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Preventing Radicalization at the Local Level: Municipal Perspectives on State-Civil Society Collaboration in Germany

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Abstract
Collaboration between civil society and state authorities in preventing radicalization has often been met with scepticism in academic debates, particularly due to concerns about power asymmetries, structural inequalities, and the risk of co-optation. While existing literature offers critical insights into national institutional frameworks and their implications for civil society, it frequently overlooks the local dynamics that shape prevention practices on the ground. The paper addresses this gap by examining cooperation between municipal officials and civil society organizations (CSOs) in local preventive efforts, focusing on the relatively understudied case of Germany. Specifically, this pilot study centres on the perspectives of municipal actors rather than directly capturing CSO voices. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews with municipal officers in Germany, it explores how collaboration is influenced not only by their formal mandates, but also by individual professional trajectories and locally embedded networks. The findings show that local cooperation in the prevention field is more contingent and negotiated than commonly acknowledged. Enabling factors and persistent challenges - such as lack of trust, divergent expectations, and the limited capacities of smaller CSOs - affect the quality and sustainability of these partnerships. By foregrounding lived experience and first-person perspectives of municipal officials, the paper advances a more grounded and relational understanding of state-civil society collaboration, one that accounts for the hybrid arrangements and interpersonal dynamics through which preventive efforts unfold at the local level.

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Introduction

Despite scholars have pointed out that "the local context matters" in processes of radicalization, deradicalization and counter-radicalization (Schmidt, 2013), most of the research on Europe still focuses on the national level. This is also true for local actors and agencies, who are assigned a pivotal role in detecting and preventing radicalization but have thus far received only limited academic attention. Notwithstanding the conceptual and

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operational ambiguity characterizing this field, it is widely acknowledged that the prevention of radicalization[2] and extremism[3] is no longer the exclusive competence of security and police services but has increasingly become a broader concern. In this framework, the notion of a "whole-of-society" approach has been introduced to emphasize the need of state actors' joint efforts with non-state actors - communities, civil society[4] and the private sector etc. - through partnerships and cooperation that leverage their unique strengths and resources (Council of the European Union, 2014). Specifically, civil society organizations (CSOs) are considered crucial in preventing radicalization thanks to their ability to foster community resilience and to provide arenas for venting political struggles and grievances, thus safeguarding and strengthening democracy against extremism (Saglie & Sivesind, 2018; Wimelius et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, cooperation between civil society and state authorities in the prevention field has been met with a degree of scepticism in scholarly debates, due to the structural inequalities and power asymmetries that often underpin such efforts (Akintayo, 2024, p. 687). For instance, studies have depicted how CSOs are instrumentalized, controlled and even coopted by the state through varying strategic mechanisms (Howell & Lind, 2010). In addition, state-civil society collaborations in this field have been described as systematically encompassing (and expanding) surveillance and intelligence-gathering practices, placing CSOs in responsibility of security (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018). However, this body of literature overlooks how the collaboration between local authorities and civil society actors is influenced not only by national-level political, legal and institutional environment but also by local factors, including the degree of political attention to the non-profit sector and the size of the municipality (Eimhjellen, 2021).

To date, empirical findings on how preventive policy is implemented and consequently its implications on state-civil society relations remain limited (Akintayo, 2024;

[2] Following Christensen et al., in this paper "radicalization" is understood as "an individual's change in values and attitudes towards embracing violence to achieve political goals" (2023, p. 3)
[3] Following Christensen et al., in this paper "extremism" is understood as "political ideologies and movements that reject core values and principles of democracy and universal human rights, and/or the readiness to use violence to realize political, religious, or ideological goals" (2023, p. 3).
[4] There is no universal definition of civil society. In this paper, civil society is understood as sphere of collective life situated between the state and the market (Anheier, 2005: p. 57). It encompasses the norms, values, networks, and informal associations through which individuals engage in public life (see Putnam, 1993). Within this wider context, civil society organizations (CSOs) represent the more formalized and institutionalized actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, charities, and community-based organizations, that operate to advance specific collective interests or causes.

van de Weert & Eijkman, 2021). This paper contributes to the literature by examining the relatively understudied case of Germany, with a particular focus on the perspectives of municipal officials. Building on Yngve and Kassman's contribution (2024), the analysis is guided by the following questions: (1) How do local authorities describe and perceive their collaboration with civil society in preventive work? and (2) What factors and challenges do municipal staff identify as shaping these collaborative dynamics? Remarkably, this pilot study does not seek to capture the voices of civil society directly; rather, it sheds light on how municipal actors understand and rationalize these partnerships. Particular attention is given to the ways in which local authorities frame their relationships with civil society actors and the complexities and tensions that they associate with this cooperation - an aspect that remains underexplored in the existing scholarship (Madriaza, 2023). By foregrounding the knowledge and perceptions of municipal staff engaged in preventive efforts, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how local state-civil society relations are negotiated in practice, and how these interactions influence the evolving role and boundaries of civil society actors in local governance in the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) and beyond.

Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations on Radicalization

Radicalization is not a monocausal phenomenon but is rather a process that can display different manifestations, sources, and trajectories in different contexts (Franc & Pavlović, 2021: 1). Whereas radicalization is the process by which individuals adopt (violent) extremist ideologies, extremism is an anti-democratic standpoint expressed through political, religious, ideological, and social beliefs that are in contrast with the attitudes, values, norms, and behaviors of the majority population (Schmid, 2013). In this context, McCauley and Moskalenko's (2017) emphasize the distinction between "cognitive" radicalization, which refers to the adoption of extreme beliefs, and "behavioural" radicalization, which relates to extremist actions. Although these beliefs and attitudes can lead to violence and terrorism, less than 1% of those who hold radical beliefs will ever engage in acts of radical violence (Wolfowicz et al., 2021, p. 4). Noteworthy, for scholars such as Sivenbring and Andersoon Malmros, extremism becomes anti-democratic only when it is coupled with the use of violence: i.e., violent extremism (2023, p. 3). Radicalization has generally been explained as

the outcome of a dynamic interplay of factors. These include structural and contextual conditions often described as "push factors" - such as lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalization, discrimination and poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law – as well as individual motivations and processes, or "pull factors" - such as experiences of victimization, the distortion and misuse of beliefs, and ideologies that exploit ethnic and cultural differences (United Nations, 2015, pp. 7-9).

