

Evaluering av Senter for ekstremismeforskning (C-REX)

SAMRISK - Samfunnssikkerhet

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Introduction

The evaluation of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) in Norway took place on 2 September 2019. The members of the evaluation team were Professor Nick Fyfe (Chair), Docent Maureen A. Eger and Senior Researcher, Manni Crone as subject area experts. The committee would like to thank members of C-REX, the host department, PhD students, partner organisations, and the RCN team for their support with and contribution to the evaluation process and the provision of written materials.

Research activities

The main objectives of C-REX are (i) to develop empirical and theoretical knowledge on right-wing extremism; (ii) to contribute to the international scholarly research on extremism in general and right-wing extremism in particular (iii) to disseminate research-based knowledge to stakeholders, policy makers, the public and the media.

Since C-REX was established in 2015, it has developed a strong academic profile through the publication of a wide-range of peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and book chapters. Aligned with the 4 thematic areas of focus (ideology, violence, friend & foes, and prevention), these publications contribute to a number of disciplines, such as communication, history, political science, psychology, religious studies, and sociology. In addition, the Center has also disseminated its research by hosting and contributing to international conferences as well as engaging with the national and international research community, particularly through their strategic partnerships with other research centres in Norway and overseas.

The Center has contributed to the development of theory (for example, creating new typologies on the perpetrators of right-wing violence and reconceptualising key actors of far-right political parties) and methodology (such as online ethnographies of far-right activism and Qualitative Comparative Analysis) in the field of extremism. They are also making innovative use of methods, such as case simulation, to help enable the systematic analysis of phenomena across countries. Additionally, they are developing a database repository of primary sources on far-right terrorism, which will be a significant contribution to the multi-disciplinary research community. Indeed, the Center's multi-disciplinarity means they can tackle research questions using a wide variety of methods.

Despite the production of an impressive body of work in a relatively short period of time, the Center has not formally synthesized the findings from these individual projects to assess its broader contribution to the field of right-wing extremism studies. The conclusions from such an exercise are arguably paramount as they would allow the Center not only to develop a distinct identity but also clarify its contribution to the field.

Recommendation 1: C-REX has developed a strong portfolio of individual projects, but it is also important that the Center reflects on and synthesizes its published research to assess its wider contribution to the field as a whole (as well as its key thematic areas). Doing this will clarify how C-REX is more than just the sum of its individual parts/projects and reveal a distinctive story about its role in answering specific research questions as well as its contribution to the overall development of the field.

The planned activities for C-REX over the next five years are to continue with their main objectives of developing and disseminating new knowledge on right-wing extremism and to strengthen its ties to

the international academic community engaged in similar research. The Center will also conduct research related to a new theme on the relationship between gender and extremism. Further, having identified empirical, theoretical, and methodological gaps in the knowledge-base of right wing extremism, scholars at the Center will also focus their efforts on understanding 'street groups' such as neo-Nazis; exploring populist and far-right attitudes in mainstream politics; investigating emotions involved in far-right extremism; incorporating social movement theory into the study of far-right extremism; and increasing the use of online big data analysis.

These are ambitious plans for the next five years, and it was evident from our discussions with members of the Center that they have already started to work towards achieving these goals. However, it appears that these research priorities are very much set by scholars at the Center, with little evidence that research partners were included in conversations about future research directions. While the academic independence and autonomy of the Center is essential to its credibility and legitimacy, this does not preclude listening to other voices in the setting of broad strategy and priorities, as there may be opportunity costs incurred by failing to take a more inclusive approach.

Recommendation 2: While C-REX has developed a strong research agenda driven by its own academic community, the Center should also provide opportunities for academic and non-academic partners' voices to be considered in the strategic setting of future research priorities. Maintaining more regular dialogue may also enhance the dissemination of research findings.

While C-REX has made a significant contribution to the field of right-wing extremism, it also conducts research on other forms of extremism and related topics (Islamism, Hinduism etc.). The text of the initial call specified that the Center must have a clear focus on right-wing extremism and could engage in related topics and field 'provided such research will enhance and advance research on right-wing extremism'. Considering the need to sharpen the identity and research profile of C-REX, it is not entirely clear, however, to what extent the Center has managed to create synergy between research on right-wing extremism and other extremisms and how research on other topics features in its main focus on right-wing extremism.

