

# Spatial Aspects of De-Radicalisation

## Evidence from Six Urban Settings across Europe

### Executive Summary

The spatial dimension of the public sphere is central in understanding the “social glue” of cohesive societies. It is in public spaces where people of different backgrounds and walks of life meet with varying interests that need to be mediated. Public spaces are by no means neutral, as they are characterised by different power dynamics and influenced by the actors occupying them. Encounters between people in public space may foster social cohesion and people’s sense of belonging to a community but they can also – and often do – contribute to reinforcing boundaries. In this work package of the D.Rad project, we have analysed the situation in six cities across Europe – Florence, Helsinki, London, Pristina, Tbilisi, and Vienna – that differ significantly regarding their geopolitical position, governance structures, framework conditions, and historical developments.

Several current developments, such as spatial segregation, gentrification, political polarisation, multiple crises, and the rise of commercial and private spaces have impacted the availability, distribution of, and access to public spaces. The design and the accessibility of public space thereby have an impact on the ways in which different user groups do or do not interact. Consequently, they can contribute to the inclusion/exclusion of groups of people. This is also connected to (de)radicalisation processes as exclusionary processes in public spaces. The latter may reinforce a pattern according to which people mainly interact within their reference group. Such processes can foster feelings of injustice, grievance, alienation, and polarisation, thus amplifying radicalisation processes. Nevertheless, public spaces may also have inclusionary effects, strengthening a sense of belonging and creating spaces for marginalised people. These processes are often influenced by a variety of actors, initiatives, and projects that work on or in public spaces. Cities across Europe have addressed these issues quite differently: While some seem to neglect public spaces, which is also connected to the question of funding, others have a highly differentiated governmental and administrative apparatus that steers interventions. Hence, the local level is also an arena where various actors interact and where socio-political negotiation processes and political projects of belonging come to the fore.

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## Evidence and Analysis

### An innovative comparative approach

In D.Rad WP9, we have developed an innovative toolkit that consisted of several research steps. We analysed policy documents and carried out expert interviews to assess the overall urban contexts and their current developments.

Each research team first chose one particular public space and its surrounding area that had surfaced during the expert interviews and/or background research as a contested (though not exceptional) public space. For this in-depth case study, two interactive workshops were organised: D.Rad LAB I and D.Rad LAB II. For D.Rad LAB I, we invited actors involved in the dynamics and layout of the space, such as municipal or neighbourhood officials, urban planners, street workers, and resident activists. For the second interactive workshop, we included young users (D.Rad Youth) of the public space who were approached as experts on the notions of inclusion/exclusion. This approach allowed the research teams to contrast the views of people working in the space in various capacities with those of the young users. The use of a participatory toolkit consisting of game cards proved to be a highly effective way to let the participants of both workshops steer the discussion on their own terms.

### Challenges in public space across urban contexts

Some challenges in public space are only found in certain cities under investigation, while other challenges equally apply to (almost) all of them.

Commencing with challenges: the **pandemic** has led to a growing degree of pressure on and awareness of the importance of easily and equally accessible public spaces. In cities with prolonged lockdowns, we first witnessed a haunting emptiness. The sudden and prolonged closure of many of these spaces has made city dwellers painfully aware of that which was missing. This was followed by the growing presence of city dwellers in public space when the lockdown measures were reduced, which led to conflicts between different user groups. While some people depend on public

#### Urban settings under investigation:

**Florence**, Italy (EU)

**Helsinki**, capital of Finland (EU)

**London**, capital of the UK (non-EU)

**Pristina**, capital of Kosovo (non-EU)

**Tbilisi**, capital of Georgia (non-EU)

**Vienna**, capital of Austria (EU)

spaces because they are suffering under overcrowded housing conditions, poverty, or homelessness, others use them for leisure activities.

