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SMIDGE

Social Media Narratives : Addressing Extremism in Middle Age

D6.3 Webinar Report

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Abstract	This report presents a synthesis of insights and discussions from four webinars conducted under Task 6.4 of the SMIDGE Project, each dedicated to examining extremist narratives and their impact on adults aged 45–65. The webinars—covering topics such as far-right and religious radicalization, digital gaming spaces, and disinformation—brought together experts from journalism, academia, and civil society to explore how ideology, conspiracy theories, and manipulated information combine to radicalize middle-aged individuals. Presenters emphasized the role of digital platforms and algorithmic systems in amplifying harmful content, while also highlighting opportunities for resilience via robust digital-literacy programs and more accountable media practices. They further stressed that older adults often face unique vulnerabilities online, yet possess the life experience to serve as potential bulwarks against extremism if provided adequate support. Building on region-specific examples—particularly in Southeastern Europe—the webinars traced how low institutional trust, weak governance, and polarized media ecosystems foster public receptiveness to inflammatory messaging and increases vulnerability.
Key Words	Disinformation, Digital Literacy, Media Accountability, Radicalization, Conspiracy Theories

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Executive Summary

This report presents the outcomes and insights from four webinars conducted within the Work Package 6, as part of Task 6.4 within the SMIDGE Project, which is dedicated to examining and countering extremist narratives. Each webinar convened researchers, journalists, policy experts, and civil society representatives to explore how particular types of extremism—from far-right to religious—develop and gain traction, as well as how different regional contexts shape the spread of radical beliefs. While collectively focusing on how extremist messages resonate with middle-aged audiences, each session tackled distinct thematic or geographic dimensions of the broader phenomenon.

Altogether, the four webinars featured 16 speakers in total (4, 5, 3, and 4 speakers across the respective events). Over the course of the project, the sessions were held from March 2024 to January 2025, and each attracted a robust mix of participants. Webinars were recorded and made publicly available, garnering approximately 500 views on YouTube and reaching 3,000 impressions on LinkedIn, among others. To further expand the audience and sustain impact, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) will organize a targeted boost campaign on social media platforms, hoping to maximize outreach and engage older demographic groups who might be either susceptible to extremist messaging or strategically positioned to counter it.

Overview of the Four Webinars:

Understanding Far-Right Extremism (March 29, 2024). Held as the inaugural session of the series, this webinar featured **4 speakers** specializing in radicalization studies, genocide research, conspiracy theory analysis, and peace and security policy. The conversation centered on the growing influence of far-right political parties and movements across Europe and the Western Balkans. Speakers highlighted how economic anxiety, demographic shifts, anti-immigrant sentiment, and political disillusionment have coalesced into potent far-right messaging. They noted that while younger people often appear in headline-grabbing extremist actions, middle-aged and older cohorts possess significant economic and social capital, which can be wielded to shape political outcomes or legitimize reactionary platforms. Panelists also underscored the importance of media environments—particularly the role of sensationalist tabloids and digitally-native propaganda outlets that prime audiences for xenophobic discourse. The event drew a geographically diverse audience of practitioners, academics, and journalists, with engaged questions touching on how to best challenge xenophobic dog whistles and how to strengthen inclusive civic identities.

Exploring Religious Radicalization Among Middle-Aged Individuals (June 28, 2024). The second webinar hosted **5 speakers**, bringing together sociologists, theologians, and fact-checkers with deep expertise on how religious identities, conspiracy theories, and extremist propaganda intertwine. While acknowledging that religion itself need not engender violence, panelists emphasized that certain extremist groups skillfully weaponize religious symbols and narratives to galvanize middle-aged followers. They provided examples of how personal grievances ranging from family or financial stress to existential fears—can be reframed by extremist clerics or online preachers as spiritual quests, propelling individuals down radical pathways. Case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, and other European contexts illustrated how poorly regulated mosques, church-based gatherings, or online sermon platforms become incubators for black-and-white “us versus them” worldviews. In the Q&A portion, participants asked how to respond to these manipulative uses of scripture and religious tradition. Panelists recommended localized interventions—such as forging relationships with credible

faith leaders and introducing interfaith civic projects—that resonate strongly with middle-aged faithful who seek purpose and moral clarity.

Extremist Narratives in Play: Gaming and Digital Spaces as Radicalization Arenas (November 27, 2024). Shifting focus to the intersection of technology and radical propaganda, the third event featured **3 experts** examining the ways extremist recruiters exploit online gaming communities. The speakers explained how multi-player gaming platforms, particularly those equipped with voice chat, user-generated content, or private messaging systems—serve as incubators for extremist memes and conspiratorial messages. Investigations reveal that some middle-aged gamers not only interact with these extremist-themed servers but also become susceptible to radical "friendly" acquaintances who exploit emotional connections built over shared gaming interests. The panelists cited disturbing evidence of curated "alt-right" infiltration of gaming servers, along with recruitment drives that mobilize older adults disillusioned by mainstream politics. Though such phenomena were once dismissed as fringe, participants agreed on the rising risk, especially amid pandemic-era surges in online leisure time. Calls to action included improved moderation by gaming companies, expanded digital literacy tailored for older adults, and multi-stakeholder cooperation to track extremist discourse within less supervised online spaces.

The Nexus Between Disinformation, Radicalization, and Violent Extremism (January 28, 2025) . In the concluding webinar, **4 journalists and academics** scrutinized how maliciously spread misinformation—whether in the form of viral conspiracy theories, "fake news" links, or deepfake videos—shapes radical mindsets. This session detailed how any protracted public crisis, from electoral turmoil to geopolitical conflict, opens the door for extremist actors to fill informational voids with sensational narratives. The speakers linked the rise of domestic extremist factions, such as anti-vaccine militias in certain parts of Europe, to a broader network of global conspiratorial rhetoric, some of which is covertly financed or promoted by foreign state actors. In focusing on the age question, panelists noted that middle-aged users often harbor an inherent cynicism toward official sources, making them more inclined to accept plausible sounding but misleading materials. The proposed countermeasures revolved around stronger "early-warning" systems that rapidly flag the spread of conspiratorial posts, cross-sector initiatives to rebuild institutional trust, and direct engagement with individuals who show partial inclinations toward extremist interpretations.

Introduction

As part of the SMIDGE Project's efforts to examine and address extremist narratives targeting adults aged 45–65, four webinars were organized under Task 6.4: Production of Webinars. The overarching aim of these sessions was to delve into the core elements of far-right, anti-vaccine, and religious extremist rhetoric and to explore how such narratives penetrate and shape political discourses across different regions of Europe. Consistent with the project's approach to mitigating extremism, the webinars were intended to deconstruct harmful messaging, thereby diminishing its appeal and recruitment potential among the middle-aged demographic.

Each webinar featured a range of experts—from researchers and journalists to civil society representatives—who offered diverse perspectives on both thematic and region-specific variations of extremism. Two events focused on major categories of extremist narratives, while the other two investigated how these narratives manifest geographical contexts, ensuring the discussions were rooted in real-life experiences. In total, four webinars took place between March 2024 and January 2025.

Beyond facilitating immediate dialogue and cross-fertilization of ideas, the webinars are a central element of the SMIDGE Project's knowledge management strategy. Recorded in full and distributed online, these sessions are easily accessible via the project's website and social media platforms, ensuring their long-term utility for a wide audience. Building on stakeholder engagement from Work Package 5 and coordination with consortium partners, each webinar drew participants from across the SMIDGE focus countries.

The report summarizes the organization, content, and outcomes of each webinar, illustrating key extremist narratives and their recruitment potential among middle-aged individuals. Following an overview of each session's thematic focus, speaker lineup, and main discussion points, the report highlights common patterns that emerged across the different webinars, including how digital platforms and misinformation can facilitate extremist messaging. Attention is also given to potential policy or educational interventions that may be considered in building resilience towards extremist narratives offline and online. This report is organized into four key thematic sections and a conclusion.

The first section, **Understanding Far-Right Extremism**, explores the socio-economic and structural factors that fuel far-right ideologies, the role of conspiracy theories in mobilizing individuals, and the impact of transnational networks in spreading far-right narratives. It also considers how social media ecosystems amplify these messages and examines the specific vulnerabilities of middle-aged populations to such ideologies.

The second section, **Exploring Religious Radicalization Among Middle-Aged**, delves into the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, particularly in post-conflict societies. It addresses how extremist religious narratives exploit uncertainties and grievances, with case studies such as ISIS propaganda and the Albanian experience. The discussion also considers hybridization processes in radical religious movements and the role of online affordances in spreading extremist rhetoric.

The third section, **Gaming and Digital Spaces as Radicalization Arenas**, focuses on how digital vulnerabilities facilitate radicalization, particularly through gaming ecosystems. It discusses the

psychological and socioeconomic dimensions of online radicalization and highlights key policy challenges in countering extremist influence in these spaces. The section connects these trends back to middle-aged radicalization, emphasizing how digital engagement can serve as both a risk and an opportunity for intervention.

The final thematic section, **Disinformation, Radicalization, and Violent Extremism**, examines the critical role of misinformation in mainstreaming extremist content. It unpacks how conspiratorial worldviews and political manipulation of disinformation contribute to radicalization, with a particular emphasis on the use of platforms like Telegram as hubs for extremist coordination. The discussion also considers the demographic vulnerabilities of middle-aged individuals to these narratives and proposes policy interventions to counter disinformation-driven radicalization.

Each section concludes with **policy recommendations**, distilling insights from the webinars into actionable measures aimed at mitigating extremist influences. The **final conclusion** synthesizes the cross-cutting themes identified across the four webinars, emphasizing broader trends such as digital literacy, institutional trust, and the evolving landscape of extremist propaganda. By structuring the report in this manner, the analysis remains both thematically cohesive and policy-oriented, offering valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners involved in counter-extremism efforts.

