tendency seemingly also observable in other Nordic countries.

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This said, civil servants responsible for preparing and implementing security-oriented policy decided by politicians also find it challenging to handle the trade-off between security and civil liberties (Sivenbring & Malmros, 2020). The emergence of PRVE has led to a situation in which the distinction between social, educational and security policies is increasingly blurred (Mattsson, 2018). Civil servants sometimes face a difficult strategic dilemma, torn between providing protection and adequate security for the population through counterterrorism and PRVE, and striving to maintain legitimacy by not overriding individual rights, such as freedom of expression, religion, mobility, and assembly, which are fundamental to any liberal democracy (Finch et al., 2019). Perceptions about how to balance this trade-off depend on the actors' positions and policy areas (Christensen et al., 2019). For instance, requiring social workers to also engage in anti-radicalization runs the risk of pushing social work towards being a "policing profession" that exercises social control and threatens "social workers' principles of social justice and human rights" (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Similarly, school staff struggle with dilemmas arising from the tension between security and safeguarding (Mattsson, 2018). Throughout much of Europe, there are contradictory demands placed on school staff, expecting them to build social cohesion and resilience among pupils while at the same time requiring them to employ a logic of suspicion in spotting future terrorists (Ragazzi, 2018). The idea that teachers and educational settings should be used to identify and monitor potential extremists threatens to damage the trust and respect that a healthy teacher-student relationship relies on, and to violate the democratic rights of students to think and speak freely in these institutional settings (Sivenbring, 2019). This trade-off between democratic rights and security-driven monitoring leads to the PRVE practitioners' dilemma when they have to walk the fine line between "mind policing" and the prevention of potential terror attacks (Johansen, 2020, p. 482).

A second set of dilemmas arise from the tension in PRVE work between measures that are too soft and those that are too hard. Thus, tightening legislation and criminalizing ever more behaviors and speech acts might on the one hand provide greater powers to intervene, but on the other, might leave little room for local authorities to maneuver and respond without resorting to coercive measures (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Shack, 2016). The criminalization of certain acts and emphasis on proactive intelligence-led policing has led to a corresponding

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increase in reactive police interventions, and more people being channeled into the criminal justice system and being punished (Ellefsen, 2020a). This development in PRVE policing means that increased proactive intelligence-led police work may produce more coercive reactions, rather than “soft” sanctions (Lid & Heierstad, 2019).

The third type of dilemma relates to the disconnect between intentions and outcomes, including the underlying risk that PRVE efforts will have unwanted consequences. There are several challenges connected with the lack of knowledge about whether or not the PRVE measures employed actually work, and whether aspects of them “may in fact create counterproductive side-effects” (Hemmingsen, 2015, p. 36). There are many reasons why policies pursued with the aim of protecting the citizens of democratic countries might end up defeating that purpose (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016; Lindekilde, 2012a). The factors that lead people to engage in political violence are so many and so complex that, while interventions to disengage someone from violent extremism may succeed in some cases, they may easily lead to intensified extremist engagement in others (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016). In Denmark, for instance, the tension between intended and unintended consequences has figured prominently in the discussions surrounding the outreach and awareness programs that are being implemented to prevent radicalization and extremism (Lindekilde, 2012a). Although they are deployed to ensure safety and trust, studies show how they can at the same time have the unintended consequence of contributing to a society of mistrust, in which there may be more radicalization (Andersen & Moe, 2015). In this way, counterterrorism is associated with the possibility that security efforts might end up undermining the anticipated security gains (Field, 2017).

As seen in the examples above, many dilemmas and trade-offs can be related to the question of proportionality and the societal ramifications of PRVE efforts: “at what costs should attempts be made to prevent radicalization and extremism” and what “strange bedfellows are societies willing to risk ending up with” by choosing to impose extensive PRVE efforts (Hemmingsen, 2015, p. 36)? While our examination of dilemmas involves an emphasis on the challenging and disputed aspects of PRVE, this does not involve a normative take on how PRVE should be conducted. In this article, we examine the nature of these

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dilemmas with an analytical intent to facilitate reflexivity and increase awareness of the potential ramifications of PRVE.

