Strategic orientations on a coordinated
EU approach to prevention of radicalisation for 2022-2023

2022 marks the fourth exercise of the EU Strategic Orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation (hereinafter "Strategic Orientations").

The aim of this exercise is to make sure that actions taken at EU level address and are aligned with the needs and priorities of stakeholders in Member States. At the same time, the deployment of the relevant EU Instruments[1] supports and fosters the exchange of experiences, as well as the knowledge building and transfer within and among Member States.

As some core priorities have remained stable during these years, and without prejudice to flexibility and adaptation to new challenges, these Strategic orientations are set up for a two-year period (2022-2023).

The Strategic Orientations for 2022-2023 cater the priorities set out in the Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU adopted in December 2020[2]. They are based on the input from Member States as expressed in their oral and written contributions in the context of the Network of Prevent Policy Makers (NPPM). They also take into account outcomes of the Project-Based Collaborations carried out so far and they will be implemented in accordance with the guidance provided by Member States.

Priorities identified by RAN Practitioners by means of a dedicated survey, outcomes of the discussions at the RAN High Level Conference and RAN Practitioners' Plenary held on 12-13 October 2021, and insights provided by researchers, in particular the newly established RAN Advisory Board of Researchers, have also been taken into account when defining these priorities. Even if some topics are developed more in depth under one specific priority, sometimes they are also mentioned under other thematic priorities as there are evident links. Therefore, these Strategic Orientations should be read as an integrated and comprehensive document.

As to the structure, the first chapter sets the scene by providing reflections on the current threat landscape. The second chapter puts forward six thematic priorities identified by Member States, specifying challenges and possible approaches to address them in the next two years. The third and final chapter sets out the main considerations for the implementation of the Strategic Orientations specifying involved actors and tools.

1. Introduction. Threat picture: current and emerging challenges

Terrorism and violent extremism continue to represent a major security concern for the EU and its Member States. The impact of the proliferation of online violent extremist propaganda on radicalisation, recruitment and

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[1] In particular the Radicalisation Awareness Network with its two strands RAN Policy Support and RAN Practitioners

[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0795&qid=1631885972581

training of terrorists has increased. Violent ideologies, such as violent Islamist right- and left- wing extremism have benefited from widespread sentiments of insecurity and vulnerability fostered by the COVID 19 pandemic.

While the threat posed by violent Islamist extremism and right wing extremism remains significant, while the increasingly fragmented and variegated nature of emerging violent ideologies is generating a new phenomenon labelled as "hybrid ideologies"[3]. Such ideologies have become particularly prominent in the context of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, where conspiracy theories as well as movements opposing vaccination and technology, have provided fertile ground for their proliferation. We have witnessed in the last months an increase of violent acts in several Member States as a reaction to measures taken by governments to reduce the impact of the pandemic. There is, in general, a clear need to better understand and define the phenomenon of "hybrid ideologies" to develop targeted responses.

As regards the online dimension, the increasing polarisation online is a new trend which needs to be addressed, as well as the increasing grooming and luring of young users in violent extremist online movements and networks. Europol has reported on how suspects arrested for attempting to perpetrate terrorist attacks are increasingly of a young age. Cooperation with internet platforms and service providers is key to prevent young users from accessing harmful violent content online.

When it comes to the development of jihadist ideologies, experts have underlined a tendency to detach from ideological coherence and traditional 'brands/groups' such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, in favour of wider perceptions and acceptance of violent extremists ideologies. In this respect, the situation in Afghanistan needs to be closely monitored, as it has the potential to trigger a new wave of Islamist radical propaganda targeting Western governments and to incite violence against them.

2. Thematic priorities

Ideologies and polarisation

The relevance of extremist ideologies and their direct or indirect influence on the radicalisation process towards violent extremism and terrorism, continues to be part of a comprehensive approach on preventing and countering radicalisation. Violent extremists are learning from each other on how to target and recruit supporters, in particular as their online outreach is becoming more sophisticated.