Understanding Far-Right Extremism

On March 29, 2024, the SMIDGE Project convened its inaugural webinar under the theme "Understanding Far-Right Extremism." This virtual gathering brought together experts with extensive experience researching radicalization, conspiracy theories, and the political mainstreaming of far-right movements in both Western and Eastern Europe. The panel of speakers included scholars from academic institutions across Europe, as well as two representatives of the SMIDGE Project itself, one who moderated the session and another who offered additional insights on the project's direction.

Drawing on the insights from this webinar, it became clear that the issues of far-right extremism cannot be adequately understood without taking into account a range of interlocking factors. Panelists emphasized how structural economic conditions, such as globalization and deindustrialization, feed into social anxieties and create openings for populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric to thrive. They showed that conspiracy narratives, especially those casting elites and global institutions as malevolent forces, have grown more potent due to the increasing primacy of social media in political discourse. Speakers also underscored the transnational character of contemporary far-right extremism, particularly noting how older grievances and conflicts in the Western Balkans continue to resonate with, and even inspire, extremist actors across Europe and beyond.

A series of interrelated findings emerged from the webinar that collectively illuminate why far-right extremism maintains a persistent foothold in contemporary political culture:

- The first insight is that socio-economic insecurity, particularly in post-industrial communities, remains a fundamental catalyst for radicalization. Speakers repeatedly showed how men and women in their midlife years who face job displacement or diminishing prospects often look for explanations that blame distant entities, whether those be immigrants, Muslims, or the European Union.
- The second finding is that conspiratorial thinking is no longer confined to the fringes. Conspiracy theories thrive on social media and can become interwoven with ordinary political discourse, especially in environments where trust in mainstream institutions has collapsed. Emotional narratives about impending doom, cultural takeovers, or secret elites are particularly potent, and their effect is magnified by digital algorithms that reward divisive content.
- A third takeaway is that far-right extremism is both local and global. While many movements present themselves as defenders of specific national traditions, their tactics, funding streams, and intellectual inspirations cross borders in a remarkably fluid manner. This dynamic is exemplified in the Western Balkans, where post-war ethno-nationalism merges with broader European far-right networks. It is also visible in the United Kingdom, where Brexit activism intersected with international populist narratives.

- Finally, the SMIDGE focus on the 45–65 age bracket reveals a vacuum in current strategies to combat extremism. Policy interventions and NGO initiatives often target youths deemed "at risk" or attempt to educate older seniors who may be unfamiliar with the basic functions of digital platforms. Meanwhile, middle-aged populations, who combine digital self-reliance with substantial societal influence, operate below the radar. Their susceptibility to misinformation stems partly from a lack of training or guidance in critical digital literacy, but also from genuine frustrations that extremist narratives find easy to exploit.

Broader Socio-Economic and Structural Drivers

A key focus of the discussion was the large-scale social and economic transformations reshaping post-industrial regions. A senior academic described the dislocation experienced by men and women in their forties and fifties whose once-stable jobs in manufacturing or service industries have vanished. Many of these individuals face precarious working conditions or long-term unemployment, fostering a sense that mainstream political and economic institutions have failed them. Such grievances produce a receptive audience for far-right groups claiming that outsiders—whether immigrants, minority populations, or transnational bodies like the European Union—are responsible for lost opportunities.

In addition to economic shifts, panelists addressed how cultural or identity-based concerns feed extremism. One speaker, drawing on her work on Brexit-era politics in the United Kingdom, noted that older people who were accustomed to relatively static conceptions of national identity sometimes find rapid multicultural change unsettling. The cultural friction can manifest in sentiments that "we are losing our country" or "we are being overwhelmed," narratives that populist agitators readily exploit. Instead of exploring systemic forces, the anger is often directed toward visible minorities, asylum seekers, or foreign institutions.

A common thread in the analysis was that these disaffections, intensified by perceived social marginalization, are particularly acute among the middle-aged demographic. When established institutions such as parliamentary bodies or traditional media fail to provide answers or reassurance, some older individuals gravitate toward online communities that interpret their difficulties through conspiratorial or xenophobic lenses. Because the SMIDGE Project is committed to understanding how these processes unfold in digital spaces, speakers repeatedly returned to the theme of social media and its capacity to fuel resentment, especially during times of crisis.

The Role of Conspiracy Theories as Mobilizers

Conspiratorial thinking emerged as a second major theme, thoroughly addressed by a researcher specializing in radical ideologies in her segment on how conspiracy theories help legitimate radical and even violent ideologies. Conspiracy theories, she argued, are particularly effective because they weave real events or genuine documents into larger, misleading frameworks. A specific paper published by a legitimate organization might be quoted out of context to suggest that a tiny cabal of world elites aims to eradicate local cultures or forcibly "replace" one ethnic group with another. This is especially visible in the so-called "Great Replacement" narrative, which falsely claims that globalist political elites are intent on flooding Europe with non-European migrants to dilute its cultural or racial makeup.

The same expert explained that such theories are not only resistant to fact-checking; they become socially self-reinforcing within echo chambers. Once people feel they have discovered a "hidden truth," they may dismiss contradictory information as either propaganda or intentional deception by hostile forces. This mindset can generate a binary worldview in which critics are painted as complicit with evil, and believers see themselves as the enlightened few. Moreover, conspiracy narratives often tap into visceral fears or protective instincts: content about alleged plots to harm children, orchestrate pandemics, or destroy family structures can elicit strong emotional responses and encourage individuals to share them fervently on platforms like Facebook and Telegram.

Panelists also made the case that conspiracy theories are not merely fringe phenomena. Through targeted social media campaigns, many have entered the political mainstream and influenced elections or referendums. In the United Kingdom, for example, a speaker said that they encountered Facebook groups that linked Brexit directly to broader conspiratorial claims. These spaces often invoked a narrative in which the British people were being robbed of their democratic choice by shadowy elites who aimed to preserve an EU-centric status quo. The EU was thus recast, through the lens of cultural Marxism or other theories, as a project to dilute sovereign traditions or forcibly bring about a cosmopolitan, progressive world at the expense of local identities.

Social Media Ecosystems and Their Amplification Effect

According to this researcher's work, social media platforms such as Facebook are not neutral conduits for information but structures that reward provocative, high-engagement content. Algorithms frequently recommend extreme or conspiratorial posts, as these tend to evoke strong emotional reactions. Users in their forties or fifties, who may not have had systematic digital training, can be susceptible to what might appear as grassroots material. Large thematic groups, such as those dedicated to national issues or protest causes, can become gathering places for extremist actors and mainstream users alike.

The sense of empowerment that older individuals feel when they find like-minded users online can be paradoxical. It gives them a venue to express grievances and adopt activist stances, but it also predisposes them to trust content that reaffirms their frustrations. Participants often conflate professional-looking websites or polished video channels with journalistic rigor, which allows conspiracy entrepreneurs to elevate their platforms. Furthermore, many older users have the financial means or the social capital to organize local events, donate to online initiatives, or share materials with extended family networks. This ensures that the far-right ideas they consume online do not remain relegated to the digital realm; they spill over into offline social circles, church groups, and community gatherings.

Transnational Dimensions of the Far-Right

Although far-right rhetoric often adopts a nationalist framing, the speakers agreed that contemporary extremist movements are highly internationalized. One expert, for example, offered an analysis of the Western Balkans, revealing a series of connections extending back to the conflicts of the 1990s, when certain elements of the international Neo-Nazi and skinhead scene traveled to the region as foreign fighters. In those years, some of the most extreme militias operating in Croatia, Bosnia, or Serbia attracted volunteers from various European states. Their experiences forged personal or ideological bonds that persist to this day.

According to this expert, the Western Balkans now serve as both a symbolic and practical meeting point for extremists. The region's tumultuous history of ethnic strife and genocide has made it a source of inspiration for far-right terrorists who admire figures implicated in war crimes. The Anders Breivik and Brenton Tarrant manifestos have shown references to or admiration for Balkan war criminals. Additionally, because some local authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and beyond lack robust institutional checks, extremist groups exploit relaxed oversight to host rallies or conferences. The speaker underscored that such ties are not limited to nostalgic references; they entail ongoing logistical coordination and ideological exchange that links Balkan ultra-nationalists with Western European or Russian groups.

The synergy of these networks underscores a paradox: while nationalist movements harp on preserving separate identities and cultures, they are also keen to foster transnational alliances and share resources across borders. This phenomenon is facilitated by global social media platforms, diaspora communities that live in Western Europe but remain politically connected to their homelands, and informal organizational structures, such as motorcycle clubs or football fan clubs, that straddle national boundaries.

The Middle-Aged Factor

Throughout the webinar, the speakers returned to the question of why the 45–65 age cohort is particularly significant for counter-extremism work. One Panelist, representing the SMIDGE Project's conceptual framework, stressed that most scholarly and policy attention focuses on radicalization in youth. There is abundant concern about young men in their teens or twenties being drawn into extremist subcultures, including Islamist or Neo-Nazi groups. Similarly, older seniors are often approached through basic digital literacy programs intended to prevent scams or misinformation. Yet those approaching or in midlife, who typically have deeper financial resources and robust social influence, rarely receive specialized interventions or training.

The group dynamic among middle-aged citizens can be both an enabler and a hindrance in responding to far-right challenges. Many have a powerful sense of grievance—especially if they lost stable employment in the post-industrial or post-2008 recession era—and feel that younger generations and elites alike are ignoring their struggles. This sense of "invisibility" ironically mirrors the policy neglect that fails to address them as a distinct category. In the eyes of extremist recruiters or conspiracy peddlers, the 45–65 demographic is a fertile recruiting ground, precisely because it seeks solutions and has the means to publicize them.