**Over-tourism** is a phenomenon that leads to overcrowding in public spaces. These are often packed to capacity, resulting in a negative impact on the local population. Overcrowded streets and squares, as well as an increasing burden on infrastructure drive those who can afford it out of the respective neighbourhoods. This particularly applies to Florence, where tourism poses a substantial threat to public space. Over-tourism seems to go hand in hand with processes of gentrification, progressively undermining free and equal access to spaces and places. In Vienna, which is a monocentric city, tourism is largely confined to the (rather small) first district, while other parts of the city remain untouched. The role of and impact of tourism on London, which is a global tourist magnet, needs no further elaboration.

**Security and securitisation** are controversial issues. While some – mostly female – young users of public space call for better lighting and greater police presence, there is a conflict between actors favouring suppressive measures and surveillance, and those favouring soft measures such as social work. Strict security measures can also affect the youth, who are often perceived as a threat or nuisance by public authorities when they are visiting public spaces in larger groups. Although safety and security measures are important, many issues can be solved by social or youth workers in dialogue with the actors involved. Answers to the public use of

harmful substances like alcohol and drugs include the instalment of safety zones and place bans, which however may merely result in the activation of displacement mechanisms.

**Privatisation and commercialisation** can be both a threat and an opportunity for urban public space. Given the fact that public spaces are already scarce in many parts of European cities today, both aspects can be detrimental to the notion of “accessibility for all”. Private spaces such as shopping malls have nevertheless become places for young people to spend their free time, and if these spaces also include public services such as libraries, the distinction between public and private spaces becomes blurred. In some of the settings under investigation, a sense of disillusionment with institutionally led initiatives resulted in openness to the idea of the partial privatisation of public space, as long as this serves the public benefit and makes a space more functional and vibrant.

A **sense of belonging** to a city or a certain neighbourhood can be fostered by encounters and activities in public space. However, the reverse can also be true: rejection or hostility in the public sphere can have a negative impact on a person’s sense of belonging to society as a whole. Such processes can foster feelings of injustice, grievance, alienation, and polarisation, thus amplifying radicalisation processes. The question “do you even belong here”, and the decision of that which should or should not be allowed in public space is a topic both in superdiverse cities such as Vienna and London, and in less diverse contexts, such as Helsinki. Added challenges include new locally prevalent diasporas, for example of those relocated due to war.

**Climate adaptation** and green spaces is a topic discussed more often by young users of public space than by people involved in public space in a professional capacity. This shows how important this issue is for young people in particular. Current protests, for example in Vienna, also have the potential to create tensions and divide society. Cities are globally strongly affected by climate change, and the rise in temperature, causing phenomena such as heat islands, heat waves, and smog, has negative effects on public health and the urban population.

The **uneven distribution of public space within cities** is an element of social injustice. It is often low-income groups living in the densely built-up parts of the city, exposed to overcrowded housing conditions, that lack easily accessible recreational areas. This creates a gap that reinforces social exclusion and that can lead to feelings of injustice and frustration. In parts of Europe, weather-proof non-commercial spaces are important. In the situation of climate change, these should not only offer shelter from cold but also from hot weather.

### **Governance approaches**

In the area of governance, we observe certain city administrations that are very active in the design of public space and that also incorporate its importance for social cohesion into their considerations (Helsinki, Vienna). There, we also find approaches to citizen participation and bottom-up initiatives that are being paid attention to. Other cities are characterised by clear top-down structures in an increasing neoliberal milieu, leaving little room for manoeuvre for residents or other users in planning processes (Tbilisi). The third variant is would be a *laissez-faire* approach according to which the city administration does not show any pronounced activity regarding or interest in public space but rather takes a reactive stance. Here, too, it is local initiatives and bottom-up approaches that can help to shape lively and liveable public spaces, often doing so without the involvement of public administration.

For city administrations that are highly engaged in public space, the many networking structures and various administrative units that are involved need institutionalised forms of exchange. If this is absent, administrative processes can become an obstacle to comprehensive approaches and the implementation of concrete projects. Instead, each of these units then focuses on their particular task and field of expertise, lacking exchange. Furthermore, decision-making processes are often too complex, with delays due to complicated bureaucratic structures. To overcome the distinction between the public and private space and establish connections between the users of both, collaboration is needed between public and private actors, e.g., businesses such as shopping malls, libraries, and associations acting in public space.