The propaganda and structures of violent Islamist extremists and violent right-wing extremists groups and networks are better understood but there are **new types of ideologies** that are gaining attention, with a lesser understanding of their links to potential violence. Ideologies and their narratives, including anti-vaccine, anti-government and other conspiracy theories have gained attention during the Covid-19 crisis.. Anti-Semitism has also increased during the pandemic in the far-right, far-left and Islamist extremism environments. More research is needed to analyse the characteristics of anti-government and anti-democratic behaviours. A better understanding of how different ideologies and extremist movements are interlinked, interact with each other and exacerbate conflicts and tensions is crucial, as well as looking into individuals who switch between ideologies or are influenced by different forms of radicalism, including in prisons.

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[3] A quite accurate definition dates back in 2009, identifying hybrid ideologies as "the mixing of ideal rationales for violence and the attendant blending of their associated enemy hierarchies" (Thomas Heghammer).

Overall there is a need to strengthen the knowledge base of front line practitioners on existing and emerging violent extremist ideologies. Moreover, extensive work undertaken to tackle violent Islamist and violent right-wing extremism should be further disseminated and it is important to promote the use of the **working non-binding definition of violent right-wing extremism** developed in the context of the Project-Based Collaboration, as a means for increased common understanding of the phenomenon when implementing preventive measures.

Non-violent/not yet violent forms of extremism, its ideologies, actors and networks can also pose a threat to European values and to social cohesion. Their impacts on radicalisation should be further explored.

In general, the detection of **weak signals of radicalisation** necessitates continuous attention and a stock-taking exercise, especially in light of the threat posed by lone actors.

Prisons, Radicalisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration

Prison environment is where radicalisation processes can advance in already radicalised inmates, but also where such processes can start. These dimensions need to be further addressed by policy makers and practitioners, being aware that if cooperation between inmates and P-CVE practitioners, and information exchange among the latter, are improved, prisons can provide valuable opportunities to work on rehabilitation of extremist offenders in view of their release.

Risk management, proper risk assessment and preparedness of prison staff in the **detection of signs of radicalisation** is crucial, as well as analysing the dynamics among like-minded extremist inmates and also among inmates and groups that apparently do not have any affinity but that nevertheless could establish links in prison, which probably wouldn't happen outside.

Specific challenges such as the management of radicalised detainees losing their citizenship during detention, thereby hindering their rehabilitation and reintegration, radicalised minors and women convicted for terrorism could be addressed, including by learning from adjacent fields, as individuals involved in organised crime.

Transition between detention period – release – time after release is a challenge for several EU Member States. Effective ways to improve information exchange among professionals and different stakeholders involved is another area for further work. Furthermore, how to reach continuity and consistency between the activities conducted before and after release needs to be further explored. Cooperation at the different stages of prosecution, prison, probation, and police should be enhanced.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters, including returning women and children

A proper **management of returning foreign terrorist fighters** including women – either imprisoned or not - is essential for ensuring safety in our societies. Their engagement in reintegration programmes – either voluntary or compulsory - is key, as well as improving our capacity to evaluate the results of such working methods and programmes and to ensure a proper follow up in managing risks and needs.

The **long-term management of youth and child returnees** could be facilitated by the creation of dedicated multi-agency structures, allowing professionals to share information on a long-term basis. The measures need to be tailor-made to their different needs, taking into account lessons learnt from adjacent fields. Furthermore, establishing children identity and filiation when they were born abroad raises additional challenges.

The gender dimension in the management of returning foreign terrorist fighters and their family members has to be further addressed, as well as the identification of gaps and best practices to better address possible risks, and increase the chances of successful reintegration of women.

Online dimension & Strategic Communications

Links between online and offline violence need to be better understood, especially when it comes to measuring to which extent terrorist content online can lead to violent forms of radicalisation and offline violence. The application of the **Terrorist Content Online Regulation**, as of 7 June 2022, will ensure the swift removal of terrorist content from internet platforms within one hour. The Commission will continue to work closely with Member States and industry (in particular small companies) in this area and to monitor the application of the Regulation as of next year.

