

SAFEGUARDING SYMBOLIC SPACES IN EUROPE

LOCAL COOPERATION FOR PREVENTION, TRUST AND RESILIENCE



Prepared by the United Nations Interregional Crime Prevention and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and Enhancing Faith Institutions (EFI), with contributions from the Dutch Institute for Safe and Secure Space (DISS) and the SHIELDed Consortium



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Key Highlights



Symbolic spaces are facing complex risks. Schools, places of worship and community institutions are exposed to threats that go beyond physical attacks, including hate incidents, online hostility, intimidation and social exclusion.



Protection remains fragmented. Responsibilities are spread across public authorities, law enforcement, schools, religious communities and civil society, often leaving communities uncertain about how to report concerns or access support.



Low reporting may hide lived insecurity. SHIELDed findings suggest that underreporting, limited trust and engagement fatigue can obscure the everyday impact of hostility and intimidation on affected communities.



Local Shielding Councils offer a practical response. Among surveyed stakeholders, 72% expressed support for structured Local Shielding Councils, provided they are properly supported and embedded within existing local structures.



Policy action should combine security and trust. Physical protection should be integrated with accessible reporting, community engagement, trauma-informed support, awareness of online threats, and gender-sensitive safety planning.

1. Context

Across Europe, the protection of public spaces remains a priority for policymakers. The *EU Action Plan on the Protection of Public Spaces*, the *EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda* and wider EU work on preventing violent extremism, hate crime and discrimination all point to the need for prevention, preparedness and cooperation.

Schools, places of worship and community institutions require particular attention within this agenda. These are **symbolic spaces**: places where identity, belief, education, culture and belonging are expressed. When such spaces are targeted, the harm extends beyond the immediate incident. Attacks, threats, or repeated hostility can weaken trust, increase fear and undermine social cohesion.

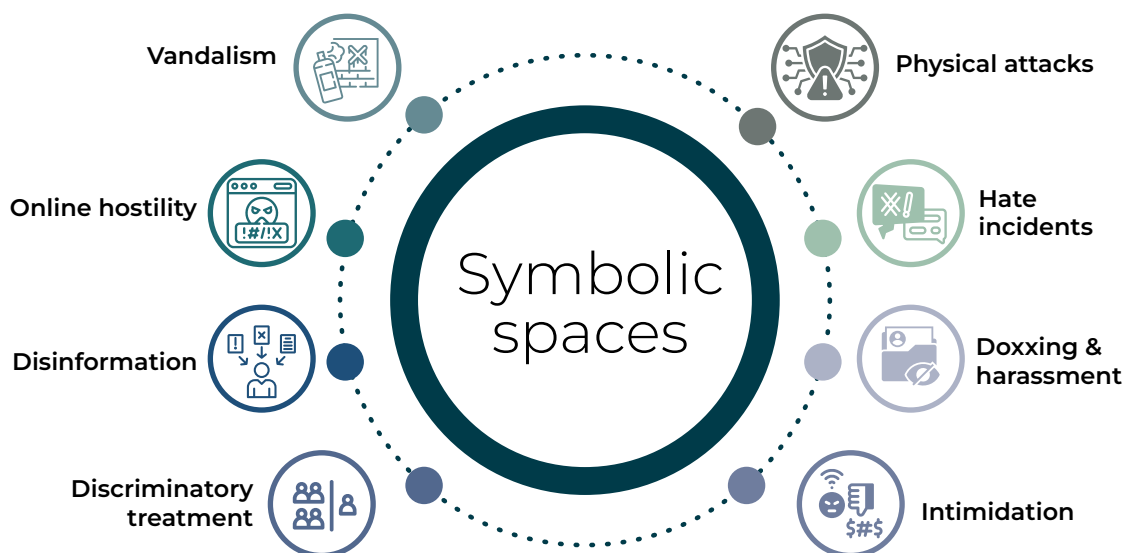
Symbolic places include not only formal institutions, but also community-based and informal settings such as rented halls, shared buildings, community centres and migrant-led congregations where social, cultural and religious life takes place. These spaces may be highly significant for the communities that use them, even where they lack visibility, resources or formal security arrangements.

The threat landscape affecting symbolic spaces is increasingly multi-layered. Communities may face physical attacks, vandalism or disruption, but also less visible forms of harm such as online harassment, doxxing, disinformation, intimidation linked to community events and discriminatory treatment. These risks can reinforce one another. Online hostility can contribute to offline insecurity, while recurring low-level incidents may discourage reporting and contribute to the normalisation of fear.