### Methods and data

The authors have conducted several studies about PRVE in Norway, Sweden, and the UK. These range from theoretical contributions (Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022; Ellefsen & Sjøen, 2023) and policy studies (Sjøen & Mattsson, 2022), to analyzing actors involved in PRVE work, whether local practitioners (Ellefsen, 2020a; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020b; Sjøen, 2020), targets of PRVE measures (Ellefsen, 2022; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020a) or other stakeholders (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). A recurring theme in these studies is how the actors we interviewed raised different sets of difficult dilemmas that affected their PRVE work or views on it. The encounter with these different types of dilemmas was the starting point for this article.

Next, we did a strategic review of the literature on Nordic PRVE aimed at identifying research that raised or deliberated dilemmas in PRVE as a field of policy and practice. Of the studies we reviewed, few explicitly explored dilemmas, but dilemmas were presented or implied in their presentation of results and discussions. The review resulted in the outlining of three recurring general themes: *liberty versus security*, *soft versus hard measures*, and *intention versus outcome*. These themes corresponded with our own observations of and interviews with actors involved in PRVE.

Based on these three themes, each author revisited empirical data from their former research projects for a deductive re-analysis of qualitative interviews with practitioners working in PRVE in Norway and Sweden. This primarily involved municipal coordinators against violent extremism and municipal coordination of local crime prevention measures, police, social workers and teachers. All data used in this article thus originates from our previous research (Norwegian Research Council, project no. 259541; The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, project no. 2016-489; Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, project no. 2016-00925; Nordic Research Council for Criminology, grant

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no. 20180021; Norwegian Centre for Research Data, project no. 594686).<sup>2</sup> The three general themes were used as a basis to categorize how practitioners considered and acted upon these dilemmas, through a thematic analysis of our own data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). All quotations used in this study were selected on the basis of our re-analysis of data and illustrate important aspects of the three dilemmas outlined above. In the few cases where we used quotations from our published work, the publication is noted.

In sum, the analytical process allowed us to move from our initial empirical “hunches” (originating from our former studies) to a broad, research-based typology (based on the literature review), and back to practice-oriented reasoning and analysis of the three themes (based on thematic analysis of data). This design allows us to explicate the dilemmas in-depth and to outline how they play out and are negotiated by those involved in PRVE work.

### Three dilemmas in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism

In this section we examine in greater depth each of the three *strategic dilemmas* described above. We present empirical examples and discuss how the dilemmas manifest in real life situations, pointing out the *strategic considerations, actions and interactions* that characterize them, as well as the potential implications of prioritizing or choosing certain pathways or approaches over others.

#### *PRVE actors torn between civil liberties and security*

The first strategic dilemma relates to the way PRVE policies and practice confront actors with a tension between civil liberties and security. Although this tension can be characterized as a key feature of contemporary “risk society”, the contradiction between ensuring individuals’ civil rights, liberties and freedoms on the one hand, and countering security threats on the other, is arguably a source of several PRVE dilemmas. Civil liberties are considered human or moral rights that are universal, but maintaining them is relational,

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<sup>2</sup> For details on the data, methods and ethics for each of the projects covering Norway and Sweden, see Sjøen (2019, p. 165); Sjøen & Mattsson (2020, p. 224); Ellefsen (2020a, p. 5); Jämte & Ellefsen (2020b, p.199); Jämte & Wennerhag (2019, p. 13).

depending on social capital and trust (Paxton, 2002). Security on the other hand, is a protective response when societal trust is lacking (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

The tension between civil liberties and security comes to the fore in the array of strategic considerations experienced by many PRVE actors, such as social workers, school staff and municipal PRVE coordinators (Lindekilde, 2012a). They need to be particularly sensitive to how the tension between safeguarding civil liberties and providing security may impact their efforts to help vulnerable clients. Safeguarding clients, by which is meant the protection of clients' well-being and dignity, is an integral part of professional frontline practice, and is also one of the primary arguments for ensuring liberties in the Nordic welfare states (Haugstvedt, 2021; Sjøen, 2020). In our work, safeguarding has found recent traction as the locus of preventing violent extremism among PRVE workers, as is explained in this statement by a female educator in Norway:

As a teacher, you have to see how you can help your students deal with the underlying causes [of radicalization]: For instance, by preventing bullying or other factors. It is vital that we give support to students who are experiencing difficulties in their lives. (Sjøen & Mattsson 2020, p. 229)

However, as our analysis shows, when securitization permeates new areas in society, PRVE actors also describe themselves as walking a precarious tightrope between considering clients as subjects in need of support and considering them as potential threats. Although there need not be any contradiction between thinking of subjects simultaneously as both vulnerable and a threat, this dilemma of strategic interaction manifests itself through a potential reconsideration whereby interpersonal trust in PRVE work risks gradually being replaced by mistrust. Trust and mistrust are interactionally constructed, which was explained by a Norwegian police representative tasked with preventing youth from engaging with violent extremism:

We are constantly faced with the need to gain trust, while also, for lack of a better word, acting out measures that challenge the maintenance of trust. This is the core of

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all preventive work. [...] It is impossible to gain any standing with young people without developing mutual trust. But as we start the process of reporting concerns, we are also jeopardizing our relations, confidentially and perhaps their rights. Then we risk losing sight of them. [...] The problem with this, as I see it, is not finding extremists, but losing them.

This dilemma illustrates how psychosocial support, under the banner of preventing violent extremism, becomes mixed with expectations that suspicious clients should be surveilled and reported on to the relevant authorities.

For PRVE actors in education, and similar professions, such as social work and health care, disregarding confidentiality does not only risk breaking the legal and moral underpinnings of their professions, but also jeopardizes the unspoken social contract and relationship between professional and client (Haugstvedt, 2021; Sjøen, 2020). Inherent to this dilemma is the way clients themselves may adopt self-censoring habits for fear of being associated with terrorism, thus nullifying any strategic action by PRVE workers, such as outreach and engagement activities aimed at preventing violent extremism.

Our analysis indicates that the growing emphasis on security in Nordic PRVE can lead to a move towards a pre-crime logic (Ellefsen, 2020a; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020). Muslim minorities are often at the receiving end of such logic (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). This is apparent in the following quote from a social worker in Norway, who described the need to carefully observe a student undergoing a religious conversion to the Islamic faith:

When students change their apparel and behaviors in religious ways, you have to keep an eye on what is going on [...] These are situations where school and society have to be watchful (Sjøen, 2019, p. 169).

Linking religiosity to violent extremism in this manner brings out authoritarian elements in security governance, usually at the expense of civil liberties in social life. These authoritarian elements are not necessarily at play because PRVE actors are themselves

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mistrustful, but suspicion of potential Muslim extremists has underpinned much PRVE work and thinking (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020b, Kundnani, 2014; Sjøen, 2019).

As noted by Mattsson (2018), securitization threatens social relations between professionals, target audiences and other stakeholders. Moreover, PRVE measures can have a chilling effect on democratic participation, with citizens on the receiving end of security interventions tending to describe feelings of exclusion, discrimination and stigmatization (Chin, 2015; Mulinari, 2019). While security policies and practice may effectively target extremist milieus, they are sometimes apt to temporarily silence extreme language rather than actually preventing extreme behaviors (Ravndal, 2017). Security measures and priorities may thus provide a false sense of safety and protection (Jore, 2012). This is the paradoxical side of strategic security considerations: although intended to protect society, it may create both insecurity and false security (Sjøen, 2020).

In managing security, it is our understanding that PRVE actors are also faced with interactional dilemmas through cross-sectoral cooperation (Ellefsen & Sjøen, 2023). Similarly, Haugstvedt (2021) notes that PRVE workers may experience increased pressure to surveil their clients, sometimes at the expense of their professional ethics. This suggests the hegemony of security norms over civil liberty, and how the former may dominate by making certain courses of action the preferred ones. There are numerous situations where the hegemonic position of security considerations influences strategic actions and interaction across the PRVE field (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016).