At the same time, there is an opportunity for harnessing the influence of middle-aged individuals who reject hateful ideologies. As two speakers suggested, older citizens can function as effective community mediators or even mentors if they are engaged in counter-narrative work. They often command the respect of their immediate circles, including younger relatives, and can be credible messengers in challenging conspiracy content. The question the SMIDGE Project seeks to answer is how to empower these potential "influencers for good," rather than ceding the digital terrain to those who exploit older users' grievances for extremist purposes.

Policy Recommendations

Considering the insights discussed, participants offered reflections on how European institutions, national governments, and civil society organizations can address far-right extremism, particularly

among those in midlife. This section details a set of strategies targeting different levels of governance and engagement.

The first dimension involves the European Union, which remains central both as a target of far-right agitation and as a partner to the Western Balkans. Multiple speakers emphasized that the EU could reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives by countering the widespread impression that it is a distant, elitist project. Practical measures might include fostering deeper citizen engagement through town halls, digital consultative platforms, and accessible opportunities for communities to shape EU policy agendas. To tackle conspiratorial claims about secret EU intentions, institutions could invest in transparent communication strategies that clarify how legislation is made, who gets consulted, and what the tangible benefits for localities are. Furthermore, the EU could create dedicated funding lines to support digital literacy programs directed at midlife adults, establishing the same degree of priority that is typically reserved for youth-focused initiatives.

National governments, particularly those with areas heavily affected by deindustrialization, can advance structural reforms that address the root causes of anger and resentment. Speakers argued that short-term security measures, such as banning extremist groups or monitoring their communications, will be ineffective without parallel efforts to rejuvenate local economies and boost social welfare provisions. Governments might consider incentives for job retraining in regions transitioning away from manufacturing, as well as expanded mental health services for adults who have experienced repeated economic shocks. Such socio-economic interventions, though not traditionally viewed as "counter-extremism" policies, have the potential to reduce the very grievances on which far-right ideologies flourish.

Civil society organizations play an equally critical role, given their immediate access to local communities and their ability to foster trust. During the webinar, panelists noted that community centers, adult education institutes, and faith-based groups are often best positioned to provide practical training on identifying and refuting disinformation. Individuals in midlife may be more receptive to guidance from peers or recognized local leaders than from government campaigns. Community organizations could hold interactive sessions in which participants learn how social media algorithms function, how to distinguish legitimate sources from "pseudo-expert" platforms, and how to have constructive conversations with friends or family members who endorse conspiratorial material. These sessions might also highlight positive stories and historical examples of cooperation across ethnic or national lines, to counter the apocalyptic narratives that dominate far-right discourse.

Partnerships across borders, especially in the Western Balkans, are also necessary. When extremist groups from multiple countries meet and coordinate in relatively permissive jurisdictions, security agencies must collaborate to track their movements and disrupt harmful activities. However, webinar participants cautioned that any policing measures should be accompanied by engagement and dialogue. A purely repressive approach risks driving such networks further underground or reinforcing their propaganda that the "globalist system" is persecuting them. Collaborative efforts between regional governments, supported by the EU, might include joint conferences or workshops, in which policymakers, researchers, and grassroots activists from different countries meet to exchange effective practices in countering extremist narratives. This approach could mitigate the detrimental effect of groups converging on the Balkans to celebrate individuals and ideologies associated with genocide or other atrocities.

Across all levels, an overarching theme is the importance of acknowledging middle-aged citizens as a core constituency in shaping public discourse. The "invisibility" of this demographic in extremist prevention programs must be reversed. National and EU policy frameworks can integrate explicit references to older age brackets in funding calls, ensuring that research and intervention on radicalization or hate speech address not only youth but also midlife adults. Where possible, local authorities might recruit middle-aged volunteers to serve as digital literacy ambassadors who can lead peer-led training sessions, bridging generational gaps and presenting alternative narratives that disrupt conspiratorial thinking.

Conclusion

The SMIDGE webinar on Understanding Far-Right Extremism showcased how structural economic drivers, conspiratorial narratives, digitally enabled echo chambers, and specific historical legacies create fertile ground for radicalizing individuals between 45 and 65 years old. Each presenter brought a distinctive viewpoint to the conversation, yet all recognized that far-right ideologies do not arise in a vacuum. Rather, they emerge where institutions have lost credibility and where large segments of the population feel abandoned by political and economic transformations beyond their control.

Speakers revisited a recurring concern that stoking fear of immigrants, promoting anti-EU resentment, or vilifying religious minorities is often a potent strategy for extremist groups seeking to unite the disaffected under a banner of populist anger. Social media plays a decisive role by tying emotional or sensational content to virality, thus pushing conspiracy-driven messaging deeper into mainstream spaces. The Western Balkans provides a cautionary example of how unresolved grievances and historical atrocities can become points of reference for global far-right movements, creating networks that transcend national boundaries.

Yet, the discussion closed on a note of cautious optimism. Although middle-aged individuals frequently feature in alarmist headlines as supporters of Brexit or populist parties, or as donors and organizers of extremist causes, they also possess the life experience and community standing to contribute meaningfully to solutions. When offered the chance to acquire digital skills in safe, respectful environments, or when included in dialogues on social cohesion, many in this age group can become voices of reason and pragmatic leadership. The SMIDGE Project's commitment to studying and engaging this demographic positions it to develop interventions that do not stigmatize older citizens but instead empower them.

This inaugural webinar, therefore, underscored not just the magnitude of the challenge posed by far-right extremism, but also the flexibility of strategies available to policymakers, civil society, and the EU alike. The greatest impact may be achieved through a seamless integration of social and economic reforms, targeted digital literacy programs, robust cross-border cooperation, and transparent political engagement. By recognizing that the 45–65 demographic holds immense sway over cultural and political trends, and by focusing on how to harness its potential for positive community-building rather than extremist mobilization, the SMIDGE Project offers a novel pathway in the broader field of radicalization studies.

Through continued research and additional webinars, SMIDGE hopes to refine its findings and translate them into actionable practices. The quest is to prevent the next wave of discontent from transforming into hatred or violence, which requires sustained cooperation across local and international organizations. The urgency of this endeavor is evident from the sobering examples

shared by the panelists, but the dialogue also revealed many constructive entry points. If properly implemented, the recommended approaches to digital literacy, inclusive socio-economic policy, and thorough yet balanced cross-border security efforts will help to diffuse the frustrations that extremists seek to exploit. In doing so, they may pave the way for more resilient, cohesive communities in Europe, the Western Balkans, and beyond.

Exploring Religious Radicalization Among Middle-Aged

On June 28, 2024, the SMIDGE Project convened a second webinar, entitled "Exploring Religious Radicalization Among Middle-Aged," which sought to deepen conversations around the drivers, manifestations, and policy responses to religiously framed extremism. The session included a diverse panel of scholars and practitioners.

The second webinar provided a distinctive interlacing of theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and on-the-ground policy practice. It followed the SMIDGE Project's consistent focus on the 45-65 age cohort, a group often overshadowed by analyses of radicalization that disproportionately emphasize youths. Despite their relative invisibility in scholarship, many middle-aged individuals wield tangible power—as parents, community leaders, public officials, or heads of households. Their transition into new digital and cultural environments can also produce vulnerabilities to extremist narratives, including those justified through religion.

In the first part of the webinar, a speaker offered insight into the SMIDGE Project's broader interest in online discourse and conspiracy theories. By analyzing hashtag networks and meme clusters, she and her colleagues revealed hybridization trends where ideologies, conspiratorial content, and religious references merge online. This research formed a conceptual bridge to the other presenters, who turned their attention to ways that religion intersects with nationalist or identity-based radicalization in settings as diverse as the Western Balkans, the so-called Islamic State's online propaganda, and new conspiratorial movements in the West.

What stood out was the persistent tension between seeing religion as merely a cover or proxy for political, social, or cultural grievances and recognizing that certain doctrinal or communal settings can act as catalysts for radicalization. Several speakers indicated that "religion" can be both an authentic motivator and a convenient rhetorical veneer, particularly in post-conflict regions. Others noted that conspiratorial worldviews with religious overtones—from QAnon to fundamentalist apocalyptic movements—can serve as cohesive social environments, providing meaning and solidarity to people facing rapid change or profound uncertainty.

Discussions throughout the webinar converged on several core insights about religious radicalization among people in their midlife years.

- First, post-conflict conditions can breed religiously framed extremism, particularly when ethnic identity, historical grievances, and religion become fused. The Western Balkans epitomizes this phenomenon, as older adults continue to live with war-induced traumas, fueling a range of radical impulses that transcend narrow definitions of religion.
- Second, extremist groups exploit notions of community and belonging that resonate with middle-aged individuals. Whether through ISIS's emphasis on "building a caliphate for one's children" or conspiratorial communities' promise of esoteric enlightenment, religion becomes a potent vehicle for forging solidarity.

- Third, religious radicalization often emerges through "hybrid" spaces online, where conspiratorial memes, nationalistic diatribes, and scriptural references intermingle. This amalgam can be especially attractive to older adults who have not had structured digital literacy training and find comfort or meaning in adopting a posture of moral certainty within otherwise uncertain worlds.
- Fourth, there is a fine line between "lawful" but illiberal beliefs and incitement to violence. While religious or conspiratorial discourses may contain incendiary rhetoric, not all such content is violent in aim. Overly broad approaches that treat all non-mainstream religious or conspiratorial forums as preludes to terrorism risk alienating communities and pushing them further into clandestine settings.
- Fifth, constructive engagement and legitimate religious leadership can act as bulwarks against radicalization. When local communities trust their imams, priests, or rabbis—particularly those recognized as legitimate and empathetic voices—preventive work gains traction. A mismatch, however, between official religious structures and community loyalty can reinforce alternative networks, which may include extremist or sectarian influences.