SHIELDED — *Schools, Religious Communities and Local Authorities' Harmonised Initiative to Enhance Local Resilience* — responds to this challenge by supporting a prevention-oriented and multi-actor governance model for safer communities. Rather than relying only on reactive or overly securitised measures, SHIELDED promotes a local security culture rooted in tolerance, awareness, shared responsibility and trust.

Threat landscape affecting symbolic spaces

Risks are multi-layered and mutually reinforcing



SHIELDed research suggests that Europe does not lack relevant tools or expertise for protecting public spaces. Rather, the challenge lies in the fact that these resources are often dispersed across different actors and sectors. Municipal authorities, law enforcement agencies, schools, religious communities, civil society organisations and judicial actors may all hold part of the response, but communication between them is often informal, inconsistent or activated only after incidents occur.

This fragmentation creates practical barriers. Communities may be uncertain about whom to contact, how to report threats, what preventive support is available, or whether reporting will lead to meaningful follow-up. Smaller, informal, rented or volunteer-led spaces may face additional obstacles because they lack the financial, technical or administrative capacity to implement complex security guidance.

The central policy question is therefore:

How can European policymakers support practical local cooperation mechanisms that protect symbolic spaces while strengthening trust, prevention and community resilience?

2. Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to European institutions, Member States, local authorities and communities. They are designed to support practical uptake of SHIELDED findings in public space protection, hate crime prevention, counter-radicalisation, community resilience and local safety planning.

Actor	Key Recommendations
EU Level 	➔ Promote scalable local governance models such as Local Shielding Councils across Member States. ➔ Support harmonised reporting standards for hate crime and hate incidents. ➔ Fund capacity-building for multi-stakeholder cooperation and practical toolkits for under-resourced institutions. ➔ Support mechanisms that connect online threat awareness, community insights and local prevention efforts.
Member States 	➔ Establish trained community liaison officers within law enforcement and relevant public authorities. ➔ Ensure funding mechanisms are accessible to volunteer-led, migrant-led and smaller institutions. ➔ Integrate structured local cooperation platforms into national prevention, hate crime and public space protection strategies.
Local Authorities 	➔ Streamline fragmented reporting pathways into clear, accessible mechanisms for all communities. ➔ Institutionalise Local Shielding Councils as standing platforms for coordination and prevention. ➔ Integrate trauma-informed engagement practices within law enforcement and municipal services. ➔ Implement gender-sensitive safety planning in collaboration with local communities.
Communities 	➔ Appoint community security focal points connected to local cooperation structures. ➔ Participate actively in Local Shielding Councils and collaborative prevention initiatives. ➔ Equip community leaders through scenario-based micro-training for disruptions, harassment, and emerging threats. ➔ Support resilience-building initiatives and encourage incident reporting.

3. Evidence and Analysis

SHIELDED findings draw on three complementary sources: desk research, a Europe-wide stakeholder survey conducted in nine languages, and a structured Call for Practices. Together, these activities show that the protection of symbolic spaces requires more than physical security. It depends on coordinated governance, community trust, accessible reporting and locally adapted prevention.

3.1 Fragmentation weakens prevention

The desk research identified several structural conditions needed for effective protection: coordinated governance, evidence-based cooperation, shared situational awareness, problem-oriented prevention, risk management, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) and civic participation.

These approaches point to a common lesson: safety in symbolic spaces is no longer the exclusive responsibility of law enforcement. Municipal services, schools, civil society organisations, including youth organisations, private security actors, and communities all contribute to prevention through shared awareness and coordinated action.

However, SHIELDED also found that responsibilities often remain fragmented. Municipal authorities, law enforcement, schools, religious communities, civil society and judicial actors may each play important roles, but without structured cooperation, responses can remain reactive rather than preventive.

This can create duplication, delays and uncertainty. Communities may not know where to report incidents, while authorities may not receive the information needed to identify patterns of hostility, emerging tensions or underlying vulnerabilities.

3.2 Reported risk may underestimate lived insecurity

The SHIELDED survey identified a weighted overall risk score of 1.2–1.5 out of 5 among surveyed faith-based institutions, suggesting a low-to-moderate reported risk level. This finding should be interpreted with caution. Stakeholder consultations suggest that lower reported risk may partly reflect underreporting, fragmented reporting pathways, limited trust in institutional responses and the normalisation of recurring low-level hostility.

This means that low reporting should not automatically be interpreted as low insecurity. For many communities, repeated low-level hostility, online harassment, discriminatory treatment or uncertainty about institutional follow-up can still generate fear and erode trust.

