

## **Report on focus groups with practitioners about the Extreme Dialogue materials - Discussion of the Daniel videos**

The Daniel video (as the other ED videos) were recognized as **being high quality** both technically with regard to the video production and content wise, in terms of the topics addressed , especially in the resource videos (not so much in the main video).

It was also recognized that the videos were overall not too much focused on political issues in the narrow sense – and rather **followed a narrative method** of story-telling, based on an interview modus of narrative questioning. This is quite conducive considering that German prevent approaches against rightwing extremism, at least until some time ago, used to be focused too much on historical, civic and politics issue. They followed more instructional and educational methods and less open-process, narrative and experiential learning strategies – which, however, have proven to be the way to go in order to work with disenfranchised, disenchanting and hard-to-engage young people.

It was concluded that there is something inherently preventive/deradicalising (and therapeutic) in providing a safe space for narrative exploration and exchange (not only for discussing opinions and historical information). While such narrative approaches generally take more time and aren't very easily captured by media, it is possible even for short videos to embark on narrative modes of representation – and strive for achieving a **high degree of narrativity** in the strictly defined narratological sense. The Daniel video does have this narrativity.

However, it was also remarked that with the ED videos this narrative approach could have been employed **even more and more in-depth** – and that narrativity in the strict sense could have influenced more the editing of the films. In particular, this could have been done in the main film which was felt by some to be too sensational and to lack substance and sober presentation.

For instance, **Daniel's family history** was pictured in the appropriate openness and gravity, also with reference to the grim gender and masculinity based violence and denigration committed by Daniel's stepfather. Yet, these issues come across pretty **sensational and shortened/ decontextualized**. The tool could have profited from a less emotional and sensational mode which in turn would have focused more on **further narrative exploration** of Daniel's parents as persons with their own history and life world context. Such contextualization would have increased the video's capacity to build and support resilience within the wider audience.

For instance, the fact is mentioned that **Daniel's mother** had children with several men, so that Daniel has brothers and sisters from "six dads". What is not depicted at all, however, was the character and history of the mother and the question of what might have possibly caused her to live her life as she did and chose her partners as she did – and to put up with violence and denigration. In fact, it seems that no other fact of information is conveyed about the mother than having kids with different men and being beaten by Daniel's stepfather "right in front of him (Daniel)". This and similar issues were felt to be dealt with in a **narrower than necessary** way – which some felt was due to sensationalizing editing.

As good practice in respect to narrativity reference was made to the EDNA tool ([derad-narratives.eu](http://derad-narratives.eu)) which was created by CI members. EDNA sticks to audios exclusively and works with **state-of-the-art biographical-narrative interviews** and reconstructive analysis for the editing of the materials. It aims at a maximum of narrative exploration of as many narrative issues as are presented or alluded to by the interviewees. This entails an entirely different mode of questioning and editing.

---

It was felt to be a great potential of the ED videos and the Daniel video in particular, that it inherently stresses the **European and global dimension** of violent extremism, bringing products from different Member States and cultural areas together. This was seen as a great chance to facilitate the expression of different cultural

styles of ED narratives – and to provide a diverse collection of different genres of media narrative about violent extremism, victimization and prevention. Such portrayal of a **European diversity of narrative genres** seems to be a very worthwhile objective, all the more so since some of these genres could differ significantly from the North-American/ Anglo-Saxon style as represented by the Daniel video (and thus also be less “sensational”).

However, given the videos which are on the ED site now, a particular risk was seen in case the ED project would be further extended and “rolled out” into different countries. In this case it seemed likely that, indeed, relevant interviewees would be found and interviewed in these different countries and videos edited – but the style of the videos would probably stay the same across the board. Hence, in this case no diversity of different cultural styles of narratives about violent extremism, victimization and prevention would emanate from the project. Rather, as one person put it, some **“video aesthetic imperialism”** seems likely to involuntarily play itself out and impose the same style onto all interviews/ videos.

On a practical level, a **serious drawback is seen in the lack of German voiceover** (since only subtitles are given). The young people of concern who should be worked with via the ED video tool not only don’t speak much foreign languages but also often don’t like or aren’t capable of reading very fast. There was some incredulity about how this could have been overlooked in a media-pedagogical project of this magnitude – and how little first-line knowledge there seems to have been about the young EU end-users which the ED tool is designed for.

---

Following from this there was some discussion about the cultural differences between **Germany/ Continental Europe** and the **Anglo-Saxon/ North American** cultural sphere in terms of media work and pedagogy – and about the resulting sensitivities. Such particular sensitivities would have to be taken into account when producing a video with German interviewees for German audiences – especially if hard to reach young people are at stake.

As one particular difference between Germany and the Anglo-Saxon/ North American cultural sphere it was mentioned that the discourse and **narrative pattern on confession and redemption** are much less pronounced and available in Germany than in North America. However, the editing and narrative pattern of the Daniel video seems to owe much to this inherently Anglo-Saxon or North-American pattern of confession and redemption. This not only pertains to the “repentant sinner” pattern but also to the “heroic victim”. These and similar other patterns entail a quite emphatic mode of video representation which, attendants thought, is not likely to go down well with young people, at least not in Germany.

Especially unappealing the videos would probably be for the **difficult to engage young people** – who, however, need to be of our greatest concern. Rather, the feeling among some attendants was that these young people, especially if they are radicalized, would likely react cynical about narrative patterns of ‘confession and redemption’ or heroic victimhood – as they tend to be cynical about emotional, sensational, and film industry style productions in general, since they associate these with a lack of credibility and integrity.