Intersection of Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in Post-Conflict Settings

The webinar opened with a striking reminder from a regional scholar that in much of the Western Balkans, ethnicity and religion cannot be meaningfully separated. She noted that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, identities are often described in terms of ethno-religious markers—Bosniak (commonly Muslim), Croat (predominantly Catholic), and Serb (mainly Orthodox). This context further complicates any study of "religious radicalization," since becoming "more religious" may also imply an intensification of group identity and a hardening of inter-ethnic boundaries.

This speaker suggested that Bosnia's post-conflict environment has led to what she calls "cumulative" or "interactive" radicalization. This process stems partly from failed reconciliation following the wars of the 1990s. Socio-political structures established by the Dayton Agreement, such as complex power-sharing models anchored in ethnicity, can entrench polarization. Older adults who survived wartime violence may have deep resentments or unresolved traumas that intensify radical, adversarial perspectives toward other groups. All of this raises the likelihood of religious radicalization that is intertwined with nationalist narratives, rather than being purely about theology or doctrine.

The complexity of these dynamics surfaces clearly in the Bosnian case of "para-jamats," or informal Salafi communities that organize their own religious schools and prayer sites. Although these communities might be rooted in local grievances or historical experiences, they also connect to transnational Islamic currents, fueling anxieties within majority Hanafi Sunni communities, who perceive Salafis as an external or radicalizing influence. However, the panelist was quick to underline that the reasons behind Bosnian foreign fighters traveling to Syria often included expressions of solidarity, memories of war crimes in the Balkans, or emotional responses to perceived injustice. In many instances, purely religious convictions formed only a partial explanation for radical decisions.

Children, Statehood, and Religious Identity in ISIS Propaganda

A scholar turned attention to the propaganda strategies of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). His account drew heavily on his doctoral work, for which he analyzed hundreds of hours of ISIS videos, some featuring Bosnian children and others aimed at a variety of immigrant audiences. He emphasized that ISIS sought to present itself as a functioning state, complete with governance, social services, and opportunities for families. This imagery was designed to appeal to those who might feel marginalized in their home countries, including middle-aged parents.

Children were prominently featured in ISIS videos. They were depicted in a spectrum of roles: as carefree innocents enjoying a state free of Western "moral corruption," as students in training programs that blended religious indoctrination and militant discipline, and, disturbingly, as executors or participants in acts of violence. Through these portrayals, ISIS leveraged both parental instincts to protect or guide children and broader communal aspirations for a restored Islamic utopia. A major part of the pitch that ISIS made to foreigners was that living in the "caliphate" would safeguard their families from Western secularism, consumerism, or discrimination, effectively blending religious, social, and psychological motives for migration.

What emerged from his presentation was a stark reminder of how emotional triggers—love of children, hope for a "purer" life and reaction to war crimes or injustice—can be harnessed by extremists of any persuasion. For middle-aged adults, faced with generational responsibilities, these discourses may be particularly resonant. Inasmuch as the middle-aged demographic frequently shoulders parental or caregiving roles, the promise of a righteous or morally secure environment for the next generation could exert strong pull, whether that environment is presented as a Salafi jamaat in Bosnia or a "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq.

Conspiracy Theories, Religious Narratives, and the Search for Certainty

Another scholar proposed a wider, cautionary perspective on how religious elements can mix with conspiracy narratives. He began by situating current conspiracy movements in a longer historical arc, noting that conspiratorial beliefs spike in times of profound upheaval or uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted daily routines, heightened anxieties, and triggered emotional isolation, proved fertile ground for conspiratorial worldviews. Yet he also noted that these conspiracies can be subtly religious in tone, echoing or mimicking eschatological ideas about salvation or apocalyptic struggle. Movements like QAnon, with their rhetoric of "the Great Awakening" or "the Storm," mirror concepts of revelation, repentance, and eventual deliverance from evil.

This blending of conspiratorial imagination and religious frameworks can appeal strongly to individuals seeking order in a chaotic world—whether middle-aged or otherwise. As this speaker observed, conspiratorial movements offer a sense of belonging, agency, and privileged knowledge. People already predisposed to religious modes of thinking may gravitate toward cosmic or transcendent explanations. This synergy sometimes goes unnoticed if researchers treat "religious radicalization" and "conspiracy radicalization" as separate tracks. He argued that many contemporary extremist communities fuse these threads into a single, multi-layered worldview.

He then cautioned that overzealous policing of "radical" content in these non-violent conspiratorial spaces can be counterproductive. He invoked the example of Muslim-targeted policing in the United Kingdom following July 7, 2005, London bombings, suggesting that the far right made easy use of the suspicion cast on Muslim communities to stoke xenophobia. Similarly, conspiracy-laden networks can harden their positions if they feel excessively surveilled, singled out, or censored. This dynamic resonates with the broader conversation in the webinar, which emphasized how trauma, marginalization, and identity insecurity can feed radical worldviews.

Policy Implementation in Practice: The Albanian Example

To balance theoretical analysis with concrete measures, the webinar also spotlighted a practitioner perspective. A speaker laid out how her office had approached issues of religiously framed radicalization, foreign fighter returnees, and ongoing programs to deradicalize or reintegrate individuals. Her comments revealed the significance of multi-agency coordination, with bodies like the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and local municipalities each playing a role.

Albania's experience showcased how a "top-down" approach can mesh with local-level partnerships. Although the national government set the policy framework—largely via a CVE strategy that assigned specific tasks to different ministries—day-to-day work involved local governments, civil society organizations, and religious communities. In the Western Balkan environment, there is often an expectation that international donors and NGOs will take the lead in providing social or psychological support to returnees from Syria, Iraq, or other conflict zones. In Albania's case, she explained that the state insisted on taking the central coordinating role. Civil society partners were welcomed, but they were also bound by confidentiality agreements and guidelines to ensure that returnees were not stigmatized or exposed to sensational media coverage.

The Albanian example stressed that middle-aged men and women with children in conflict zones sometimes remain overlooked in policy. It is easy to focus on youthful fighters; indeed, many reintegration programs revolve around minors or detainees. Yet this speaker found that adult men and women who voluntarily returned from Syria still needed robust mental health care, job assistance, or re-education. Middle-aged returnees often harbor entrenched experiences, sometimes shaped by years of immersion in radical networks. Addressing these experiences requires an approach tailored to their generational needs.

Hybridization and Online Affordances

The opening contribution by the researcher on "spaces of hybridized preparatory extremism" provided a conceptual through line for the webinar's many strands. Hybridization, in this context, refers to the blending of multiple ideological discourses, from conspiracy theories and nationalist grievances to religious fervor and fears of global "elites." Platforms like Instagram, with their hashtag networks, can intensify this blending by fostering overlapping digital enclaves.

Although *the* researcher's immediate work focused on memes and conspiratorial content, they noted that significant clusters of hashtags were consistently linked to themes of religious or spiritual awakening. This interplay of conspiratorial and spiritual references suggests that, for certain middle-aged users, religious frameworks can be reshaped through conspiratorial narratives, and vice versa. One panelist's descriptions of ISIS's strategies, another speaker's commentary on

QAnon-like movements, and a contributor's reflections on reintegrating women radicalized online all illustrate how the emotional power of religion can be woven into broader discourses of threat, salvation, and belonging.

Because middle-aged populations often manage or frequent local Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, or family-based communication networks, they can amplify these hybrid messages—sometimes unknowingly. The group dynamic that emerges is, as another panelist noted, fundamentally social: it is not just about a set of beliefs but about forging a shared identity and sense of purpose. Governments and civil society actors often overlook such networks, either dismissing them as innocuous or focusing solely on younger demographics perceived as "at risk."

Policy Recommendations

Participants offered varied suggestions for addressing religious radicalization among middle-aged individuals, touching on areas that European Union institutions, national governments, and civil society might tackle collaboratively.

One repeatedly stressed recommendation involved acknowledging the unique realities of post-conflict societies. While Western European CVE models often assume a stable institutional baseline, the Western Balkans and other recent post-conflict regions grapple with a legacy of intercommunal violence, contested state structures, and cyclical resentments. In these contexts, it is insufficient to rely on the same messaging or interventions that might be used in, say, France or Denmark. National governments in post-conflict settings need specific, context-sensitive approaches that account for entrenched war trauma and the existence of entire age cohorts who lived through direct violence.

Another recommendation centered on the need for multi-agency cooperation anchored in a robust national framework. A panelist's account of Albania's strategy illustrated the importance of having an overarching institutional body—like the CVE Center, initially under the Prime Minister's Office—that sets direction, coordinates line ministries, and facilitates local-level engagement. Such bodies should be equipped to bring together health, education, security, media, and religious stakeholders around a shared agenda.

Policy experts also underscored the requirement of ensuring confidentiality and dignified treatment of returnees or suspected extremists, especially when they are middle-aged parents. Children are often the immediate reason these adults seek help or re-entry into mainstream society, and local governments must provide integrated support services (housing, counseling, vocational training, and family therapy) without creating stigma. In this respect, the Albanian approach of establishing an ad hoc hosting center was applauded by webinar participants, though they recognized that such an approach demands significant political will and resources.

Cooperation with official religious bodies was widely discussed, but speakers cautioned that "official" may not always equate to "credible." In many contexts, community members follow charismatic preachers who are outside—or even opposed to—established religious hierarchies. Where official or state-sponsored institutions lack trust, they may struggle to counter radical or conspiratorial messages that are couched in religious terms. Yet, official bodies remain valuable partners for shaping broader theological discourse and rallying credible imams, priests, or others who can contest extremist interpretations.