As mentioned earlier under ideologies, the spread of online extremist narratives has had a significant impact in the development of the so-called **hybrid ideologies** making opportunistic use of people's vulnerabilities linked to crisis situations to reinforce violent anti-government messages. The difficulties in defining such ideologies, and therefore the online content that relates to them, makes it challenging to provide guidance to tech companies on how to best moderate related narratives.

While the **EU Internet Forum** has made important progress in supporting tech companies in their moderation efforts of violent right wing extremist content, it now needs to look more into the fragmented nature of ideological extremisms and to reach a better understanding about the role played by **"legal but harmful" content** in the process of users' radicalisation.

The misuse of new technologies, such as recommender **algorithms and video gaming**, for malicious purposes must continue to be under focus: more empirical research and cooperation is needed in this field. Algorithms may create and/or reinforce negative loops leading to more polarisation in the society. Technological advancement (including artificial intelligence) opens up new avenues for propaganda, recruitment, financing and can provide means to evade content moderation systems. There is a need to disseminate knowledge about these tactics and facilitate cooperation between industry and law enforcement to tackle this problem. The evaluation of **counter narrative actions** is also crucial to improve their positive impact on users as attractive alternative to violent extremist content.

Following more stringent content moderation by social media platforms led to an increase in **terrorist operated websites**. We need to achieve a better understanding of the use of these websites, and explore with a broad range of stakeholders possible joint approaches to tackle their re-emergence. It will also be important to look into the transnational online aspect of violent extremist and terrorist financing to define the scope of such activities and exchange on counter measures.

There is evidence that **minors** are becoming increasingly radicalised, spread propaganda and engage in recruitment and planning of attacks. Focusing on different means to prevent radicalisation of young people online should be among the main objectives of Member States and industry involved in the EU Internet Forum.

When it comes to **Strategic Communications**, the European Strategic Communication Network has extensively supported the development of Member States' capabilities. The COVID-19 Pandemic has in particular shown how communication with the public is crucial to counter the spread of hybrid ideologies and polarisation. Time has come to assess the effectiveness of existing strategic communications campaigns. In the meantime, considering the imbrication between offline and online landscapes, it seems necessary to work on the transfer of

P/CVE strategies to the digital world, and to exchange ideas on approaches and methods to reach the online community and to engage with radicalised individuals online. In addition, the collaboration with the private sector could also explore adjacent fields to enhance the efficiency of strategic communications campaigns.

Finally, the evolving threat implies a constant adaption of strategic communication: coordination between local administrations and national level is a challenge, as well as the necessary adaptation to new target audiences.

Local dimension, Communities, Resilience building

In the recent years, prevention of radicalisation has focused very much on individuals and groups. However, the focus is now turning increasingly to local **neighbourhood-level acceleration factors** and patterns of interaction that might explain the emergence of radical milieus in one area rather than in others. Understanding better these dynamics would not only help to develop targeted resilience-building interventions, but also provide useful insights for **early prevention approaches**.

Local authorities need more support in dealing- including via strategic communications approaches- with the risk of **polarisation** in their communities. This requires a double approach, targeting the broader public but also analysing the development of separate communities. The challenges related to migration, , risk to be manipulated in extremist discourses. The same goes for the risk of anti-governmental propaganda risen in the current pandemic. Moreover, local authorities are at the forefront of the reintegration of returnees and need a solid and differentiated approach from the national level, taking into account also the specificities of women and children.

In more general terms**,** young people could be a target group of extremist networks, providing polarised social media content. Segregated areas, or so called hotbeds of radicalisation, would benefit from an increased national support provided by **resilience-building activities** at the local level. This could encompass, in an integrated prevent approach, formal and informal education, culture, arts and sports. For a more effective outreach and impact, especially *vis-à-vis* young people, it will be of utmost importance to increase the knowledge on digital prevent work at the local level, and to foster resilience against the misuse of the Internet and social media. At the same time, youth should be addressed not only as target of radicalisation but also as an actor who can be empowered and contribute to prevent work.