To summarize, the nexus between liberty and security often means that PRVE actors have to negotiate the tension between safeguarding and surveilling their clients. On the one hand, the findings reported in this article show that the securitization of social domains may allow for the efficient mobilization of a wide range of preventive actors across society, but on the other, it may also close off several promising non-security avenues for preventing violent extremism. For instance, safeguarding civil liberties, which involves the whole range of local civil society engagement, including cultural exchanges, education and active citizenship may prove powerful bulwarks against extremism. As persuasively argued by Dalgaard-Nielsen (2016, p. 135), local trust-based preventive networks are probably “the least bad solution” to the complex problem of preventing violent extremism. However, the dilemma resulting from

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the tension between considerations regarding civil liberties versus security, suggests that, while preventing violent extremism through informal social ties has shown much promise in both research and practice, PRVE policies often tend to deal with the potential consequences of politically motivated violence through hard(er) security approaches (Sivenbring & Malmros, 2020; Sjøen & Mattson, 2022).

*The dilemma of too soft versus too hard measures*

The second strategic dilemma relates to the tension between choosing hard and coercive PRVE efforts versus softer, non-coercive measures. The dilemma is also made visible by the differing aims and mandates of PRVE actors, which lead them to choose different courses of strategic action, where one response may make other options harder or even impossible.

One example is to be seen in what has been referred to as the “proactive response dilemma” that faces liberal democracies (Rosendorff & Sandler, 2004). Both policymakers and frontline practitioners grapple with the risk of losing public confidence and support if the response to the perceived terrorist threat is thought to be too weak, while too strong a response risks alienating parts of the population if it is thought to undermine liberal democratic principles (Richards, 2012).

The dangers of relying too much on coercive responses to radicalization and violent extremism has, for example, been described by the former head of the Norwegian Police Security Service (PSS): “Severe penalties may, as I see it, be a dilemma in preventive work” (Aasland, 2019). The head explained that it is usually those who are closest to the radicalized individual who detect that this person is at risk, and that the goal of the PSS is, therefore, to reach these people proactively before any crime is committed, but reaching them becomes more difficult when the punishment is harsher. We find this dilemma featured in numerous ways in our data on PRVE.

However, even if the PSS states their goal is proactive prevention, their work involves strategic considerations and actions that may disrupt the soft proactive efforts of municipal actors outside the realms of criminal justice and national security. A Norwegian municipal

PRVE coordinator explained how the proactive actions of the PSS could rob municipal agencies of their opportunities to intervene early and non-coercively:

If the PSS discovered a 17-year-old entering an extreme jihadist milieu in the period when people were traveling... from the perspective of the PSS, it is important to initiate work around that boy. They do that following their own methods, and a part of those methods involves not approaching the boy or perhaps using the boy for monitoring the milieu, or using him as an informant. This is how intelligence services in all countries work, and these are acknowledged methods, and the tools they make use of to fulfill their mandate.

The PRVE coordinator further described how the employment of these strategic actions by the PSS prevents municipal agencies from initiating early efforts to help a person out of the extremist milieu, because intervention by them could disrupt the PSS's covert monitoring and intelligence gathering. Our analysis demonstrates how the local agencies' preventive work and mandate to access people as early as possible thus goes contrary to – and is made impossible by – the PSS approach. According to the PRVE coordinator, this demonstrates a “conflict of interests” between these different actors' strategic considerations that results from their mandates and leads them to choose diverging courses of strategic action. Inherent in the soft versus hard dilemma we have outlined in this example, is a trade off between the national security mandate of preventive intelligence-gathering through observing ongoing radicalization (without intervening), and the local authority's mandate to intervene preventatively to interrupt individual radicalization.

The tension between different approaches also manifests as a dilemma for both policymakers and society at large in strategic considerations and decisions about what action should be prioritized and allocated resources. During periods of intense challenges, such as the height of the departure of so-called foreign fighters to engage in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, policymakers are likely to prioritize the short-term efforts of the national security services (Lindekilde, 2012b). This may be at the expense of alternative initiatives.