In a digital context, participants called for programs that improve middle-aged digital literacy while avoiding patronizing assumptions. Such efforts might involve short, accessible training modules on recognizing manipulative content, verifying sources, and understanding how algorithms promote outrage and clickbait. These modules could be offered in cooperation with community centers, adult education programs, or religious institutions.

Finally, one panelist's emphasis on the lack of compelling "counterpropaganda" indicates that policy approaches need to prioritize alternative narratives, not just policing or content removal. Governments and NGOs might invest in multi-lingual, visually engaging content that directly addresses extremist propaganda, whether produced by ISIS or other groups. Since older audiences sometimes gravitate toward videos or social media posts featuring children, counter-narratives could likewise spotlight personal stories of families who overcame radical influences, thereby humanizing the complex pathways away from extremism.

Conclusion

The second SMIDGE webinar highlighted the multifaceted ways in which religious radicalization manifests among people aged 45 to 65. In some instances, religion becomes a language for enduring ethno-national grievances, as seen in the Western Balkans. In others, it surfaces as an emotional anchor for disillusioned parents drawn into the "caliphate" promises of groups like ISIS. It may also arise through conspiracy-inflected narratives that borrow from religious eschatology and offer clarity in a world perceived as chaotic.

Across these different settings, the webinar made it clear that simplistic assumptions about who radicalizes, and why, can mislead policymakers. Middle-aged adults cannot simply be treated as "bystanders" or "less impressionable." They often occupy critical nodes in families and communities, which can either enhance extremist recruitment or impede it. The impetus for radicalization may come from trauma, a thirst for moral clarity, or an urge to defend perceived in-groups—factors not confined to adolescents or young people.

Speakers consistently affirmed that multi-agency coordination is vital, though it must be tailored to local contexts. Albania's approach reveals how a single coordination office or center can marshal line ministries, municipal officials, and civil society to address returnees effectively. Bosnia and Herzegovina's trajectory underscores how entire populations, shaped by the experience of war and day-to-day ethnic fragmentation, may be vulnerable to collectivized forms of radicalization. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of online mixing—where conspiracy memes, spiritual references, far-right symbolism, and jihadist rhetoric intersect—underscores the need for a nuanced digital strategy that respects civil liberties while addressing overt incitement.

Looking ahead, the SMIDGE Project intends to weave these insights into a robust body of research on how older adults encounter radical narratives online and offline. By centering the 45–65 age bracket, SMIDGE fills a crucial gap in traditional counter-extremism paradigms. The webinar series, including this second event, has made it evident that religious radicalization is not a phenomenon of "others" or "somebody else's children." Rather, it is shaped by local histories, global networks, and the everyday struggles of older men and women who navigate uncertain social, economic, and cultural terrains.

In this sense, the webinar reinforced the value of context-specific, multi-pronged efforts, as well as the moral imperative of maintaining dialogue with communities rather than imposing external, top-

down solutions. Through further comparative research and pilot interventions, SMIDGE hopes to identify actionable practices that can help middle-aged populations become bulwarks against—rather than conduits for—religiously framed extremism. Achieving this aim will depend on continued cooperation among national governments, EU institutions, and grassroots actors, grounded in mutual recognition of the complexities surrounding religious belief, internet communication, and social vulnerability across Europe and beyond.

Gaming and Digital Spaces as Radicalization Arenas

On November 27, 2024, the SMIDGE Project convened its third webinar, entitled "Extremist Narratives in Play: Gaming and Digital Spaces as Radicalization Arenas." This session highlighted how extremist movements leverage online gaming platforms and related digital communities to spread propaganda, recruit members, and foment social tensions. While the SMIDGE Project has consistently examined the radicalization of middle-aged demographics (roughly 45–65), this event recognized the interconnectedness of multiple age cohorts within virtual environments and addressed the diverse ways extremists exploit gaming culture.

The webinar featured three distinguished speakers: one panelist offered a sociopolitical framework for understanding extremism, describing how deep-seated socio-economic grievances and "neoliberal governmentality" facilitate radicalization. Another contributor focused on how youth, especially adolescents, encounter hateful or conspiratorial materials on digital platforms, including gaming forums. A third speaker examined the policy challenges tied to extremist exploitation of online games, drawing on empirical insights from an EU Horizon-funded initiative exploring how radicals manipulate gaming ecosystems.

Collectively, the panelists depicted a dynamic landscape in which extremist actors can target all age groups, from teens to older adults. The conversation underscored the globalizing influence of digital platforms—where local grievances mix with global narratives—and stressed the need for new policy measures, offline community-building, and educational initiatives that empower users to detect and resist extremist messaging. Although the SMIDGE Project maintains a core focus on the 45–65 demographic, the webinar confirmed that vulnerability and radicalization often reach across generational lines, deepening the importance of a holistic response.

The discussions converged on several insights that illuminate the broader reality of radicalization in digital gaming spaces and online platforms more generally:

- **Socio-economic precarity remains a root cause**: Whether among older or younger cohorts, individuals facing unemployment, familial instability, or disillusionment with mainstream politics are more susceptible to extremist narratives. Their sense of betrayal fosters a psychological readiness to "transvalue" social ideals and define themselves against an imagined enemy.
- **"Co-radicalization" flourishes in segregated contexts**: One panelist's term captures how self-identified militant Islamists and far-right nativists unwittingly amplify each other's rancor when they inhabit separate information bubbles. Digital spaces—ranging from closed Discord servers to Facebook groups—cement these oppositional identities, foreclosing empathetic dialogue.
- **Gaming platforms offer novel vectors for extremist recruitment**: Contrary to older stereotypes that radicalization demands offline contact, games enable strangers to interact

pseudonymously. Extremist recruiters exploit comedic banter, hype around gameplay, and coded references, forging new extremist subcultures.

- **Humor and coded memes mask hateful intentions**: One speaker highlighted how edgy humor normalizes extremist content. Memes with numeric codes, historical references, or sly wordplay promote hateful worldviews while evading detection by mainstream users and automated moderation. This strategy simultaneously builds group cohesion and obscures real-life implications of violent ideology.
- **Adults, not just youth, can be swayed by digital communities**: Despite some emphasis on adolescent vulnerabilities, middle-aged gamers can also be lured into extremist circles. Their advanced digital skills and greater disposable incomes may give them deeper influence in online spaces.
- **Inadequate regulatory and law enforcement frameworks**: Another panelist emphasized that gaming communities cross borders, outpacing national efforts to monitor hate speech or extremist recruitment. Industry reluctance to address the issue, combined with privacy norms and user anonymity, poses a formidable obstacle to consistent and effective responses.

Radicalization as a Socioeconomic and Psychological Reaction

The speaker opened the discussion by outlining how communities experience "destabilizing forces of modernization," such as deindustrialization, global inequality, and the weakening of welfare states. He drew attention to the theoretical framework of social movements, in which radicalization can be interpreted as an extension—or misappropriation—of ordinary protest. Historically, radicalism involved progressive movements, from Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation to Marxist critiques of capital. Today, he argued, many radical groups adopt reactionary stances that intensify communal boundaries, whether along ethnic, religious, or racial lines.

The speaker's concept of "co-radicalization" helped illustrate how different ideological camps sustain each other's hostility. In Europe, for instance, far right ethnonationalists and self-identified militant Islamists often become "mirror images," each finding validation in the other's perceived threat. Through inflammatory discourse—especially online—they reinforce a Huntingtonian civilizational divide, overshadowing any shared socio-economic grievances that could otherwise unite them in common cause.

Central to his argument was the idea of "Resentemont" a notion deriving from phenomenology and the parable of the fox who convinces itself grapes are sour because they remain out of reach. He observed that many individuals presumably reject global mobility or multicultural integration not because they genuinely despise cosmopolitan life, but because they have been structurally excluded from it. Marginalization forces them to "transvalue" and scorn the very opportunities they suspect are unattainable. This psychological pivot—resenting what one cannot have—fuels reactionary radicalism.

He also critiqued the decline of offline community centers, youth clubs, and cultural spaces as part of a broader neoliberal disinvestment in public goods. Young people (and middle-aged individuals, too) find fewer places to gather physically, so they retreat to online enclaves where extremist discourses circulate. The result is a self-perpetuating digital environment that fosters "co-

radicalization," as groups demonize each other in the absence of face-to-face communication that might allow them to find common ground.

Digital Vulnerabilities and Radicalizing Pathways among Youth

The panelist followed with a more focused look at how adolescents (roughly ages 13–19) experience radicalizing trajectories online, including in gaming communities. Although her research does not primarily address the 45–65 demographic, her insights illuminate structural factors that remain relevant across ages, albeit manifesting differently.

She introduced a Danish case study of the "Halick" trial, in which a 16-year-old boy was prosecuted for affiliating with the neo-Nazi Feuerkrieg Division. Remarkably, the court materials revealed that his radicalization had occurred almost exclusively via online gaming platforms and Discord channels. These findings disrupted the long-held assumption that radicalization requires some offline anchor of extremism. Instead, the teenager's sense of belonging emerged virtually through humor, memes, and references shared within an insular community.

The phenomenon of "dark whistles" and coded language underscores how extremist subcultures thrive on insider references. Just as sports fans share esoteric knowledge of playbooks or team histories, extremist gamers learn dog-whistle terms, numeric symbols (e.g., "88" for "Heil Hitler"), and "in-group humor" that outsiders fail to detect. Over time, participants internalize hateful rhetoric as normal banter and develop a moral disengagement from broader society.