However, recent studies have re-examined earlier research, challenging its underlying assumptions and proposing more nuanced explanations. For instance, scholars such as Franc and Pavlović (2021) have noted that only a limited number of studies have examined the role of objective economic inequality (e.g., individual income, employment status, and education level) in shaping far-right and Islamist cognitive radicalization in Western Europe, with inconclusive findings. For the scholars, it is perceived socio-political inequality, manifested in experiences of personal or group deprivation, unfair treatment, and injustice, that demonstrates a consistent positive relationship with cognitive radicalization across ideological orientations and contexts (Franc & Pavlović, 2021, pp. 13-15). Moreover, although cross-national studies show that socio-political inequality at the societal level (e.g., poor quality of democracy and human rights and high levels of repression) is related to terrorism, evidence suggests that advanced democracies also experience a high incidence of both domestic and transnational terrorist attacks. This indicates a non-linear relationship between democracy and terrorism, underscoring the need to consider additional individual and contextual factors contributing to radicalization and (violent) extremism (Ibid., pp. 15-16). Likewise, scholars refute the search for sociodemographic root causes of radicalization, as no consistent findings have been identified that would constitute a terrorist profile (see, for instance, Horgan, 2008)). Instead, they highlight underlying mechanisms that explain radicalization (e.g., group processes, grievances, and protest-related factors) rather than observable individual characteristics (Henrich et al. 2025, pp. 185-187).

In addition, group-based identity construction processes are among the most frequently cited factors in theoretical models of radicalization. Theoretical models diverge, however, in their assumptions about the role of identity. While some studies stress threats to social identity as central driver alongside perceived deprivation and injustice (Swann et al., 2009), others draw attention to the role of personal crises that create a "cognitive opening" for

adopting new worldviews (Crocetti et al., 2012). Extremist groups are seen as particularly attractive because they provide meaning through clear, unambiguous ideologies; once individuals identify with such groups and internalize their norms and values, radicalization is considered complete and may culminate in violent action. In this context, scholar such as Echelmeyer et al. (2023) revisited the influence of underlying societal issues, such as lower social status, relative deprivation, in-group discrimination, and perceived symbolic or realistic threats, in shaping social identities and their compatibility. Moreover, studies suggest that terrorists often share backgrounds and risk factors with criminals, indicating that traditional criminogenic and criminotrophic factors may also shape radical attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Wolfowicz et al., 2020).

Although the radicalization process has been extensively studied, there is little consensus on which factors function as drivers or protective elements, or on how these factors interact. This lack of clarity carries significant implications for counter-radicalization policy and practice, as existing risk assessment tools often lack precision and risk stigmatizing communities (Wolfowicz et al., 2021, p. 5). Moreover, poorly designed counter- and deradicalization programs risk not only wasting resources but also exacerbating the potential for violence (Koehler, 2019). Taken together, these dynamics may contribute to undermining the legitimacy of state strategies in the PVE field.

At the same time, preventive policies and initiatives have also been scrutinized by critical security scholarship, which analyses them through the lens of governmentality, emphasizing how risk is exploited by the state and its institutions as a "dispositive for governing social problems" (Aradau & van Munster, 2005, p. 91). More precisely, scholars have examined the politics of knowledge that shape trajectories of extremism and radicalization, producing so-called "imaginative geographies of extremism risk" that legitimize pre-criminal interventions (Heath-Kelly, 2017, p. 299). This structure of hegemonic knowledge is enacted on the ground by practitioners who navigate the "unknown" - that is, security risks associated with processes of radicalization and extremism - and its imagined spaces, often in the absence of tangible signs of danger (Pettinger, 2020, p. 972). For instance, studies on the UK illustrate how national counterterrorism policy constructs the boundaries of at-risk communities by designating who qualifies, and who does not, as relevant stakeholders (Heath-Kelly, 2013, p. 93). This is accompanied by processes that portray specific

communities simultaneously as "at-risk", and thus deserving of resources and support, and as "risky", and therefore subject to surveillance as potential threats. Concurrently, within these constructed geographies, national structures of education and healthcare emerge as key arenas in which preventative surveillance is extended to all citizens under the guise of protection, ultimately functioning as an apparatus of national security (Pettinger, 2020, p. 971). Framed as the "safeguarding of vulnerable adults" against terrorism, this logic ends up securitizing all individuals, casting them as inherently susceptible to contamination by extremism (Heath-Kelly, 2017, p. 299).

The Role of Local Actors in Preventing Radicalization and Extremism

Despite the critique directed toward the hegemonic framing of radicalization briefly outlined above and the limited clarity about its drivers and their interaction, there is broad consensus that prevention is most effectively pursued at the local level. Preventive efforts are commonly distinguished according to three temporal points of intervention: primary, secondary, and tertiary **(**Ceylan & Kiefer, 2018). Primary prevention aims to reduce the general risk of radicalization across society, while secondary and tertiary prevention target individuals or groups considered particularly vulnerable to radicalization, or those already radicalized, respectively (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022).