The survey also indicates that many communities are responding primarily through internal capacity-building measures. These include encouraging victims to report incidents, raising awareness and providing resilience-oriented training. This demonstrates agency, but it also suggests that communities often carry a significant share of the prevention burden without sufficient external support.

3.3 Accessibility is central to effective protection

SHIELDED research highlights that many existing protection measures and security guidance documents are not always designed with smaller or informal institutions in mind. Many religious communities and community-based organisations operate with limited financial and technical capacity, often in rented, shared or volunteer-led spaces.

For these actors, complex security requirements may be difficult to implement unless translated into practical, proportionate and low-cost tools. This includes simplified checklists, basic risk mapping templates, short training modules, incident communication protocols and guidance that reflects the realities of volunteer-led settings.

The accessibility and practicality of protection measures should therefore be treated as a core policy issue. A security model that works only for large institutions with dedicated staff will not adequately protect the diversity of symbolic spaces across Europe.

3.4 Local innovation exists but remains unevenly shared

The SHIELDed Call for Practices identified examples of protective measures and cooperation models across Europe, including physical and operational security, community self-protection, partnerships with law enforcement, counter-hate initiatives and inter-community dialogue.

These examples show that promising local practices already exist. Some initiatives demonstrate concrete, action-oriented partnerships between religious communities, private security actors, local authorities and law enforcement agencies. Others focus on building trust, improving reporting, supporting community self-protection or strengthening dialogue between groups.

The policy challenge is not only to create new tools, but also to ensure that existing good practices are systematically shared, adapted and embedded in local prevention efforts. Local Shielding Councils can contribute by providing structured platforms for dialogue, cooperation and the exchange of experience.

Box 1. What Local Shielding Councils can deliver

Local Shielding Councils are multi-faith, multi-actor platforms established in each implementing country. They bring together religious leaders, law enforcement, public authorities, educators, civil society organisations and community members to assess local needs, share knowledge and strengthen cooperation.

In practice, they can help to:

- ➔ identify local vulnerabilities, tensions and recurring incidents before they escalate;
- ➔ build trusted communication channels between communities and authorities;
- ➔ improve reporting and follow-up after incidents;
- ➔ coordinate prevention measures across local actors;
- ➔ support scenario-based training and practical preparedness;
- ➔ strengthen youth engagement, interfaith cooperation and community resilience;
- ➔ reinforce a sense of security among minority and vulnerable groups.

For Local Shielding Councils to be effective, two conditions are essential. First, they must be supported with adequate capacity and resources so that participation does not overburden communities that may already rely on volunteers or limited resources. Second, they must be embedded in existing municipal and law enforcement structures to ensure legitimacy, continuity and practical impact.



What they deliver



4. Methodology

This policy brief is based on SHIELDED Work Package 2 research, including:

1. **Desk research** on public space protection, prevention, governance frameworks, risk management, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), community resilience and civic participation.
2. **A Europe-wide stakeholder survey** conducted in nine languages, with 152 respondents. The survey explored perceived threats, frequency and intensity of incidents, reporting practices, community responses and views on structured local cooperation.
3. **A structured call for practices** collecting implemented examples of protective measures, cooperation models and community-based prevention initiatives across Europe. The call for practices covered physical and operational security, community-law enforcement partnerships, community self-protection, countering hate crime and discrimination, and inter-community dialogue.

The findings should be understood as evidence generated through the project rather than a statistically representative assessment of all symbolic spaces in Europe. Their value lies in identifying practical governance gaps, recurring challenges and promising models for local prevention.

5. Conclusion

Protecting symbolic spaces requires more than securing buildings. It requires trusted local systems that connect communities, authorities and civil society before risks escalate.

SHIELDED shows that prevention-oriented protection depends on practical governance: clear reporting pathways, accessible tools, trusted relationships, inclusive safety planning and structured cooperation across sectors. Local Shielding Councils offer one way to translate these principles into local practice.

By institutionalising Local Shielding Councils, improving reporting pathways and making security guidance accessible to under-resourced institutions, policymakers can strengthen prevention, resilience and social cohesion across Europe.

6. References

- European Commission, *EU Action Plan on the Protection of Public Spaces*.
- European Commission, *EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda*.
- European Commission, *EU Internal Security Strategy / ProtectEU: A European Internal Security Strategy*
- SHIELDED Project, Work Package 2 desk research, stakeholder survey and Call for Practices.
- SHIELDED Project, *Deliverable D5.1 — Protecting Symbolic Spaces: A Local Governance Model for Safer Communities*.
- Relevant EU frameworks on hate crime, discrimination, public space protection, prevention of violent extremism and community resilience.

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