Still, the panelist emphasized that purely "online" radicalization rarely arises without underlying psychological vulnerabilities. Adolescents dealing with loneliness, family conflict, or poor mental health may seek community in digital spaces. Once there, extremist recruiters or older radicalized gamers can "groom" them—gradually testing ideological boundaries, exposing them to hateful content, and offering a coherent identity framed against a perceived enemy.

From a policy perspective, she advocated for robust digital literacy training within school systems, training that goes beyond a narrow focus on "fake news" to encompass the emotional manipulations at play in extremist memes and humor. She also highlighted the importance of empathy-building exercises, deeper teacher-student dialogues, and parent education on how to discuss digital life. Because hatred can be masked as edgy jokes or memes, educators need specialized tools for detecting these signals without dismissing teenage socializing or resorting to over-policing.

Exploiting Gaming Ecosystems: The GEMS Project and Policy Challenges

The final speaker addressed the intersection of radicalization and the online gaming ecosystem from a policy and law-enforcement perspective. Drawing on the GEMS project's initial findings, he clarified how extremists recruit and mobilize gamers, highlighting the two-phase process that typically unfolds.

In the first phase— "pre-selection"—extremists pose as ordinary players on popular platforms like Steam, Discord, Roblox, or multiplayer game servers. They identify vulnerable users by monitoring chat interactions, assessing emotional states, or gauging openness to hateful jokes. Because many gaming communities rely on anonymity and ephemeral screen names, it is hard for moderators or

authorities to pin down real-world identities, enabling extremists to operate with minimal risk of detection.

In the second phase— "grooming and radicalization"—communities move discussions off major game servers to encrypted chats on Telegram, WhatsApp, or private Discord channels. This shift parallels the dynamic the previous speaker found in her Danish case: once the prospective recruit bonds with the extremist contact through playful interactions, they are funneled into more clandestine spaces for deeper indoctrination. From there, extremist messaging can intensify, culminating in either passive endorsement of hateful ideologies or active involvement in violent plots.

This speaker underscored a stark structural challenge: gaming platforms operate across multiple jurisdictions, so consistent regulation proves difficult. Industry self-regulation often lags behind extremist adaptation. While some game companies implement rudimentary moderation, many are reluctant to acknowledge the scope of hateful content for fear of reputational damage or legal liabilities. This reluctance, in turn, impedes efforts by law enforcement and civil society to monitor suspicious activities.

Moreover, he identified a trust deficit between gaming communities and external actors like law enforcement, policymakers, or NGOs. Gamers, who sometimes resent older "outsiders" meddling in their spaces, may not report extremist activities. They often see these infiltration attempts as tangential or do not recognize the red flags in time. This complicates any attempt at a "whole-of-society" approach.

Tying It Back to Middle-Aged Radicalization

Throughout the webinar, references to the 45–65 age bracket cropped up in subtle ways. While the presenters mainly discussed younger cohorts, the dynamics they described resonate among older gamers and digital users as well. One of the panelist's notion of "renon" points to how middle-aged individuals, just like adolescents, can feel betrayed by systemic inequalities and turn to online communities for validation. The other speaker's model of grooming applies to older participants too, especially those who feel marginalized after job losses or family disruptions. And the last speaker's policy observations can stretch to older adult gamers, who might equally be reluctant to engage with law enforcement.

Because gaming is no longer the exclusive domain of teens and young adults—many in their 40s and 50s have grown up with video games, especially as technology has advanced—these risk factors and exploitative tactics can reach beyond adolescence. Middle-aged individuals may experience a sense of dislocation similar to younger players: divorced from stable offline networks, searching for belonging, struggling with identity conflicts, or simply seeking escapism in gaming worlds. This phenomenon underscores the SMIDGE Project's broader thesis that older demographics are not immune to digital radicalization but rather deserve a targeted approach that acknowledges their specific life experiences.

Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen Offline Social Infrastructure: All three panelists emphasized the collapse of community spaces—from youth centers to adult education hubs—as a major enabler of

online radicalization. Governments at both EU and national levels could invest in local clubs, cultural centers, and sports facilities that foster face-to-face interaction across ethnic, religious, and generational lines. For middle-aged populations, programs like community tech classes or digital forums in public libraries might offer constructive avenues for discussing social issues without retreating into extremist echo chambers.

- Develop Nuanced Digital Literacy and Counter-narrative Initiatives: Following the insights of one of the speakers, a new generation of digital literacy curricula might combine critical thinking about misinformation with emotional awareness. Such curricula could address moral disengagement, the manipulative use of memes, and the multi-faceted appeal of "edgy humor." Parents, teachers, and adult educators should receive guidelines on how to talk about extremist references—particularly numeric codes and "dark whistle" language—in a non-judgmental manner that fosters open conversation rather than stigma.
- Foster Cooperation Between Gaming Industry and Policy Actors: The policy analysis presented by another speaker revealed that a trust deficit hinders effective cooperation between multiple stakeholders. Overcoming this challenge might include establishing multi-tiered partnerships between law enforcement, academic researchers, gaming companies, and civil society organizations. EU-funded projects such as GEMS or SMIDGE could convene roundtables that promote best practices for content moderation, ethical data sharing, and user reporting protocols. The industry must feel incentivized rather than coerced, for instance via regulatory frameworks that reward robust moderation while protecting user privacy.
- Encourage Active User Reporting and Community Moderation: Authorities need to enable gamers to recognize extremist grooming and feel safe reporting it. This effort could involve simplifying reporting mechanisms, ensuring anonymity for tipsters, and providing feedback loops that confirm user reports have impact. Public awareness campaigns—like those that successfully discourage cyberbullying—could highlight how extremist infiltration subverts gaming culture. A sense of shared duty can help The Gaming Community self-police, thus reducing reliance on blanket censorship.
- Develop Tools for Real-Time Monitoring and Intervention: One speaker mentioned GEMS's efforts to create AI-driven watchtower tools for detecting suspicious language in real time. Governments and NGOs might invest in complementary technologies that parse extremist-coded references without infringing on legitimate freedom of expression. Doing so, however, demands robust oversight to guard against overreach and false positives.

Conclusion

The SMIDGE webinar on "Extremist Narratives in Play: Gaming and Digital Spaces as Radicalization Arenas" illuminated the evolving tactics of extremist groups in a digital age marked by fracturing social bonds. While gaming culture can foster creativity, teamwork, and cross-cultural friendships, it also offers extremist actors opportunities to groom members, disseminate propaganda, and coordinate off-platform activities. Speakers emphasized that the underlying drivers—such as disenchantment with political institutions, socioeconomic precarity, and the human longing for belonging—are not exclusive to young adolescents. Middle-aged users, already shaped by neoliberal constraints, can find themselves just as susceptible to conspiratorial or hateful messaging.

One speaker's detailed explanation of "co-radicalization" and "renon" underscores that neither far-right nativists nor militant Islamists operate in isolation; each wields the other's hostility to amplify fear and produce new recruits. In the background, the decline of robust offline institutions has forced individuals into atomized digital enclaves, intensifying the isolation that fosters radical impulses. Another speaker's micro-level insights into how humor, memes, and closed communities accelerate radicalization particularly underscore the need for nuanced interventions that look beyond mere detection of violent content. Finally, the policy-oriented remarks underscored the complexities of regulating cross-border gaming platforms.

Though the webinar was nominally about gaming, the discussions revealed broader lessons relevant to all digital spheres. Online radicalization thrives when offline belonging is scarce. Platforms that facilitate creative cooperation, such as massive multiplayer games, ironically can also nurture extremist subcultures. Bridging these contradictions requires multi-pronged strategies. Governments must reinvigorate local meeting spaces that restore a sense of inclusive belonging. Educators must refine digital literacy efforts to address emotional manipulation, comedic codes, and group identity. Industry must accept responsibility for moderation while balancing user rights.

Through these multifaceted steps, societies can potentially reclaim the digital realm as a force for positive connection rather than a breeding ground for hate. The SMIDGE Project's interest in older demographics remains vital here: as middle-aged gamers become more numerous, their vulnerabilities and roles—both as potential radicalization targets and as pillars of family and community—warrant renewed attention. Only by understanding how generational dynamics intersect with digital platform architectures can researchers and policymakers mitigate the risk of extremist infiltration in gaming, protect younger populations, and reinforce a healthier sense of belonging for users of all ages.

Approaching the 2,500-word threshold, this report reaffirms that the next frontier of counter-extremism policy must grapple with cultural expressions once deemed apolitical—be it gaming, meme sharing, or niche humor. The new norms of digital connectivity demand innovative solutions, grounded in a recognition that radicalization, whether among 14-year-olds or 50-year-olds, springs from the same human need for identity and community. The future success of these endeavors will depend not only on advanced technologies and agile laws, but on the willingness of diverse stakeholders—from gaming companies to local community leaders—to forge trust and collaborate in building safer, more inclusive digital environments.

Disinformation, Radicalization, and Violent Extremism

On January 28, 2025, the SMIDGE Project held the fourth and final webinar in its series exploring the complex interplay between social media, disinformation, radicalization, and violent extremism, particularly as it pertains to the oft-overlooked age group of 45 to 65. Entitled "The Nexus Between Disinformation, Radicalization, and Violent Extremism," the event spotlighted how different types of misinformation and conspiracy theories, when propagated via both mainstream and alternative media channels, cultivate a sense of grievance and identity that can lead individuals to extremist beliefs and, in some cases, violent actions.

The webinar featured four expert speakers. Their presentations drew on research and fact-checking experiences in different parts of Europe, with a focus on the Western Balkans—an area where socio-political vulnerabilities and post-conflict divisions create fertile terrain for radicalization. Together,

they unveiled how disinformation in contexts like elections, war, and geopolitical conflict foster radicalizing narratives that emphasize cultural threats, nostalgia, or hatred toward "the other," thereby mainstreaming extreme views in digital communities.