Recommendation 3: The Center should consider whether the relationship between research on right-wing extremism and other examples of extremism is balanced, according to the description in the original call. When engaging in research on other forms of extremism or related topics, the Center should nevertheless ensure that such research still advances and contributes to the core theme of right-wing extremism.

Relevance and benefit to users and the society

C-REX has provided clear evidence of wider engagement at a national and international level, with activities ranging from work with Norwegian government to outreach to the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network. The C-REX Newsletter and web page are also directly marketed to policy makers and professionals.

Our discussions with the Center's local research partners demonstrated that C-REX actively collaborates and engages with external research groups and users. The Norwegian Police University College, for example, values the input from C-REX on police courses, particularly in the area of hate crime. Partner representatives also described the research from the Center as being policy-relevant and there was a clear focus on practitioner knowledge exchange. Research partners also highlighted

that the academic standing of C-REX and the high quality of its outputs was of wider benefit in terms of legitimising the use of research evidence and strengthening the knowledge base for practitioners. Furthermore, partners described the Center as being ‘problem-oriented,’ which benefits practitioners by delivering policy-relevant and timely research. Through its engagement with the wider community, including the media, the Center made important contributions to political and public debate during this time.

There were concerns from partners, however, about the extent to which interaction often depended more on individual rather than institutional relationships, which makes the strength of these relationships vulnerable to changes in personnel. There was also a sense that at a strategic level the input of policymakers and practitioners in discussions around research priorities was not strong, exemplified by the composition of the Advisory Group, comprised only of academic representatives. There are therefore opportunities for C-REX to broaden and deepen its relationship with external stakeholders in ways which would help enhance both the relevance and impact of the Center’s work.

Recommendation 4: The Center would benefit from developing stronger institutional ties to external partners and stakeholders and giving external representatives a voice in the strategic development of C-REX by revising the composition of the Advisory Group.

C-REX could also sharpen how it frames its relevance and impact in relation to non-academic audiences. Currently, its strategy is largely focused around ‘downstream’ engagement by disseminating findings from projects. There are opportunities for more ‘upstream’ engagement such as co-production and co-design of research activity.

Recommendation 5: Research output from C-REX has made an impact in academia and beyond. However, the evidence to support claims of its impact on policy and practice could be highlighted more explicitly. In addition, a more strategic approach to engaging in co-production (in terms of the co-identification of research questions and co-design of projects) could be developed along with a narrative about the ‘pathways to impact’ for both individual projects and the Center as a whole. However, a balance must be struck as this should be done with respect for scientific autonomy.

Recommendation 6: In its self-evaluation, C-REX identifies the relationship with the 22 July Centre as one that has yet to reach its potential. We agree this should be prioritized in the future.

Internationalisation

Given the global interest in right wing extremism, C-REX is well situated to engage internationally. It is clear from both the self-evaluation and discussion with Center members that C-REX participates in international networks, via editorial positions on international journals and book series as well as successful collaborative bids for international research funding, including H2020. Further, C-REX has quickly established itself as an authority in international news media.

Several international visiting scholars have found a home at the Center, and C-REX researchers have also spent time in research centres outside of Norway. In some cases, however, developing strong inter-institutional collaborations has been challenging due to differences in research focus and emphasis.

C-REX also has an international advisory board but it has yet to meet formally. This resource could provide helpful strategic advice around the internationalisation agenda and/or the sustainability of the Center in the future.

Recommendation 7: We suggest that the Center build closer relationships with their international advisory board both to gain strategic advice on internationalisation activities and to deepen C-REX's relationships with those overseas centres most closely aligned with its core objectives.

Recruitment

C-REX has hired several PhD students and postdoctoral researchers who are based at the Center. It is also soliciting applications for new PhD students from across different disciplines. The criteria for appointing PhD students and postdocs have largely been driven by academic merit but it is also important that candidates' individual goals are consistent with the aims, objectives, and priorities of C-REX.

Recommendation 8: Applications from potential PhD and postdoc candidates should be assessed both in terms of academic merit and strategic fit in order to sustain the coherence of the research profile and agenda of the Center.