In recent years, approaches to prevention have been characterized by important changes, among which the emergence of multi-agency collaboration stands out as a particularly salient development. This refers to structured cooperation among schools, social and health services, the police, municipal authorities, civil society organizations, and other relevant actors, with the aim of pooling diverse expertise and resources to improve both the effectiveness and the coordination of preventive measures. Remarkably, such collaboration promotes cross-sectoral and multi-professional engagement among institutions with distinct mandates and practices, enabling them to address complex challenges that cannot be effectively managed by any single agency alone.

The existing body of research has identified several factors promoting multi-agency collaboration in the PVE field such as establishing clear roles, objectives and responsibilities among the actors involved (Mazerolle et al., 2021). In parallel, it has also highlighted factors

hindering cooperation such as unclear jurisdiction (Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2008), competition for funding (Madriaza, 2023) and lack of shared understanding of risks and concerns (Ellis et al., 2020) as well as of trust (Cooper et al. 2016). Among these factors, trust has been recognized for its fundamental impact on multi-stakeholder collaboration whose effectiveness depends specifically on interpersonal relationships between individuals rather than formalized and institutionalized exchanges (Solhjell et al., 2022; Van der Vet & Coolsaet, 2018).

The literature on multi-agency collaboration focused on the Nordic countries further underscores the tension existing between two distinct logics that characterize PVE practices at the local level: a societal security logic applying to police officers and security service staff and a societal care logic applying to social workers, teachers, youth workers etc. (Haugstvedt & Tuastad, 2023; Solhjell et al., 2022). Whereas those applying a security logic are considered "hard professionals", tasked with safeguarding the rule of law by reducing the capacities of radicalized individuals to commit violence, those guided by a care logic are regarded "soft professionals", concerned with individual wellbeing and with reducing their propensity to radicalize and engage in extremism (Haugstvedt & Tuastad, 2023). Hard and soft professionals pursue different goals and employ divergent strategies. These discrepancies pose challenges for municipal staff - the central focus of this paper - who frequently find themselves caught between different professional groups and the competing logics of security and care.

The role of local authorities has received only limited scholarly attention so far, with the few existing studies offering valuable insights into the difficulties they encounter when implementing preventive measures. Insufficient expertise as well as the inconsistent use of concepts such as radicalization and (violent) extremism have been identified as hampering the work of local professionals (van de Weert and Eijkman, 2021, p. 399). Alongside this, studies on the UK case have shown that local authorities often implement national preventive policies in significantly modified forms, as their vagueness allows for adaptation to local, autonomous objectives (O'Toole et al. 2012, p. 382). For instance, on the ground, local authority personnel may emphasize community-related themes, such as social cohesion, which are perceived as more neutral and, therefore, less controversial. However, this approach often lacks a clear focus on addressing radicalization directly (Ibid., p. 384). Local authority staff can also refuse

to implement certain measures where they feel uncomfortable to pass information about communities and individuals to the police (Heath-Kelly, 2017, p. 305). Moreover, professionals working in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) often describe their work as frustrating. This is due to the complex and persistent nature of radicalization, the lack of definitive solutions, and the project-based funding structures that result in precarious employment conditions (Schlegel, 2022, p. 2).

State-Civil Society Relations Between Power Asymmetries and Hybridity

As outlined in the previous section, radicalization and extremism are no longer seen as issues to be addressed solely by hard professionals. In fact, it is widely recognized that effective prevention requires close cooperation with civil society, with local authorities, above all municipal officials, acting as key partners in fostering such collaboration. Sivenbring and Andersson Malmros (2019; 2023) have identified several advantages coming from the involvement of CSOs in preventing radicalization looking specifically at the case of Nordic countries. Being well rooted in local communities, civil society actors possess a deeper understanding of the population's specific needs than state authorities and are therefore better positioned to develop context-specific responses, including those addressing security concerns within communities (Evers et al., 2018). Moreover, the proximity to their communities confers upon local CSOs greater legitimacy and influence compared to state-actors, making these organizations more credible messengers when it comes to the spread of alternative and counter-narratives challenging extremist ideas (van Ginkel, 2012). Lastly, (local) civil society can also contribute to giving a voice to most vulnerable and marginalized groups, providing them with a platform through which they can address their demands and grievances, thus helping to reduce forms of exclusion that may lead to radicalization (Evers et al., 2018).

Despite its significant potential, the literature has also underscored several challenges characterizing civil society's involvement in PVE efforts. For instance, scholars have pointed how preventive initiatives have contributed to securitizing the social domain (Kundnani and Hayes, 2018) and how state-civil society engagement has been used to justify state's expansion of intelligence and surveillance (Mesok, 2022). More precisely, when CSOs take on the role of the government's "eyes and ears", they may undermine the exercise of

fundamental freedoms (Sivenbring and Andersson Malmros, 2023). In doing so, they not only endanger core democratic principles but also erode public trust in the voluntary sector. In addition, scholars warn that PVE policies and initiatives risk colonizing the work of civil society, potentially undermining its autonomy. As observed by Akintayo (2024) drawing on the liberationist perspective, the state often seeks to influence civil society to act in ways that serve its own interests - even when these actions contradict CSOs' foundational principles (p. 664). From this perspective, state-civil society relations have been viewed as a form of pathology that undermines the stated objectives of civil society, compromising its voluntary nature (Cortright et al. 2012). These accounts align Wolch's definition of the "shadow state" as "a para-state apparatus comprised of multiple voluntary sector organizations (…) and charged with major collective service responsibilities previously shouldered by the public sector, yet remaining within the purview of state control" (1990, p. xvi). Based on this perspective, through their reliance on state funding, nonprofit organizations' agendas often become co-opted by government institutions. This dynamic enables deeper state penetration into their organization, management, and goals, ultimately transforming voluntary associations into a shadow state apparatus that constrains their capacity to foster progressive social change (Ibid., p. 15).