- Radicalization Pathways Vary: a speaker distinguished between "red-pilling" (rapid shifts via extreme online content) and slower, more insidious radicalization-by-cultivation. Both processes rely on repeated emotional or hateful messaging, which in turn triggers anger and fear.
- Conspiratorial Thinking is a Catalyst: Another expert stressed that conspiracy theories—particularly those linking a malevolent out-group to society's ills—lay fertile ground for radicalization. Once ingrained, conspiratorial thinking makes counterevidence nearly impossible to accept, normalizing extremist beliefs.
- Echo Chambers and Telegram Communities: two of the panelists highlighted how alternate digital spaces (e.g., Telegram) have become hotbeds for extremist coordination in the Balkans. For example, Serbian Telegram channels praising Russia and demonizing Kosovo exemplify how disinformation fosters real-life mobilizations.
- Emotional Hooks and Nostalgic Myths: Nationalist or "lost heritage" narratives easily mobilize older adults, who may recall pre-war times or resent unfulfilled European integration. By combining anti-Western, pro-Russian storylines with cultural nostalgia, extremist groups generate solidarity and purpose among disaffected populations.
- Low Media Literacy + Minimal Institutional Trust = High Vulnerability Speakers repeatedly emphasized the importance of robust media literacy, especially among older adults who grew up before the digital era. Mistrust in institutions—fueled by corruption and political manipulation—further entices individuals to seek alternative "insider" platforms.
- Offline-Online Synergy: The speakers agreed that radicalization stems from a mix of offline conditions (historical resentments, political corruption, socio-economic hardship) and online networks. Digital misinformation can accelerate and intensify these latent grievances, culminating in coordinated extremist action.

Disinformation, Misinformation, and Radicalization

All four speakers underscored that while radicalization historically implied complex processes of ideological shifts or group identity formation, contemporary digital environments have changed the pace and scale at which extremist ideas circulate. A speaker offered a communication-scholar perspective, arguing that research often treats "online extremism" and "misinformation" as two separate phenomena, yet they intersect at multiple points. She mentioned two distinct pathways:

- The "Red-Pilling" or Radicalization Pipeline: In this scenario, individuals are exposed to increasingly incendiary content—often suggested by algorithms on platforms like YouTube—and gradually adopt more extreme beliefs. While visible, she suggested this phenomenon might primarily affect fringe users.
- Gradual Radicalization or "Radical Cultivation": Here, prolonged exposure to normalized extremist narratives leads to desensitization, essentially ratcheting up acceptable levels of

prejudice or hate. Distortions and conspiracy theories repeatedly broadcast via certain social media channels can shift entire subcultures, and eventually mainstream discourse, toward more radical views.

- Misinformation (unintentionally false claims) and disinformation (deliberately false claims) often buttress these paths. According to her, emotional triggers—particularly fear—can encourage people to accept false premises that justify hostility or violence. Yet scholarship has yet to show definitively how exposure to extremist narratives translates into behavioral change. Much of the existing research struggles to distinguish between mere attitudinal shifts and actual violence.

Conspiratorial Worldviews and Mainstreaming Extremist Content

Another panelist elaborated on how conspiracy theories serve as potent incubators of radicalization. Drawing on her fact-checking experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), she described how crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—fueled conspiratorial narratives that portrayed certain groups as inherently evil or malevolent. She noted: Repetition of unfounded claims builds pervasive conspiracy "worldviews,"; False evidence (manipulated videos, photos, or context) lends credibility to extreme or paranoid beliefs, and Emotional resonance in these conspiracy ecosystems unites people around a perceived threat or injustice.

The result can be a sense that "action" is justified to defend in-group members. Examples include "Pizzagate" in the United States, which escalated from fringe rumors to armed attacks on a pizzeria, and QAnon conspiracies that gained traction globally, including in Southeastern Europe. She underscored that disinformation-laden "echo chambers" encourage aggressive online behaviors such as harassment and coordinated propaganda campaigns—behaviors that can spill into offline protests and violence.

Both speakers pinpointed the erosion of trust in public institutions, scientific expertise, and mainstream media as a chief enabler of disinformation-based radicalization. Users who believe media and institutional channels are corrupted easily dismiss fact-checking efforts as "censorship" or "cover-ups," turning to alternative outlets that reinforce a conspiratorial worldview.

Political Exploitation of Disinformation

A researcher cited her investigative work at Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), where she has tracked how local politicians, and partisan outlets systematically push false claims to deepen distrust and foment polarization. This pattern often manifests around election cycles or pivotal events (e.g., constitutional reforms, negotiations with the European Union, or regional security crises). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, she noted how denial or revision of war crimes—particularly genocide in Srebrenica—endures as a potent source of extremist narratives that target entire communities.

She further emphasized that old nationalist narratives, such as claims that Serbs are under constant threat, Bosniaks are radical Islamists, and that Kosovo's independence is illegitimate, are continually recycled by unscrupulous media. In an environment already rife with low media literacy

and minimal accountability, this type of extremist propaganda spreads quickly, particularly in online groups that reflect ethnic fault lines.

Telegram as a Hub for Extremist Organization

A panelist shared a specific case study: she spent months monitoring several Serbian-language Telegram channels—ranging from 6,000 to 86,000 members—that focused on narratives related to Kosovo. During that period, she observed that these channels operate like echo chambers, drumming up anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment while framing Kosovo's independence as a historical injustice. Emotional appeal is central: members share photos of alleged victims, nationalistic songs, and "sticker packs" featuring violent or graphic images, all designed to strengthen collective outrage.

Crucially, she documented how online mobilization translated into real-world events. Telegram administrators coordinated blockades at border crossings, planned bus transport for protests, and circulated instructions for prolonged demonstrations. Consequently, extremist online communities exerted offline influence, as some members—galvanized by calls to defend their "lost heritage"—undertook confrontations with Kosovo authorities. These events reveal how digital enclaves coalesce around disinformation-based narratives and pivot into tangible radical behavior.

Age Demographics and Vulnerability

While disinformation frequently targets the general population, the SMIDGE Project's focus on individuals aged 45–65 prompted each presenter to address age-related factors. The first speaker cited American research showing older adults (over 65) share the most dubious news links. She cautioned, however, that experiments suggest older individuals often display strong capabilities to discern truth in controlled "offline" scenarios. The problem arises in real-time digital engagement where manipulative tactics (e.g., deepfakes, sensational memes, "urgent" calls to action) overwhelm users with limited digital literacy.

Three speakers noted that in the Western Balkans, middle-aged and older populations often distrust official information sources after decades of political corruption and war trauma. This disenchantment can merge with conspiratorial thinking, especially when unscrupulous actors exploit historical wounds or national identity grievances (e.g., around Kosovo's status, Bosnian war crimes, or alleged foreign conspiracies). An older demographic that lacks robust digital literacy is especially at risk, says one of the speakers, since they may unknowingly amplify incendiary content and fall into more extreme ideological positions.

Policy Recommendations

The four presenters converged on several strategic measures for mitigating the radicalizing effects of disinformation and conspiratorial rhetoric. While they acknowledged that no single solution could solve the multi-layered crisis, they outlined avenues to strengthen societal resilience and institutional accountability.

- Focus on Practical Skill-Building: Rather than demanding laborious fact-checking from users themselves, media-literacy programs can concentrate on quick credibility checks. Basic rules,

such as verifying source authenticity, looking for corroborating outlets, and recognizing emotional manipulation, are crucial.

- Tailor to Adult Learning: Workshops and campaigns aimed specifically at 45+ demographics might use familiar communication styles, local outreach (e.g., libraries, community centers), and a "train-the-trainer" model to scale impact.
- Timely and Consistent Messaging: a panelist stressed how rapid, coordinated responses from public institutions, health agencies, and media can pre-empt disinformation surges in times of crisis (e.g., pandemics, violent incidents, or protests).
- Professional Communicators: Institutions should employ well-trained spokespeople who can adapt messages for different audiences. This professionalism counters "emptiness of official statements" that conspiratorial actors capitalize on.
- Accountability for Telegram and Similar Apps: a speaker illustrated how Telegram-based extremist communities orchestrate real-world disruptions. Governments and civil society actors in the Western Balkans should push for transparent moderation policies and seek coordinated frameworks—potentially with EU bodies—to manage encrypted channels.
- Harmonize Across Borders: Given the cross-national nature of extremist subcultures (e.g., pro-Serbian or pro-Russian groups active across the region), regulators should pool resources and intelligence to flag channels inciting violence or hate.
- Early Warning Networks: one of the presenters recommended tighter integration of journalists, civil society, and security agencies so misinformation trends can be identified before they trigger large-scale radicalization.
- Regional Data-Sharing: Two speakers underscored the importance of Balkan-wide cooperation. Common problem statements and shared insight into disinformation flows allow faster and more comprehensive countermeasures.
- Tackle Corruption and Improve Transparency: Speakers repeatedly highlighted that disinformation thrives where institutional corruption erodes civic trust. Incremental but real institutional reforms (e.g., judicial transparency, depoliticized public agencies) can gradually rebuild public confidence.
- Democratic Accountability: Stronger media regulation, robust public broadcasting, and enforcement of defamation or hate-speech laws could tamp down blatantly manipulative news outlets tied to political or extremist actors.

Conclusion

All four presentations converged on a sober but urgent consensus: disinformation-fueled extremism has migrated from peripheral "fringe" contexts into mainstream political discourse. As a speaker noticed, once radical ideas appear on established outlets or gain traction among powerful institutions, the line between fringe and core is blurred.

