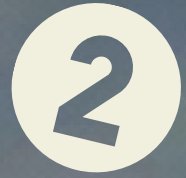




PARTES SPOTLIGHT



Safeguarding Places of Worship in Europe: A Comprehensive Assessment of Current Threats, Vulnerabilities, and Good Practices in 13 Countries

After a nine-month research from March to November 2023, which involved thoroughly analysing 30 cases across 13 European countries and conducting a total of 28 interviews with religious leaders, the PARTES project team has gathered several insights which are summarised in this Spotlight. The resulting conclusions on threats, vulnerabilities, gaps, risks and good practices reflect the current situation faced by various religious communities, with a particular focus on the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths. These findings underscore the project's commitment to enhancing the security of places of worship and the security of religious communities across Europe.

Threats: type of attacks and extremist groups

The targeting of religious faiths in acts of violence varies across European countries. Notably, the Muslim community shoulders the greatest impact in six of the countries studied. However, the correlation between the most targeted faith and the severity of attacks is not straightforward. Instances like shootings and murders at Catholic places of worship in Spain and France demonstrate this complexity, where they face such grave incidents despite not being the primary target in their respective countries.

While violent attacks and hate crimes are prevalent, their overall impact is often limited. Despite this, monitoring these incidents remains crucial, recognizing that low-intensity attacks may escalate into more severe and impactful violence. Hate crimes, particularly incidents like vandalism, graffiti, and online hate campaigns, are the most frequent types of offenses against places of worship. Case studies emphasize the potential link between online incidents and subsequent physical violence or hate crimes, yet these incidents often go unreported. Countries like the Netherlands, Latvia, Portugal, and Romania experienced fewer incidents against places of worship compared to others. Concerning cyber-attacks, the Evangelical Lutheran Church websites are the sole targets, with Latvia being the exception.





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Individual attackers or unorganized small groups of young people are the most common perpetrators. Far-right groups and individuals typically target Muslim and Jewish communities, while Jihadist individuals display a broader scope, attacking all religious faiths due to their fundamentalist views. However, Christian communities are more likely targets for Jihadist attacks. The intensity and nature of these attacks, as well as the type of perpetrators involved, vary significantly based on the national context.

Vulnerabilities

The four cross-cutting vulnerabilities identified for all places of worship are:

- High levels of stigmatisation of religious communities, resulting in an increase in the number of hate crimes against them.
- Underreporting of hate crimes and inadequate procedures for gathering and systematising data on hate crime.
- Lack of identification of perpetrators, exacerbated by the lack of protection of places of worship.
- Disparities in funding for protection measures between regions, countries and religious communities.

Gaps for improvement

The vulnerability of various places of worship seems to primarily stem from funding disparities, leading to unequal levels of security across different religious faiths and communities. Christian and Muslim communities, in particular, face heightened vulnerability due to these discrepancies. Additionally, the lack of effective communication channels between public authorities, law enforcement agencies, and religious communities further exacerbates the challenges.

Another significant obstacle to protecting places of worship is their often inappropriate location, either on the outskirts of cities, fostering segregation or in small, rented premises that prove challenging to secure. This situation gives rise to an additional gap: the implicit structural violence evident in the passivity of authorities allowing the construction of religious spaces, coupled with local societies' rejection.

Regarding hate crimes, three distinct gaps amplify the risk faced by places of worship:

- Underreporting
- Absence of coherent national systems for monitoring and investigating these crimes
- Non-identification of the perpetrators



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Risks

The absence of protective measures renders places of worship highly susceptible to both surprise and high-impact attacks. Similarly, though cyberattacks are not prevalent, places of worship remain exposed to them.

The lack of funding aggravates the vulnerability of places of worship, preventing religious communities from implementing necessary security measures to address potential threats. Even minor protective measures, such as the installation of CCTV and alarms or the engagement of security guards, could significantly reduce the risk of attacks and serve as a deterrent to potential perpetrators.

Furthermore, the vulnerability of religious communities is exacerbated by the location of their premises or the obstacles they encounter when constructing places of worship in strategically better-located areas. Consequently, the risk of severe consequences after attacks increases and the challenges of deterring or mitigating these incidents become greater.

Improving communication channels between public actors and religious communities is paramount for their protection and to minimize the stigmatization of religious faiths. The current polarized context within European societies poses a substantial risk to the security of religious communities. With the escalation of hate speech and hate crimes, coupled with the rise of far-right groups, the social environment is becoming increasingly hostile for certain religious communities.

Good practices

During the research process, investigators explored effective security measures for safeguarding places of worship and establishing communication channels between religious communities, law enforcement agencies and public authorities. As a result, the following findings have emerged:

- Trustful relationships among local actors are fostered through the establishment of effective communication and cooperation channels. Common practices include local roundtables, agreements to elect mediators, and interfaith initiatives.
- Enhancements in the security of places of worship result from proactive initiatives that raise awareness and employ proper methodologies to assess threats and incidents.
- The repercussions of attacks are minimized by implementing and funding appropriate security measures, providing training, and developing comprehensive strategies.





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The findings of the research encapsulate the complex landscape within which religious communities operate in Europe. While reflecting on the risks, it is imperative to recognize the crucial role of implementing good practices, fostering communication channels, and addressing funding disparities. By acknowledging these insights and embracing collaborative efforts, the PARTES project helps to pave the way for a more secure and inclusive environment for all.

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