Concurrently, a growing body of literature in recent years has underscored the nuanced and complex nature of government-civil society relations, emphasizing the variegated interactions that occur between state and non-state actors. Although the institutional logics of government and civil society are often regarded as incompatible, scholars such as Min (2022) have shown that government-CSO relationships can help reconcile these contradictions through processes of hybridization, in which distinctive identities, values, beliefs, and interests not only coexist but are also adjusted and transformed. The hybrid arrangements that characterize state-civil society relationships have also been examined by Trudeau's in his revisitation of the "shadow state" concept. Using a relational perspective focused on the different interactions and assemblages of state and civil society relations, his account sheds light on the ability of CSOs to negotiate or redirect state influence, pursue their own agendas a well as to shape that of the state (Trudeau, 2008, p. 672). For the scholar, civil society actors may receive funding from government agencies; however, these agencies have limited capacity to influence them, whether directly or indirectly. Rather, CSOs tend to pursue

agendas that are only minimally shaped by state institutions and, instead, prioritize the needs of local communities over those of the funding agencies (Ibid, p. 674). This phenomenon extends to the prevention field, where CSOs might exploit the ambiguity of the PVE agenda to reappropriate interventions through mechanisms of adaptation, (re)interpretation, and contestation, as one study on Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated (Pierobon, 2021). Although these strategies represent important mechanisms through which CSOs can exercise ownership and continue pursuing their own agenda in a changing funding landscape, they might also lead to the perpetuation of inappropriate interventions that fail to address radicalization on the ground.

Contextual Background: The German Case

The *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) oversees the protection of Germany's free democratic basic order as specified in several provisions of the *Grundgesetz* (the Basic Law) by providing information about the nature and extent of extremist threats. Four main groups have been identified as extremist in its most recent annual threat assessment in the country: right-wing extremism, including *Reichsbürger* ("citizens of the Reich") and *Selbstverwalter* ("self-administrators"), left-wing extremism, Islamist extremism and foreign extremism (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2024). In international comparison, Germany has developed a particularly diverse landscape of programs and projects for the prevention of extremism, which stands out by encompassing the full spectrum of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention measures **(**Koehler, 2024, p. 2). This multifaceted landscape has, to a large extent, developed as a result of Germany's federal system, in which responsibility for prevention work lies primarily with the *Länder*. Consequently, organizational frameworks differ considerably across the federal states, with varying institutions in charge and a wide range of contact points and authorities involved (Mathiesen & Meie, 2022, p. 69). For instance, when considering the tertiary prevention, three models of deradicalization work can be identified (Koehler, 2024). One model consists of programs run exclusively by state institutions or security agencies, as found in Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia. A second model reflects mixed arrangements, where governmental and non-governmental actors collaborate, as is the case in

Bavaria. The third and most widespread model is shaped by civil society, where non-state organizations independently provide counseling and support services. The field is also marked by multi-professional networks operating at the federal, state, and municipal levels. Within this structure, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) plays a key coordinating role, most notably through its Advice Centre on Radicalization (Uhlmann, 2017, p. 23). Taken together, these arrangements constitute a hybrid system of shared responsibility and highlight the significant interplay between governmental and non-governmental actors (Baaken et al., 2020), a feature that make Germany a *sui generis* case.

However, recent scholarship has underscored the challenges associated with state-civil society cooperation in Germany. One major limitation arises from the different logics underpinning civil society-led programs compared to those adopted by security authorities. More specifically, CSOs' initiatives, which focus primarily on early intervention, are marked by a cautious approach to prevent stigmatizing the target groups (von Lautz et al. 2024). Research even indicates that Islamic communities and mosques in Germany tend to avoid involvement in PVE programs led by national authorities, largely due to concerns that such engagement could reinforce narratives portraying Islam as the root of radicalization and could expose them to heightened surveillance (Ostwaldt, 2020). Moreover, consistent with research conducted in other countries, studies on Germany have shown how networks and associations engaged in state-initiated preventive efforts become not only more vulnerable to shifts in public policy but also excessively skewed in the direction of the state (Vermeulen, 2014, p. 304) The diverging logics characterizing soft and hard professionals operating in the preventive field is also accompanied by distinct funding mechanisms that give rise to competitive tensions between civil society and security authorities (Baaken et al., 2020) that do not facilitate cooperation.

Alongside, an alternative perspective has recently emerged that emphasize the positive experiences of cooperation between civil society and the police (see, for instance, Beelmann et al. 2024 and Goergen et al, 2021). These collaborations have increased the effectiveness of prevention work by improving access to information, by facilitating broader outreach, and by promoting greater public acceptance of police efforts. This emerging scholarship underscores that where cooperation falters, this is often due to reservations on the part of NGOs, which reflect divergent role perceptions and self-understandings *vis-à-vis* state actors, as well as

uncertainties surrounding data protection and legal frameworks (Ibid.). Additional challenges stem from civil society's reluctance to undergo evaluation of its work and the unstable and project-based character of its engagement, which is frequently constrained by limited resources and high staff turnover (Mathiesen & Meie, 2022). Resource scarcity and high staff turnover affect not only the work of non-state actors but also that of municipal officials, who are the primary focus of this study.

Methodology

The study is based on 14 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with local officials working in selected German municipalities from 5 different *Bundesläder* including North Rhine-Westphalia (6 participants), Hesse (4), Lower Saxony (2), Baden-Württemberg (1) and Bavaria (1). The interviewees were recruited because they all participated in the pilot project "Municipal expert consultation: Prevention and Social Cohesion"[5] implemented in 2024 by the Vereinigung Pestalozzi / LEGATO Projektverbund with financial support from the BAMF. The project was specifically designed to assist municipal actors at the local level in developing multi-professional structures and implementing prevention initiatives against radicalization and various forms of extremism. The interviews took place between September and October 2024 and were conducted in German using the platform zoom. Participation was voluntary and occurred based on anonymity and confidentiality, with written consent obtained from all participants.