Another researcher demonstrated how conspiracy theories, formerly relegated to obscure corners, are now disseminated at scale by tabloid media or political leaders, turning them into newly normalized viewpoints.

Focusing on the Western Balkans, two researchers highlighted a key paradox: though regionally diverse, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo all face cyclical waves of disinformation that manipulate deep-rooted historical wounds. Telegram groups coordinate real-life protests and other forms of extremist activism, using narratives of cultural victimhood, revenge, or nostalgia to unify members. These networks particularly exploit the limited digital literacy of older adults, many of whom lack formal training for the modern info-sphere and carry vivid memories of past conflicts that extremist actors reinterpret to strengthen hostility toward "others."

While the panelists acknowledged the uphill battle posed by platform anonymity, algorithmic amplification, and the commodification of radical sentiments, they also proposed multi-layered strategies. The overarching aim is to balance individual empowerment—through media literacy and critical thinking—with systemic solutions, such as tighter platform regulation, institutional transparency, and robust crisis communications. For individuals aged 45 to 65, specifically, the panel recognized an urgent need to design media- and digital-literacy programs that speak to their experiences and vulnerabilities. Such programs should avoid overburdening users, address emotional triggers in disinformation, and equip older citizens to navigate online environments confidently.

In the face of global shifts toward conspiratorial rhetoric and populist exploitation of grievances, this final SMIDGE webinar underscored that trust remains the linchpin. If governments in the Balkans or elsewhere fail to rebuild trust through meaningful reforms, and if technology companies continue to sidestep responsibility, extremist subcultures will keep flourishing. Yet, the discussion also showcased notable pockets of resilience—fact-checking initiatives, independent media, civil society cooperations—that offer models for constructive action. If combined with cross-border regulatory efforts and a sustained commitment to truth, these networks could help blunt the gravitational pull of disinformation-based radicalization, protecting middle-aged and younger generations alike.

Ultimately, the webinar affirmed that dismantling extremist narratives requires a collaborative, context-sensitive approach: from everyday digital-literacy lessons for older adults, to cross-regional data-sharing among investigators, to consistent policy engagement with powerful platforms. Despite the sobering realities, the speakers left open a path for resilience through community-led and institutionally supported strategies—refusing to cede the informational landscape to those who weaponize it for extremist ends.

Summary

Taken as a whole, the four SMIDGE webinars underscored the intertwined factors that enable extremist narratives to spread and resonate among middle-aged audiences. While each session focused on a specific theme or region—ranging from far-right or religious extremism to digital spaces and disinformation—they collectively illuminated cross-cutting issues that repeatedly surfaced as critical in shaping radicalization processes. Central to these discussions were questions of **digital literacy, media accountability, the particular vulnerabilities and resilience factors of the 45–65 age demographic, and the role of institutional trust**.

Across the webinars, participants repeatedly highlighted **digital literacy** as indispensable for building resistance to extremist messaging. The age cohort of 45–65 has often had fewer opportunities to receive formal training in navigating social media ecosystems or recognizing manipulated content, which can leave them susceptible to conspiratorial or hateful materials.

Experts emphasized that older adults do not inherently lack the ability to think critically; rather, what they often lack are structured pathways for understanding how digital algorithms, echo chambers, and manipulative content operate. Strengthening middle-aged users' digital literacy—through tailored workshops, accessible fact-checking guides, and ongoing guidance at the community level—could directly undermine the emotional resonance of extremist themes. Such programs would also reduce the risk of older individuals unwittingly amplifying harmful materials, including disinformation rooted in far-right, anti-vaccine, or religiously extremist beliefs.

A parallel concern shared by speakers was **media accountability**, especially in settings where disinformation is covertly backed by political or commercial interests. Even well-intentioned individuals may fall prey to misinformation when traditional media channels, social media companies, or niche digital platforms fail to implement robust editorial standards. This is doubly problematic in countries of the Western Balkans and elsewhere, where partisan ownership of outlets fuels sensationalist or factually questionable stories. Such environments encourage extremist and conspiratorial viewpoints to drift from the fringes into mainstream discourse. Panelists repeatedly called for higher professional norms among journalists, increased transparency of media funding, and genuine moderation policies by social networks. These actions, taken in tandem, could help users distinguish legitimate reports from incendiary misinformation, thereby curbing the allure of radicalizing narratives.

One aspect consistently overlooked in conventional radicalization research, and which this series of webinars endeavored to address, is the **age factor**. While much of the existing literature focuses on young recruits, the SMIDGE discussions revealed that adults in their 40s, 50s, and 60s hold influential positions in households, communities, and even governance structures, and therefore can shape or reinforce collective views. This demographic may bring to digital spaces profound socio-economic frustrations, nostalgia for a perceived "better" past, or deep-seated mistrust of elites. Combined with limited digital literacy, these sentiments can make middle-aged users particularly receptive to narratives that offer simple, identity-based explanations for complex social or political grievances. Yet, because older adults often possess extensive life experience, including prior exposure to civil conflict or large-scale crises, speakers argued that they can also serve as voices of moderation, provided they receive the necessary tools to sort reliable information from falsehoods.

Finally, the webinars made clear that **institutional trust** is an overarching factor that either accelerates or mitigates radicalization pressures. In societies plagued by corruption, weak governance, or politicized media, individuals often seek alternative sources of insight and reassurance, including extremist platforms that promise certainty and clarity. This dynamic cuts across geographical contexts—whether in Southeastern Europe or more stable democracies—undermining official sources' credibility and fueling populist rhetoric. Where trust in public agencies or established media is strong, extremist narratives struggle to secure widespread acceptance. Conversely, where institutions are perceived as captured or ineffective, conspiratorial or inflammatory discourses flourish. To counter this, experts urged targeted reforms that bolster transparency in governance, support independent news outlets, and encourage meaningful citizen engagement.

In other words, four key themes emerged from the four webinars:

- **Digital Literacy and Misinformation Awareness**. A core finding across all four webinars was the urgent need for middle-aged audiences to master critical digital literacy skills.

Panelists pointed out how fundamental online competencies—such as identifying clickbait headlines or verifying questionable links—are frequently taught to young people in schools but rarely integrated into adult learning programs. Without these skills, 45–65-year-olds often struggle to differentiate reliable sources from monetized conspiracy channels. Moreover, older adults' emotional investment in certain historical or cultural narratives can leave them especially susceptible to manipulative content that promises to restore a sense of lost pride or security. In response, many speakers argued for targeted educational outreach—such as short training sessions in local community spaces, practical guides for fact-checking, or partnerships between civil society groups and adult learning centers. By equipping older adults to navigate the digital environment judiciously, communities can blunt the emotional allure of extremist propaganda.

- **Media Accountability and Platform Regulation**. Throughout the sessions, presenters repeatedly returned to the idea that extremist narratives do not thrive in a vacuum; they prosper in environments where sensationalist media or lax platform moderation amplifies falsehoods. In some European states, far right or religious extremist content transitions seamlessly from obscure channels (like Telegram groups) into mainstream tabloids, illustrating how inadequate editorial oversight facilitates radicalization. The session on disinformation stressed that while individual users bear responsibility for scrutinizing what they share, real systemic change demands robust editorial standards and ethical guidelines within newsrooms, plus stricter regulation of social media algorithms that reward emotional engagement over factual accuracy. Panelists recommended a combination of public and private sector responses, including legislative frameworks that compel social networks to remove incitement to violence promptly, as well as support for independent news outlets that fact-check and contextualize inflammatory stories.
- **Age Factor and Psychological Dimensions**. While radicalization in younger populations often receives media focus, the SMIDGE webinars demonstrated that the 45–65 age bracket holds outsized influence in shaping narratives and social norms. Many participants in the live discussions shared anecdotal accounts of how middle-aged relatives, friends, or colleagues cling to conspiratorial interpretations when confronted with rapidly changing sociopolitical landscapes. Speakers described how a sense of disenfranchisement, economic precarity, or nostalgia for the perceived stability of the past can drive older adults to adopt simple, identity-based explanations. However, the same cohort can act as local gatekeepers of community trust, provided they have accurate information and confidence in institutions. The emphasis, therefore, was on harnessing the deep-rooted sense of civic responsibility older adults often feel—turning them into key allies for resisting extremist dogmas.
- **Institutional Trust and the Role of Governance**. Another recurrent theme was the importance of institutional trust in mediating how extremist narratives are received. Many frontline communities, especially in post-conflict regions like the Western Balkans, view official narratives skeptically due to memories of war, corruption, or perceived external meddling. Such environments enable disinformation-laden extremist messages to fill the vacuum of reliable information. The panel on religious radicalization, for instance, recounted how local faith leaders could either quell or stoke communal tensions, depending on their ties to state authorities and civil society. If those same authorities have historically shown themselves as unresponsive or partisan, middle-aged congregants might disregard official statements on suspicious gatherings or hateful speeches. Key policy

recommendations included transparent governance reforms, ongoing engagement with local opinion leaders, and credible enforcement of hate speech or incitement laws. Stronger institutions, and the trust they command, are more likely to persuade at-risk populations that official sources are preferable to extremist misinformation.

All in all, the series of SMIDGE webinars demonstrated that extremist narratives cannot be countered by narrow interventions alone. Initiatives must contend with the psychological and social dimensions of disinformation—especially where middle-aged adults are concerned—and address issues of media accountability, digital literacy, and failing institutional legitimacy. By acknowledging these cross-cutting factors, policymakers, community leaders, and educators can forge more holistic strategies to reduce the impact of hateful or manipulative content. Although the challenges remain formidable, the collective insights from the webinar sessions suggest that a multi-layered approach—one grounded in civic education, institutional reform, responsible media practices, and ongoing dialogue—can significantly diminish the power of extremist narratives to recruit and polarize.