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The ambivalent relationship between different PRVE responses is further demonstrated in our analysis by the way “tough” coercive measures may make it harder to succeed with softer proactive ones. The criminalization of ever more acts related to terrorist threats, and politicians who “talk tough” about tackling violent extremists, might deter some people from engaging with extremist milieus, but it may also limit the ability of local practitioners and agencies to tailor solutions to their own local conditions, and demotivate community members’ inclusionary work with vulnerable youth, raising the bar for when concerned peers or family members will act on their suspicions and contact the authorities for help in tackling radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen & Shack, 2016).

There are several scenarios in which the threat of more punitive measures may make it harder to try softer measures, or even make them impossible (Haugstvedt, 2021). Another example of this is the way increased criminalization of travel (and attempts to travel) to Syria and Iraq has involved greater threats of prosecution and punishment, which made it harder for civil servants to gain the trust of returnees, which was “crucial to their engagement in volunteer exit and disengagement programmes” (Hemmingsen, 2015, p. 38).

We also identify the soft versus hard dilemma in the undesirable consequences of increasing penalties and extending the powers of the police to intervene and prosecute earlier: it creates fear among family members and peers that are close to those who engage with extremist milieus (Awand & Guru, 2017; Muna, 2020). Our previous work has shown that the introduction of more coercive state sanctions, as has been seen in the Nordics for decades in relation to counterterrorism, can reduce the possibility of earlier and often more effective soft informal sanctions by family and peers (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022). The everyday efforts of ordinary citizens to prevent of radicalization may thus be hindered.

To sum up, our analysis makes evident that too much emphasis on hard or coercive measures may disrupt other potentially successful softer preventive efforts (see also Wolfowicz et al., 2022). In PRVE policy, this is an under-discussed area of unintended consequences of some PRVE approaches. The relationship between the intentions of PRVE set out in policy statements and the eventual consequences of PRVE actions are explored further in the next section.

*The dilemma of intentions versus outcome*

The third strategic dilemma concerns the intentions of PRVE work and its often unpredictable or unknown consequences. Research has provided little evidence to help gauge the actual effect of PRVE measures, and there is a lack of scientific evaluation of their intended and unintended consequences (Hardy, 2019; Pistone et al., 2019).

Despite these fundamental ambiguities, the way in which PRVE is depicted in government policy documents is often linear and simplistic (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020b; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2022). The disconnect between the complexity identified in a vast amount of research, and the tendency to simplify and generalize about such efforts at the policy level, creates dilemmas for the public servants tasked with preventing radicalization and extremism in local communities (Malmros, 2019).

Our analysis makes evident that the intention versus outcome dilemma makes many practitioners feel uncertain about how to strategically consider and carry out their PRVE mission, as they have very little established best practice to draw upon (see also Ponsota et al., 2018). This uncertainty increases because strategic actions and interactions in PRVE often produce several consequences simultaneously, some of them intended, while others might be both unintended and unwanted. The risks inherent in this tension were described by a local PRVE coordinator in Sweden:

A backfire, or risk [of PRVE], is that... if we start becoming unprofessional, being kind of careless, then we might contribute to increasing radicalization. If we, for example, begin to stigmatize Muslims as a group; if we start going after Muslims and start seeing potential extremists everywhere, then we are surely playing straight into the hands of recruiters. They will get an easy win.

Concern about outcomes that might go against the intentions of PRVE sometimes also feature in organizational policy. For instance, Salto in Norway, a crime prevention network of the municipality of Oslo, which has PRVE obligations, describes how an intervention “may work contrary to its intentions” and trigger further radicalization if the efforts are experienced

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by those targeted as “punishment, coercion, mistrust, abuse by the authorities or restrictions on freedom of expression or religion” (Salto, 2018, p. 12).