The author conducted the interviews as part of a study that was intended both to provide scientific guidance to the pilot project "Municipal Expert Consultation" as well as to generate new insights into the work and challenges faced by municipal officials engaged in the prevention field. Given that the program was directed toward local municipalities, the study concentrated on municipal employees. It thereby adopted the standpoint of municipal officers, providing a systematic account of their experiences and perceptions - particularly in relation to cooperation with civil society - while purposefully excluding direct engagement with civil society actors.

The study followed a phenomenological approach that prioritizes the lived experience

[5] Original title in German: *Kommunale Fachberatung: Prävention und gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt*.

of municipal staff from a first-person perspective. This approach deliberately "turns away from any form of thinking about a particular phenomenon that takes its point of departure in crystallized beliefs and theoretical constructs, which in turn risk perpetuating preconceptions and pre-judgements" (Raza, 2024: 186) and instead seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their professional realities in the context of PVE. The semi-structured format provided a consistent framework of guiding questions that were combined with follow-up questions responding to the direction of the conversation. The guiding questions were organized around five major themes: 1) a typical workday of the municipal official, 2) the official's pathway into working in the prevention field, 3) their networking engagement within this field, 4) how they understand and communicate their mandate and 5) their cooperation with civil society actors. The thematic framework was developed in dialogue with the team implementing the project *Kommunale Fachberatung*, building on initial input provided by them. This paper is specifically concerned with the thematic area 5).

The interviews were transcribed using MAXQDA Transcription and analysed with the support of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Following Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999), a systematic coding scheme was applied, using the five major themes listed above as macro-categories. Within these predefined macro-categories, the data were further analysed through open coding, which made it possible to capture the particularities of the officials' first-person perspectives, the ways in which they make sense of their work, and the professional realities they navigate, particularly in relation to civil society. By subsequently grouping open codes into more abstract categories, I was able to identify both recurrent patterns of state-civil society cooperation and the challenges that accompany such cooperation. Although informed by predefined themes, the analysis sought to capture the particularities of officials' first-person perspectives while also identifying commonalities across participants, thereby highlighting shared dynamics alongside individual trajectories.

The author of the paper was solely responsible for the analysis of the data. During the analysis, a detailed codebook comprising codes' short definitions, explanatory notes and illustrative examples drawn from the data, was developed. This systematic documentation helped maintain reliability across the coding of different data segments. Following the analysis, the findings were validated in an internal workshop and an external workshop organized by the Vereinigung Pestalozzi / LEGATO Projektverbund in December 2024,

where preliminary results were presented and discussed with experts and practitioners to ensure their consistency with real-world experiences.

In the following analysis, the author provides English translations of quotations from German-language interviews and assumes full responsibility for any potential inaccuracies. To preserve anonymity given the small sample size, all personal details and local references that could enable identification were removed, including any mention of the respondent's specific municipality or federal state.

Analysis

The paper is specifically focused on the primary prevention understood as universally preventing radicalization. As a matter of fact, much of the municipal work in preventing radicalization and extremism takes place before any illegal activity occurs (Haugstvedt and Tuastad, 2023). This is reflected in the professional functions of the interviewed municipal employees, who occupied positions across a broad range of departments and units, including the coordination office for democracy promotion and comprehensive extremism prevention, local human rights offices, departments for social services, for integration, for migration and refugee affairs, as well as the municipal office for public order.

Departing from existing literature (Aradau & van Munster, 2005; Heath-Kelly, 2013, 2017; Pettinger, 2020), the interviewees' accounts tend to emphasize a pedagogical rather than a security- or risk-oriented perspective characterizing the work of municipal officials engaged in preventing radicalization on the ground. Indeed, study participants were primarily involved in so-called *politische Bildung* (civic education) aimed at reinforcing democratic values and fostering individual resilience against extremist narratives and ideologies[6]. Generally, prevention work and of civic education were seen as distinct yet interconnected fields by the interview partners, with boundaries between them often portrayed as fluid. For instance, Interviewee 11 described "promoting democracy" as related to the strengthening of self-efficacy and tolerance for ambiguity and "prevention" as engaging with and reflecting on one's own prejudices, positions, and privileges (Interview 11 conducted on 23.10.2024).

[6] Nonetheless, during their daily activities, the interviewees encountered cases of radicalization that placed them in secondary prevention efforts and, in a few instances, in tertiary prevention.

Remarkably, a dominant framing emerged among the municipal officials when asked about their mandate: most referred to the German *Grundgesetz* as the foundation of their engagement. By invoking the constitution, they situated their work within a normative framework of democratic values and their duty to defend Germany's liberal democratic basic order, rather than within a security-driven logic.

Perceptions and Practices of Municipal Officials in Relation to Civil Society

The interviewed municipal employees carry out a broad range of tasks, including participating in established networks, creating and institutionalizing new forms of cooperation, implementing awareness-raising measures, as well as monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of local prevention strategies. In their work, municipal actors often serve as intermediaries between state institutions and civil society, bringing different actors together, facilitating dialogue and supporting collaborative initiatives. Notably, several interview partners reiterated the importance of building trust through their networking activities: trust not only between civil society and municipal officials but also, and in particular, among civil society actors themselves.