Hence, disenfranchised and hard to reach young people may well shrug off and deride the videos/ interviewees on this and other grounds – and, even more, be highly suspicious about both the interviewees and the makers of ED (as well as any organization using the tool). This suspicion would tend to hold that the videos are all fake/ contrived and the makers were bribed and **selling out to “the system” and “the elites”**, for instance by employing a Hollywood style marketing of “their prevent circus” and play up to Google’s, YouTube’s etc. corporate image strategies.

Moreover, not only is the narrative pattern of ‘confession and redemption’ less familiar and has less captivating impact in Germany and Europe (esp. Central and Eastern EU), **even the so-called “former”** as particular type of person is less known and generally less appreciated in German and other MS’ audiences. Formers, i.e. persons previously engaged in violent extremism, as far as they are known and worked with at all in German awareness raising and

prevention work, do not enjoy the same credibility and appreciation as in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries. Rather they tend to be looked at with some degree of suspicion - and stigmatization.

This is also the reason for the fact that almost all German exit facilitation practitioners - as well as the Federal Association of Exit Workers (BAG Ausstieg zum Einstieg) which has recently been inaugurated in 2015 following a difficult process of 6 years of preparation and moderation - regards it as an issue of **professional ethics to not encourage their clients to become "formers"**, go public with their exit from violent extremism - and then work in prevention in this role. Also the Association members don't emphasize working with formers in general and tend to not do so, unless quite specific conditions are in place. (The NGO Exit Germany seems to be the only organization which emphasizes working with formers and is increasingly isolated with this position among colleagues in Germany.)

Attendants also resumed that they don't think that there is a Daniel kind of person around in Germany and that such person was likely to express himself like Daniel did. People who have exited from right-wing extremism tend to not be such **text-book like examples of an entirely turned around person**. They usually present different shades of grey on the scale from extremism to a human rights based, democratic orientation. To interview and portray such shades of grey would require a different approach of editing and a different style of video editing entirely. This is a difficult task but would contribute to the diversity of narrative styles which Europe may and should stand for.

In this context, the focus group attendants found it unfortunate that the project **did not produce a German and Hungarian "former" video** which could have been an opportunity to create a German and a Hungarian style/ genre of narrative expression about violent extremism (either religiously based extremism or right-wing extremism). Furthermore, it was found unfortunate that as a German "survivor/ victim" a Syrian activist and refugee is presented, which is quite worthwhile and even laudable in itself, but does not pertain to **Germany and victimization through violent extremism in Germany**.

---

Some attendant suggested that the **combination of perpetrators and victims** (survivors) is an inherent problem of the ED project which raises serious questions. This combination was felt to come from ED's dedication to conventional film aesthetic patterns which, it was felt, sometimes borders sensationalism and is inherently problematic. One attendant said that the "looking for excuses in the personal history" comes across as saying "you can eventually get away with anything". While others didn't think so, there was a general agreement that the focus on the perpetrator's victim aspects in the entire **absences of specific reference to his victims** is problematic (there is no reference to any of Daniel's victims let alone an account on them).

It was also suggested that even if the perpetrator and victim aspects in each of the interviewees were more integrated, the basic binary **logic of focusing on perpetrators and victims** was problematic in itself. It portrays a too small and restricted a view on extremism - and will therefore not be very effective even in educational respect and in view of creating societal resilience. One attendant made the point that arranging an initiative in an **strictly dual/ binary structure** around perpetrators and victims basically equals polarization - and thus involuntarily repeats the structure of violent extremism itself (even if, as was conceded, there is the effort to at least partly cross-over the binary by making the victimization aspects in the perpetrators' life history more visible).

Here it was mentioned that some more and **different kinds of interviewees**/ stakeholders could and should have been included in the project in order to render a more holistic and complete picture of violent extremism, exit facilitation and prevention to the audience - and thus raise awareness and resilience in a truly sustainable way. For instance, including **practitioners of prevent and derad work** may have had a quite favorable effect (as the EDNA tool does). Since practitioners and other stakeholders cannot only speak about what extremism is but how to go about it in terms of practical interventions which is arguably the most important aspect if one thinks of creating societal resilience. This might be the most

important issue if one also aims at building resilient societies and supporting sustainable awareness raising. A society that has a good grasp of what it takes to facilitate effective exit and re-integration work would be decidedly more aware and resilient.

----

Aside of the questionable setup of focusing on (polarizing) the binary opposition of perpetrators and victims, and even more problematic than this was considered the emphasis on the type of brutal violent perpetrator. **Right-wing extremism has changed much** in appearance and political strategy already ten years ago in Germany and other countries. It has much tuned down and softened its approach in many ways. As a consequence right-wing extremism has gained even more support from so-called mainstream voters, who always had encompassed a much bigger quantity of anti-democratic citizens than voting turnouts ever showed (cf. Brähler/ Decker).

Hence, given the complex challenges through present day right-wing extremism, the **type of brutal violent perpetrator seems somewhat outdated or ill-fitted**. In any event, it is only little suited to facilitate awareness and resilience against modern forms of extremism. These are nevertheless as serious, given their firm roots in affects and ideologies of “group-focused enmity” (cf. Brähler/ Decker) – and are in fact even more serious in view of how much they appeal to the mainstream and thus endanger liberal and human-rights based society. Hence, the feeling among focus group attendants was that, especially when working with videos which implicitly are meant to also support widespread awareness raising, quite different kinds of film subjects and topic should have been chosen.