Research on the effects of PRVE on radical social movement organizations confirms the possible production of such negative results (della Porta, 2018; Wolfowicz et al., 2022). Our own study of the effects of publicly labeling certain activist organizations as “violent extremists”, shows how different radical groups were affected in different ways and that the labeling sometimes failed to deter the primary targets of PRVE, that is, the most militant and clandestine groups (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020a). Instead, the labeling risked producing so-called backfire effects (Lindekilde, 2014), for instance by creating an “aura of radicalness” that facilitated contact between radical groups and made the organizations more immediately attractive to activists seeking militant high-risk activism. Contrary to expectations, labeling organizations as “violent extremists” had the biggest demobilizing effect on radical activist organizations that mainly employed legal and non-violent forms of protest.

Our analysis shows how frontline practitioners often grapple with the intention versus outcome dilemma, as they are aware, or even anticipate that their strategic actions may also produce unpredictable or unwanted outcomes (see also Haugstvedt, 2021; Lindekilde, 2012a). A Norwegian PRVE coordinator describes the careful consideration between “acting or not acting”, in a context where outcomes are uncertain:

This is complicated work. We have seen cases where there are unintended consequences of what we have done. But this has to be weighed against the overall results, as in many child protection cases, which is a good example of the same challenge: One may employ intrusive efforts that have severe consequences for a family, but the overarching consideration nevertheless means one has to do it.

The analysis also illustrates how the risks associated with this dilemma grow greater because of the extra-local pressure on local frontline practitioners to act (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020b). This pressure stems from PRVE policies and guidelines, national and international risk assessments, as well as from political debate, and is a major influence on practitioners’ considerations, prioritizations and actions. For instance, frontline practitioners in Sweden

often experienced extra-local pressure to prioritize certain extremist groups or milieus (Islamist), even when other extremist milieus (far-right) were experienced as far more serious threats at the local level. These external pressures affect practitioners' strategic considerations and actions, and might lead them to respond in ways that are poorly considered or disproportionate. This is also described by a former police representative who had PRVE responsibilities in Norway:

If it turns out that we were wrong, it is better to think wrongly than not do anything. Because if you don't do anything, you may be affected by the obligation to avert severe actions. It is better to have gone a bit too far than to have done nothing if others are affected by detrimental [extremist] acts.

The pressure and responsibility placed on practitioners also trigger a different set of strategic considerations: the potential repercussions for themselves if the reported or observed risk turns into criminal or violent action (Sjøen, 2020). If a violent act eventually takes place, the responsibility they have because of the position they hold will mean their efforts to prevent the attack come under scrutiny. This "personal-level risk" for frontline practitioners in PRVE should be remembered, because it is another pressure that might influence their strategic considerations about when, at what level of concern, and how often they should initiate a response. A local authority PRVE coordinator in Norway described how this pressure may manifest as follows:

Just think of the radicalization coordinators [in the police] that were given the job of solving all of these challenges on behalf of everyone, both on behalf of the police security service, and the local police. They felt strongly that they had to get as many cases in as possible, to know as much as possible about the cases of reported concern [about individuals] and to handle them. [...] One felt that we needed a joint effort to... save the country, almost.

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The quote refers to a period when there were particularly high levels of concern about Muslims traveling to Syria and Iraq. During such intense periods, the dilemma of intentions versus outcomes becomes particularly acute, as there is heightened pressure and a high level of uncertainty about the perceived threat being faced, which increases the risk of reacting too often or too much, to be “on the safe side”. Such overreaction is, at the same time, described by practitioners as a risk because it may trigger radicalization and produce unwanted consequences. The pressure on frontline practitioners is further intensified by the logic of preemption that characterizes the whole field of PRVE: the aim and task is to prevent acts and events from ever happening. However, attempts to foresee the future will always include a margin of error.

### Discussion and conclusion

We have explicated three key strategic dilemmas in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism that frontline practitioners and policymakers frequently come up against. The dilemmas also reflect larger issues that are of societal relevance and scholarly interest. By examining these dilemmas, we showed the tensions between concern for civil liberties and concern for security, unraveled the challenges of employing PRVE efforts that are either too hard or too soft, and pointed out the potential disconnect between the intentions behind these efforts and their often-unpredictable outcomes. These dilemmas thus provide an entry point into an investigation of core challenges for and societal implications of PRVE in the Nordics. The same dilemmas are, however, relevant far beyond Nordic countries (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016).