In addition, there is still a need to support Member States in effectively **coordinating structures between national level and different local administration** levels and to support the latter in developing collaboration with NGOs at the local level.

Involving victims of terrorism and ensuring that Member States provide a direct and comprehensible **transfer of knowledge** from practice and research to local practitioners, with a view to better target local prevent actions and interventions, will be equally key in the next years.

Priority third countries

Terrorism and violent extremism are global phenomena, thus collaboration between the EU and its Member States and key third countries is essential. While collaboration on P-CVE with the **Western Balkans** is ongoing, there is the need to strengthen cooperation and exchanges also with some **MENA Region Countries** that are facing unprecedented security issues, which can impact on EU security. It is important to improve their capabilities to prevent, detect and address radicalisation processes, as EU Member States are facing the threat

posed by the risk of radicalised individuals who could enter the EU in the context of irregular migrant's flows. Mechanisms to improve the exchange of experiences and good practices between EU Member States and those countries should be promoted, including to reach a common understanding on the P-CVE key principles.

Furthermore, developments in third countries may also have an impact on radicalisation in Europe. **Undesirable foreign funding** of anti-democratic movements in the EU is one example. While such funding may also come from within the EU, some third countries are fostering their influence in Europe through the support of organisations which may undermine rule of law and social cohesion. Mapping of such flows would be a first step to address undesirable funding of ideas that are incompatible with our democratic and pluralistic societies. In addition, engaging with some third countries that support the dissemination of extremist material in Europe that can lead to radicalisation should continue to be addressed. Additionally, as already mentioned, the situation in **Afghanistan** may also warrant attention regarding emerging violent Islamist and right-wing extremist narratives (in particular using the Taliban takeover as model in propaganda efforts to spread anti-Western violent narratives).

3. Implementation approaches

The Commission and Member States will jointly implement the Strategic Orientations making full use of the existing fora, resources and tools- addressing both the offline and online dimension- such as the Network of Prevent Policy Makers (NPPM), the Project-Based Collaborations (PBC), the EU Internet Forum and with the support provided to policy makers, practitioners and researchers through the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN Practitioners and RAN Policy Support). These efforts will also be supported by EU funded projects, in particular the Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP). The overarching objective will be to ensure coherence with related policy areas and including a stronger link between the internal and the external dimension.

In this endeavour, the Network of Prevent Policy Makers (NPPM) and the Project-Based Collaborations (PBCs) will play a crucial role. In these two fora Member States will build, share and transfer strategic knowledge for policy making. They will also be closely involved in defining the implementation actions of the Strategic Orientations through the Annual Activity Plans of the two strands of the RAN and an annual Global Agenda of activities. The Steering Board will continue to provide strategic guidance.

The focus will be on a coordinated, consistent and joint approach, as well as concrete outcomes to be set upfront in accordance with Member States' priorities.

The successful format of the Project-Based Collaborations (PBCs) will remain unchanged, as groups of like-minded Member States diving in specific topics with a specific outcome. The focus will be on reverting back the results of the PBCs for the benefit of all Member States.

Three cross-cutting priorities will shape the work in the next two years:

- Focus on **key learnings and on consolidating knowledge**. This is particularly important for a more evidence-based approach in view of the development of an EU Knowledge Hub on radicalisation, as announced in the Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU. Member States will be closely involved in the development of the EU Knowledge Hub and will continue to provide guidance for the definition of the scope and priorities of prevent

work at EU level. Meetings, either ad hoc or within the context of the NPPM, will be periodically scheduled to exchange updates.

- **Dissemination** of outcomes and a **balanced outreach of relevant stakeholders**: The next two years will be focused on identifying the right stakeholders and in developing targeted dissemination strategies, including translation and conduct of activities in different languages, taking into account also the different needs of Member States and policy makers and practitioners.

- The social responsibility towards **children** and the priority to adopt a **gender-based** approach. This cross-cutting priority will shape all actions, across thematic priorities.

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