A recurring theme in the interviews is the often-blurred boundary between municipal officials and civil society. Indeed, while not the rule, it is not uncommon for municipal staff to have previously been actively involved in civil society organizations and networks before assuming their roles within the local administration. In some cases, previous experiences in the non-profit sector were crucial in developing skills and contacts that proved valuable for the new role and were subsequently integrated into the respondent's professional work and network (Interview 2 conducted on 16.09.2024). Similarly, the role of a local official is not necessarily incompatible with direct engagement in civil society, as highlighted by Interviewee 3. At the time of the fieldwork, the respondent was considering expanding their involvement as a moderator within preventive networks through collaboration with a civil society association (*Verein*) (Interview 3 conducted on 30.09.2024). In the case of Interviewee 10, the role as a municipal specialist was structured in a unique way: 25% of the working hours as local official were allocated to a part-time position at a non-governmental organization (Interview 10 conducted on 17.10.2024). These examples illustrate how, at the local level, no clear-cut divide exists between state structures and civil society. Instead, the

findings suggest that hybrid arrangements (Min, 2022), shaped by municipal officials' personal experiences and forms of involvement, contribute to rendering the relationship between state and non-state actors increasingly blurred and porous.

Moreover, a slightly different conceptualization of civil society emerges from the practical experiences of municipal officials, diverging from how civil society is commonly portrayed in the existing PVE literature. Rather than referring primarily to professionalized NGOs, interviewees often described civil society as consisting of small, locally rooted associations with limited organizational capacities. As will be discussed in the following pages, this presents a significant challenge for cooperation. Interestingly, the interviews repeatedly highlight the presence of a distinctive form of civil society - a society of engaged citizens, a *Bürgergesellschaft*[7] in German - as the following quotation vividly illustrates:

> "We have a vibrant civil society - a civil society of citizens who are committed not through formal structures, but out of their own initiative. They recognize that the framework we live in is changing in a way they do not support. And yes, now is the time for them to take action to ensure things don't go in the wrong direction. (…) Essentially, it would be a society of engaged citizens rather than a traditional civil society. This represents the ideal image one could envision." (Interview 4 conducted on 01.10.2024)

This is also accompanied by a distinctive approach on the part of municipal authorities, whose primary goal is often described as to build and maintain relationships while creating favourable conditions that encourage civic engagement (see also Yngve and Kassman, 2024). As emphasized by Interviewee 2 in this regard, "I provide a lot of support, especially for civil society, serving as a kind of guide or network navigator. (…) Essentially, I have an advisory role, helping to identify what's possible and establishing contacts with organizations" (Interview 2 conducted on 16.09.2024). The involvement of municipal officials in networking activities with civil society can take different forms from more formalized multi-stakeholder working groups involving hard and soft professionals in charge of secondary and tertiary

[7] *Bürgergesellschaft* can be translated as either "citizen society" or "civic society", both of which emphasize active citizen participation beyond formal organizations.

prevention measures to very loose mailing list activities aimed at circulating information about events to the broader public.

In some cases, collaboration with civil society goes beyond the implementation phase as the engagement in *ad hoc* networks allows civil society representatives to get involved in what Torfing and Ansell (2021) defined the "co-creation" of primary preventive measures - including initiation, planning and policymaking. This was, for instance, the case of a working group involving the city administration, migrant self-organizations, the police, and welfare associations and that was engaged in the elaboration of an action plan addressing racism, right-wing extremism, and antisemitism through a consultation process lasting several months (Interview 11 conducted on 23.10.2024).

Another form of collaboration identified in the interviews involved municipal actors supporting civil society actors through network activities, particularly by facilitating connections with potential funders and grant providers. In some cases, municipal staff provided financial support for small-scale projects initiated by individuals, thus reinforcing the conceptualization of a *Bürgergesellschaft*. However, recipients were typically required to have some form of institutional affiliation and demonstrate a degree of coordination, to ensure that the projects contributed to the creation of collective goods for the broader community (see also Alford, 2010). In addition to their networking efforts, municipal officials also offer direct support to civil society organizations in the process of proposal development, providing guidance on how to improve project design and increase the likelihood of funding success, as described by the Interviewee 11:

> "They submit the application, and often it's not yet perfect, so we discuss it together a bit. How can this project perhaps be implemented more effectively? Uh, is it maybe just too expensive? (…) And we try to have a dialogue on equal footing to figure out how this project can be implemented successfully." (Interview 11 conducted on 23.10.2024)

When asked to reflect on their approach, interviewees described a practical combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies in their work, pointing out for instance how "We are not above or below the network partners, we are truly equal partners. When we

develop focal points, we decide on them together. Of course, we also have to bring politics along with us" (Interview 4 conducted on 1.10.2024). Although institutional logics may differ and political considerations must also be considered in municipal officials' work, the activities within these networks contribute to initiating processes of hybridization through which the agendas of state actors are adjusted to the interests and priorities of non-state ones (see also Trudeau, 2008). Notably, the interviews highlighted the central role of local civil society arrangements in shaping governance and participation in the PVE field. As highlighted by Interviewee 14: "we not only provide space, integrate inputs, or impart knowledge, but also promote collaboration (…) so that cooperation and mutual support could be established" (Interview 14 conducted on 31.10.2024). Through institutional conditions and patterns of resource allocation, these local configurations directly and indirectly influence how collaboration and engagement are organized (see also Arvidson et al., 2018, p. 7).