Attending to these dilemmas involves acknowledging the difficult considerations and challenges of PRVE as a high-profile field of policy and practice. Society’s fear of and emphasis on the risk of terror attacks, and the great attention given in the political and public world to preventing radicalization and violent extremism, make this field of governance particularly demanding for frontline practitioners (Ponsota et al., 2018). They operate under the conflicting pressures of potential moral outrage in wider society on the one hand, and of the risk of angering people in the target group on the other (Johansen, 2018). This

“responsibilization” (Garland, 1996) of frontline practitioners is a powerful force that impacts how they make strategic decisions in the face of all the dilemmas we have outlined.

The responsabilization of frontline PRVE practitioners may make them apt to prefer security-oriented responses. This is because these may ensure they do not become scapegoats in the case of a future terrorist attack. The responsabilization of frontline practitioners may also be enhanced or fostered by their personal feelings of uncertainty, and fear of being blamed for not having done enough if “the bomb goes off” (Thomas, 2017). Anxiety about being held responsible and therefore sanctioned, increases such responsabilization and stress on the personal level, and is likely to become a yet more important factor in periods when rising public and political attention is paid to the threat of terrorist attacks; this may make them choose hard and swift responses rather than softer longer-term ones (see also Braithwaite, 2013). External pressure to act may also lead to unreasonable responses with problematic side-effects (Chin, 2015).

For some practitioners, however, intentionally abstaining from intervention may also be an important preventive strategy, because refraining from taking further action may be a way to avoid repressing the target group and stirring their political emotions and violent reactions (Johansen, 2018). De-dramatizing situations or trying to calm people down and get a fair understanding of a problem has also been recognized as an important PRVE strategy (Johansen, 2018). External pressure on practitioners, however, makes it harder to maintain calm and abstain from intervention.

The responsabilization of frontline PRVE practitioners undoubtedly impacts what path of strategic action they choose. At the same time, the analysis and empirical examples above demonstrate that there is no single “right” answer to the strategic dilemmas we have examined. Even when actors are conscious of the dilemmas involved, the costs of taking one course of action rather than another are still not necessarily obvious. Actors may sometimes be able to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes or unwanted side-effects by addressing the dilemmas themselves, but equally, they may be unaware of the dilemmas facing them, because one approach has become routine and others are buried under layers of custom, thus appearing unavailable, even if this is not really the case (Jasper, 2006). Exploring the nature

of these strategic dilemmas thus involves raising reflexivity about them, and of the fact that sometimes PRVE can be done differently.

The dilemmas we have discussed can also be considered in future empirical research. For example, they can be utilized to explore and explain the different choices and non-choices of actors who face them, and to establish what social or organizational factors or logics that lead to one strategic choice rather than another (Jasper, 2006). How PRVE actors assess a certain dilemma and act in relation to it may differ according to their particular mandate, the means and resources at their disposal, as well as other factors. In collaborative PRVE interventions, the same dilemma can lead to very different opinions about the best way to act (Solhjell et al., 2022). One way forward for researchers is to observe real-life interactions or create scenarios where different actors collaborate and are required to make decisions together on what measures to employ, how and by whom, which is likely to raise tensions and disagreement. Scholars could also examine the motives or effects of particular choices on those facing a dilemma or inquire about how actors themselves are affected by the choice made, as well as how other actors react (Jasper, 2006).

Using strategic dilemmas as points of departure for future research enables us to better understand and explain why and how different actors relate to and negotiate these dilemmas in PRVE. Such an approach has explanatory potential to show how the strategic considerations and decision-making of actors are linked to their particular characteristics, the particular collaborative situation, the actors involved, as well as different types of external pressures. This will help unravel the ways in which actors reflect on PRVE and act differently even when faced with the same dilemmas.

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