## Conclusions and recommendations

### Promotion of diversity

Cities in Europe vary in terms of the share and origins of their inhabitants with a migration history. Yet, the general trend is that the share of newcomers is constantly growing in almost all of them. Acknowledging and promoting this development is very important for creating pluralist, equal, and democratic urban societies based on diversity as a value in itself. Public space, as the arena for various different encounters, offers the perfect setting for “getting to know each other”. Consequently, it should be used as such in more initiatives, both public and private. Measures preventing segregation could include housing and zoning policies, or providing public cultural facilities throughout the city.

### Let the youth talk and take part in planning of public space

Rather than making decisions about the youth, policy makers should actively engage with and listen to young people, encouraging them to get involved in planning procedures. The creation of platforms that involve young people in the design and implementation of planning may empower young people, foster their sense of belonging, and ideally lead to the creation of public spaces that reflect their needs and realities.

### Bring public services to public space

Easily accessible public spaces across the city featuring services such as libraries, youth services, courses, and events for various user groups make it more likely that people from diverse backgrounds and of different ages will meet and thus promote social inclusion.

### Securitisation and security

There is no doubt that feeling safe and secure is of key importance for enjoying spending time in public space. Concerning safety, it is certainly not easy to find the balance between measures that involve social work and those that involve harsher measures such as bans, surveillance, and police presence. Nevertheless, many issues should preferably be solved by social or youth workers in “softer” approaches.

### Emphasis on inner-city areas with a lack of green space

Areas in the densely built-up inner parts of cities need special attention. Providing more greenery and minimising traffic can help to avoid a high heat load and to improve quality of life.

### Funding and resources

The topic of resources and funding was mentioned in all of the urban contexts that were examined. In some cities, the issues were rather fundamental, such as providing sufficient lighting, whereas funding was lacking in others for innovative approaches. The situation of multiple crises has led to economic insecurities and financial cuts despite the fact that additional investments are needed particularly now to cushion the effects of these crises.

### Creating spaces for and with marginalised groups

People do not all depend equally on public spaces or have equal access to them, nor do all groups use these spaces in the same ways. In order to provide marginalised groups with sufficient space and defuse conflicts between different groups, cities must create retreat spots and ensure that there are sufficient attractive, non-commercial public spaces. These should include basic infrastructure, such as public toilets, covered niches, benches, and drinking water. In addition, intersectional approaches are needed to identify various forms and risks of discrimination. This should be done in collaboration with the marginalised groups to ensure knowledge of their local needs.

### Cross-sectional collaboration and co-governance

As inclusion is a complex issue that starts with feeling at home and acknowledged in one’s own locality, this research underscores that inclusion can be best achieved by cross-sectional collaboration in which citizens and citizen groups are involved. Our examples illustrate that collaboration between different actors can provide co-governance structures that strengthen the agency of vulnerable groups in the society. This cannot be best achieved in a top-down structure. Horizontal and bottom-up practices should be strongly involved.

**Acknowledging the role of public spaces**

Finally, this research underlines the importance of public spaces for fostering social cohesion. Greater attention to these spaces by city governments and policy makers can at least cushion processes of social exclusion along with the accompanying frustration among some parts of the population. Ultimately, public space is where democracy is to be lived. It is a place of encounter, exchange, and engagement.

## Project identity

Project name: De-Radicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate  
Acronym: D.Rad  
Website: [www.draddproject.com](http://www.draddproject.com)  
Funding: Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, H2020-SC6-GOVERNANCE-2020  
Project no: 959198  
Duration: December 2020 – November 2023 (36 months)

This document is based on six city reports that were compiled as part of  
D.Rad's Work Package 9 "**Spatial Aspects of Deradicalisation Processes...**"

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