Overall, the findings point to the emergence of a new role in the relationship between municipal officials and civil society. Based on the perspective of the interviewed, municipal actors increasingly assume a facilitative function, bringing together non-profit stakeholders and fostering the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. Nonetheless, this often remains more of an aspirational vision than a fully realized practice, as a range of challenges hinders cooperation between local authorities and the non-profit sector. These dynamics will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

Factors and Challenges Shaping State-Civil Society Collaboration at the Local Level

A substantial body of literature has highlighted various risks associated with government-nonprofit cooperation, including the potential erosion of civil society's autonomy, the over-professionalization and bureaucratization of nonprofit organizations in response to state-imposed management and reporting requirements, and a reduction in advocacy activities to avoid jeopardizing access to public funding (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Mosley, 2012; Salamon, 1989; Young, 2000). However, the data gathered at the municipal level suggest a different dynamic: the corporatist model traditionally associated with the German context appears to give way to more socially embedded and less hierarchical relationships, marked by a growing sensitivity among public authorities to local needs and concerns (see also Bode & Brandsen, 2014). For instance,

instead of a high degree of professionalization among non-profit actors, the interviews underscored the limited capacity of local civil society to navigate bureaucratic requirements and procedures, which emerged as a major challenge in cooperation. As Interviewee 11 observed in this regard, these organizations:

> "often lack the necessary staffing, for example, to handle the entire bureaucratic workload. This means that processes, particularly accounting and financial reports, can sometimes be a bit bumpy and require a lot of coordination before we finally have a report that we can take to our supervisor for approval. It's a bit challenging at times." (Interview 11 conducted on 23.10.2024)

The findings neither confirm nor entirely refute previous studies on the German context, which emphasize that CSOs tend to avoid oversight of state funding (see, for instance, Mathiesen & Meie, 2022). Instead, the interviews suggest that local voluntary organizations often lack the knowledge and management skills to carry out evaluations. This, in turn, constitutes a significant challenge in state–non-state cooperation, as reporting requirements can only be met with considerable difficulty, which ultimately jeopardizes their access to funding.

The absence of professionalization is especially pronounced in networking activities, where the predominantly voluntary and part-time character of civil society engagement in PVE tends to constrain the consistent availability and long-term participation of its representatives. As noted by Interviewee 5, "it becomes extremely difficult to organize regular meetings that bring both full-time and volunteer staff together. Even creating a format, such as quarterly or semi-annual meetings, where the same participants consistently take part, is often unfeasible." (Interview 5 conducted on 07.10.2024)

In addition to managerial and organizational constraints, cooperation between municipal staff and civil society is further hindered by a lack of understanding of the specific mandate of the former. This is clearly illustrated in the words of Interviewee 14:

> "I tend to have difficulties with civil society. They are always very politically active, which I think is great - I have no problem with that content-wise. But they

> have little understanding that I cannot be politically active myself. And they quickly take offense at that (…) Then, they often show a strong interest not in genuine cooperation but in funding. It's like, 'We have an idea - do you have money for it? And then? When I say, 'No, unfortunately, I don't have money, but I can support financially if it's within the framework of a cooperation', they can't reconcile that. I still try to support them by highlighting various funding opportunities or wherever I can help. But I notice that there are tensions in the work." (Interview 14 conducted on 31.10.2024)

While earlier studies emphasize the risks of PVE policies and initiatives colonizing civil society and undermining its autonomy (Akintayo, 2024; Kundnani & Hayes, 2018; Mesok, 2022), at municipal level civil society actors seem to be less constrained by state influence. Instead, the interview data evoke Trudeau's revisitation of the "shadow state" concept (2008) highlighting that municipal officials possess only limited capacity (including limited financial resources) to exert influence over civil society. Some civil society representatives perceived their relations with state authorities only in instrumental terms (see also Mathiesen & Meie, 2022) and, as the interview excerpt illustrates, even expressed a preference to forgo financial support if accepting such resources necessitated cooperation with municipal officials.

With reference to the mandate of municipal staff mentioned during the interviews, other respondents pointed to the need to avoid political activity as a significant challenge in their cooperation with civil society actors. Indeed, local officials in Germany are required to adhere to the *Neutralitätsgebot*[8], which prohibits them from expressing political preferences or opinions, particularly in relation to political parties. As highlighted by Interviewee 5:

> "It's a slow system with its own limitations, and combined with the principle of neutrality, there's often little understanding from volunteers. When people are not

[8] *Neutralitätsgebot* denotes the principle of political neutrality governing public administration in Germany, which holds that civil servants and municipal officials must refrain from expressing political preferences or engaging in partisan activities during their official duties. This requirement is rooted in constitutional mandates (Articles 20(2) & 33(5) Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany) and codified in § 33(1) of the Civil Servant Status Act, thereby safeguarding the impartiality and legitimacy of the state bureaucracy (Classen, 2025)

> well-versed in these processes, it becomes very difficult to repeatedly explain your situation - why certain things can't be done or why this particular project is not something I can support right now. This can sometimes make communication and collaboration challenging." (Interview 5 conducted on 07.10.2024)

The situation is exacerbated by the lack of trust that civil society organizations place in municipal officials, particularly when they are associated with security forces. Such situations are not uncommon given the hybrid nature of PVE work that inevitably combines both security and social work logics and engagements (Clubb, Koehler, Schewe, & O'Connor, 2021). In this regard, one interview partner, a youth social worker, reported being "perceived as the 'spy side'" (Interview 14 conducted on 31.10.2024) simply because their office was located within the *Ordnungsamt* (public order office**)**. In addition to the lack of trust in security forces, municipal officials identify another challenge to cooperation in the divergent interests and, at times, conflicting standpoints among the various actors involved in multi-agency formats. In certain cases, some civil society actors might hold worldviews that are fundamentally critical of - or even reject - the existence or legitimacy of specific state institutions, making multi-agency cooperation unlikely or even impossible. As depicted by Interviewee 1:

> "I find it more challenging in larger platforms where various interest groups come together at the same table. (…) At these meetings, professional discussions often devolve into, what I consider, unnecessary debates, such as whether the police should be abolished. I believe we can only work together on these topics if we refrain from attacking each other. This is particularly difficult when so many different ideologies collide, and some participants hold very entrenched views." (Interview 1 conducted on 12.09.2024)

In addition, the interviews indicated one further reason negatively affecting cooperation with civil society actors that has not yet been considered in the existing literature on PVE. The data revealed instances where volunteers were perceived as overstepping their intended roles, particularly in refugee support, where they became engaged in primary

prevention activities. Specifically, certain volunteers were described as excessively involved in assisting newcomers, at times taking on responsibilities that were meant to be carried out by the newcomers themselves, with the aim of fostering their autonomy and strengthening their sense of self-efficacy (Interview 12 conducted on 28.10.2024). This dynamic is particularly evident among elderly volunteers who, according to interviewees, are often retirees with limited social and familial ties. Although engagement with refugees is portrayed as being motivated by a genuine desire to contribute positively to society, the interviews reveal that these well-intentioned efforts can sometimes result in an overextension of care, which may inadvertently foster dependency among newcomers.