C-Rex has developed excellent networking and training environments for PhD students, including a network for PhD students on extremism (NEXT) and a "PhD Summer School on Concepts and Methods for Research on Far-Right Politics" drawing in international speakers. The popularity of this summer school is evidenced by its over-subscription last year (140 applications for 15 places). The PhD community at C-REX also highlighted how important being physically located at the Center was for them, helping build a sense of cohort identity, enabling multi-disciplinary discussions around research questions, and supporting each other through the challenges of doing research on extremism. However, some PhD students also mentioned some of the difficulties of working in an interdisciplinary environment and presenting work to those not familiar with particular disciplinary traditions. Given that the Center is hosted by the Department of Political Science, there was also a sense among some students that this sometimes led to the neglect of other disciplinary perspectives.

C-REX is also actively engaged with teaching at master's level. They have developed a full-day seminar that is delivered once in each semester for all master's students to allow for multi-disciplinary discussions and feedback on their dissertations. Furthermore, they have developed a website to provide literature resources for master's students who conduct research on far-right extremism. Additionally, some masters students have then moved onto research roles within C-REX, and three of these have then successfully secured PhD positions at the Center. Affiliated scholars have also taught on master's level modules at the university related to extremism and C-REX scholars have taught at different Norwegian post-secondary education institutions, such as teaching on the master's level courses at the Norwegian Police University College.

Recommendation 9: To ensure it maintains its identity as a multi-disciplinary Center, C-REX must recruit PhD candidates from a range of disciplines. However, Center leadership and staff must also remain sensitive to the challenges, particularly for younger scholars, of working in an interdisciplinary environment.

Organisation and Management

C-REX is hosted within by the Department of Political Science. From our discussions, it was evident that they enjoy a very good working relationship — and one which allows C-REX an appropriate level of autonomy in terms of its operations and activities. There is clearly added value from the Center occupying a space at the University of Oslo, as a physical home facilitates both discussion and the development of identity and community. In addition to the symbolic legitimacy a space on campus provides, having a physical address also has practical benefits in terms of community members knowing where and whom to contact.

The leadership team comprised of Director, Co-director and Administrative Manager at the Center is very capable and serves C-REX and its stakeholders well. However, given men are overrepresented on the executive group, C-REX should be mindful of gender issues in terms of future recruitment to leadership positions. Consideration should also be given to succession planning in leadership roles, with periods of tenure established for positions and processes of appointment when roles need to be filled.

The one underdeveloped element of the governance arrangements is the Advisory Board which, to date, does not appear to have been active. And, as previously mentioned, its composition is exclusively drawn from academic institutions so there is scope for broadening its membership.

Recommendation 10: We propose that C-REX reconfigure their current advisory board to include external representatives from policy and practitioner communities or, alternatively, create a second advisory board of practitioners and representatives of policy makers parallel to the scientific one. Whichever is the strategy going forward, the Advisory Board should play a more active role in discussions around the strategic development of C-REX, especially in long-term planning.

Recommendation 11: The Center has taken steps towards gender balance but should be mindful that its current leadership and senior research team are predominantly male while the graduate students are mostly female.

Recommendation 12: While there is benefit in the continuity of current leadership in the short to medium term, consideration should also be given to succession planning for the executive team, with clarity around periods of tenure and the process for selecting future member of the executive team.

Conclusions and final recommendations to the Center

In a relatively short period, C-REX has contributed much to the field of right-wing extremism research. The evaluation team was impressed by both the quantity and quality of academic outputs. C-REX has also recruited and supported new scholars in the field of right-wing extremism, and in the process, developed a dynamic and vibrant postgraduate and postdoctoral environment that attracts the attention of international scholars. Moreover, partners are complimentary about the work of the Center and the many benefits it brings to their respective organisations. C-REX takes seriously the dissemination of its collective research to a broad spectrum of audiences including not only research communities, but also practitioners, media, and the public at large.

Since the establishment of C-REX in 2015, issues related to right-wing extremism have become even more urgent. The substantial funding has enabled C-REX to be at the forefront of this growing academic field and to establish a vibrant inter-disciplinary research environment at the University of Oslo. The evaluation team therefore recommends continued funding but also believes that there is

potential for growth and further development in this next phase. Our 12 recommendations are framed with these goals in mind.

Oslo, 26 November 2019

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