Concluding Discussion

This paper sheds light on how the relationship between municipal authorities and civil society is more complex and less deterministic than commonly described in the scholarly literature focused on the prevention field, resizing the influence that the state has on non-profit actors at the local level. The study highlights how municipal staff's understanding of civil society and its role in preventive efforts might influence the variation in approaches and forms of cooperation to be found in different German municipalities. This variation is shaped not only by institutional frameworks and local regulations but also by individual personal experiences and perspectives. Nonetheless, a key commonality emerges among municipal officials: they conceptualize their role in cultivating and sustaining networks as a central component of their professional responsibilities. As evidenced by the interviews, municipal officials act as social infrastructure builders, creating new spaces and opportunities where various state and non-state actors - *in primis*, civil society representatives - can come together and engage in exchange. Their contribution in this regard is also partially from a social capital perspective, as it fosters the development of "bridging" social capital, including its "linking" form. These forms of social capital provide access to new skills and resources otherwise not available (Onyx and Bullen 2000). The linking variant specifically facilitates access to power structures and institutions through which policy can be influenced (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

The paper also underlines how the boundaries between the state and civil society is fluid and porous at the local level, pointing out a certain continuity between the two. Indeed,

civil society is not something completely external to public authorities and their actions (Citroni & Coppola, 2021) as the interviewed municipal actors were, for instance, members of civil society, still work for CSOs or are engaged in civic networks and initiatives as private citizens. In addition, from the accounts of the interviewed municipal officials, it became evident how a neoliberal understanding of civil society as consisting of NGOs commonly found in conventional PVE literature does not accurately reflect the realities on the ground where civic engagement extends beyond organized third sector and takes place in forms of formal and informal volunteering.

The centrality of the individuals - the municipal employees themselves and their networks as well as the volunteers engaged in preventive efforts - also suggests that at the municipal level, it might be more accurate to talk about a *Bürgergesellschaft* (civic society) rather than a *Zivilgesellschaft* (civil society). As these forms of civic engagement are even unpaid, a marketization has not occurred, at least not within the prevention field, where a lack of professionalism rather than an over-professionalism characterizes the sector. Noteworthy, the limited capacity of the volunteer sector makes it difficult for municipality structures to find reliable partners for funding and collaboration on long-term initiatives. Paradoxically, even when resources for preventive initiatives are available, they cannot always be allocated due to a shortage of human resources and managerial skills.

Yet, this research has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to municipal officials and thus captures only one side of the collaborative relationship between local authorities and civil society. While this perspective provides valuable insight into how collaboration is understood and practiced at the local level, it excludes the views of civil society. This asymmetry introduces a potential bias, as civil society's perspectives are only indirectly represented through the accounts of municipal staff. Moreover, the aim of this study was descriptive and exploratory, seeking to shed light on how municipal officials make sense of their professional realities in the context of PVE. The findings of this study are based on interviews conducted in 14 German municipalities and its micro-sociological approach does not allow any form of generalization. Indeed, local contexts vary across federal states, municipality size, urban-rural settings, political orientation, and local radicalization histories, all of which may shape collaboration dynamics. As contextual

differences were not accounted for in the analysis, the transferability of the findings beyond the municipalities studied here is limited.

Despite these limitations, this pilot study contributes original empirical evidence on local-level state-civil society collaboration in the prevention field in Germany, a topic that remains understudied. In particular, the pronounced discrepancy with the existing scholarship compels the reader to interrogate the underlying causes of this divergence. Surely, the German case is *sui generis*, owing to its hybrid preventive system and the interplay between governmental and non-governmental actors, which makes it only partially comparable to international experiences. In addition, the interviews reflect the perspective of municipal officials rather than that of civil society, whereas much of the prevailing literature implicitly adopts a civil society-oriented perspective, thereby offering new insights into the study of collaboration between state and non-state actors. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped civil society, as the absence of public life for over two years resulted in the discontinuation of numerous initiatives, as well as the dissolution of the organizations associated with them. The interviewees highlighted how municipal officials often had to rebuild and revitalize structures that went down or even did not survive the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic which partly explains the poorly organized civil society.

The topic of state-civil society cooperation in the PVE field of clearly warrants further empirical investigation, particularly at the local level. By emphasizing the role of municipal officials as facilitators and mediators, this research not only opens new avenues for comparative inquiry but also lays the groundwork for future studies that integrate the perspectives of CSOs, thereby fostering a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of state-civil society collaboration in the PVE field. In addition, future studies could more systematically examine variations across federal states and municipalities and investigate how they influence the dynamics of state-civil society relations. A phenomenological approach - centred on the lived experiences and first-person perspectives of those directly engaged in preventive work - holds significant potential for revealing how collaboration is understood, and shaped and practiced across diverse local contexts. Such an approach moves beyond normative interpretations and prescriptions, advancing a more grounded and relational understanding of state-civil society collaboration, one that accounts for the hybrid

arrangements and interpersonal dynamics through which preventive efforts unfold at the local level.

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