

Violent Right-wing Extremism in the Local Strategy

28-29 September 2020

Digital event

Summary

The challenges faced by local coordinators or authorities when incorporating violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) in their local preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies and possible ways of overcoming these challenges, were the central topics of this digital RAN LOCAL meeting on 28 and 29 September 2020. In addition, special attention was given to the ways in which (V)RWE manifests itself in the community and what preferable places for recruitment are (both online and offline). The key outcomes of the discussions are mostly aimed at local P/CVE coordinators but can also be of interest for first-line practitioners such as exit workers, youth workers and social workers who deal with VRWE on a local level. Dealing with (V)RWE on the local level, reaching out to (V)RWE individuals at an early stage of radicalisation, capturing the online dimension, and combating RWE non-violent but threatening behaviour were the most prominent challenges mentioned. Practitioners and local coordinators recommended tackling these challenges through the means of investing in understanding and recognising (V)RWE on a local level and finding ways to include online as well as non-violent activities of right-wing extremists in their intervention methods.

This paper captures the highlights of the discussion, which focused on identifying how VRWE is included in local P/CVE strategies and where it manifests itself on a local level. The identified challenges are followed by suggested recommendations to deal with the most important challenges.

Highlights of the discussion

In essence, three main themes were discussed and shared on both days. The first was how and whether VRWE was already included in local strategies on P/CVE. The second theme discussed was where and how VRWE manifests itself and what common places for recruitment are, followed by the third theme concerning challenges that participants faced related to VRWE and the local strategy.

How is VRWE included in your local strategy?

Most of the cities represented by the participants already have a P/CVE strategy in which VRWE is included. For the majority, the P/CVE strategy has a broad focus and is thus aimed at all types of (violent) extremism and radicalisation. Their strategies thus include VRWE, but do not have a specific focus on this type of extremism. The actors involved in the multi-agency approach, their responsibilities and possibilities for interventions are usually the same irrespective of the type of extremism discussed.

In some cities, special awareness-raising trainings are being organised for first-line practitioners to increase their knowledge and skills in dealing with VRWE. Other interventions include programmes that stimulate critical thinking, dialogue with others, cohesion projects, or even job training.

Where does it manifest itself?

VRWE manifests itself in local pubs, in soccer and sport clubs (hooliganism), and right-wing extremists can be found in political parties or participating in anti-establishment or issue-based protests. In line with this, many participants stressed that the threat from RWE does not come from one place; there are many nuances to be seen and therefore the places where VRWE manifests itself are also diverse. Participants also pointed to existing relations with the military, whose highly disciplined structure seems to be attractive to vulnerable individuals. Some cities have had to deal with provocative actions near Islamic schools or mosques, for instance when VRWE groups (wanted to) roast a pig or pig's head during Ramadan in front of mosques or Islamic schools. Besides such smaller manifestations, many local communities have had to deal with demonstrations from right-wing extremist groups on the streets, for example from the Nordic Resistance Movement in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. Some of these protests targeted a single issue, e.g. the issue of migration, and were used to boost the dissatisfaction amongst the population to further the (V)RWE causes. This was recognised by some practitioners as a new type of recruitment that VRWE has adopted and whose aim is to groom individuals "slowly" by feeding their grievances and allowing the dissatisfaction to grow.

Likewise, practitioners touched upon the political cover of recruitments that manifests itself through parliamentary offices of far-right political parties and referred to existing ties between political leaders and the traditional far-right. As far-right extremist political parties run for parliamentary elections in several European countries, they seek to exercise influence on the political agenda of their countries regarding the issues of immigration, integration and Islam (RAN Factbook, 2019).

Increasingly, local coordinators and practitioners worry about VRWE manifesting itself online, through (mainstream) social media and gaming platforms. The last few years have witnessed extensive use of online platforms by (V)RWE in Europe. VRWE groups have shown incredible skills in using the constantly emerging online tools and employing them to recruit individuals and to reach out to those "like-minded" people who have ever been involved in hate crime and terrorist activities (Conway, Scrivens, & Macnair, 2019). In some countries, there are worrying signals that people vulnerable to radicalisation are being influenced by VRWE and increasingly also by conspiracy theories

and fake news narratives. Their vulnerabilities are being fostered by the shared feelings of isolation, anxiety and uncertainty that trigger them to look online for communities to discuss and find explanations for their questions. This seems to be enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which local coordinators have all seen a drop in P/CVE activities, especially as many first-line practitioners are not having face-to-face contact anymore with the people they used to see in schools, community centres and other areas.

Challenges

Mentioned challenges included establishing systematic multi-agency cooperation with organisations working with VRWE individuals and how first-line practitioners can become or be kept aware of the ever-changing landscape of VRWE — including language, symbols, movements and other developments related to VRWE.

Practitioners also addressed the challenge of **reaching out to individuals and capturing the early signs of radicalisation**. This challenge lies in the fact that the incubator environment of (V)RWE is divergent and hard to identify. Establishing a comprehensive understanding of the threat of the extreme right is deemed highly problematic and unpredictable. This is because not all right-wing extremists share the same ideology (CTED, 2020). Where in some places the threat of VRWE can come from (former) military personnel, in other places, it might be hooligans or lone actors. A comparison was made in how it is relatively easier to engage with Islamist extremists as the targeted group is known, identifiable and can be reached out to.

Another challenge concerns **the lack of capabilities to deal with the online aspect of VRWE**. Nowadays, the vast majority of VRWE activities and their recruitment practices are taking place online. Vulnerable individuals are being exposed to an unprecedented number of online platforms controlled by right-wing extremists who use these channels to spread the ideology of extremism and recruit youngsters (Conway, Scrivens, & Macnair, 2019). Furthermore, online platforms and video games can work as an inspiration for extremists to conduct violence as well as to inspire other vulnerable people to do the same — e.g. the attack in Christchurch in New Zealand and on the Baerum mosque in Norway (Örell, 2020). Yet, as most opportunities for intervention are offline, practitioners and local coordinators are still lacking the tools for addressing the online work on preventing and countering VRWE.

Participants also shared concerns about **how to deal with non-violent right-wing extremists attempting provocations**. They discussed how certain activities, for example, roasting a pig in front of a mosque, are deemed extremely difficult to act upon as there exists no legal reference that bans or prevents such an act. The problem was mainly attributed to the fact that such activities are “in the grey zone” between what is legal and what is illegal. This makes it very complicated to determine whether a right-wing extremist act or statement is an incitement to violence and hatred or whether it’s an act that falls under the legally permissible range of freedom of speech and the right to protest. As explained in the RAN Factbook ⁽¹⁾, right-wing extremist groups and other active legal organisations may not pose direct security threats to the local community, given the absence of the use of violence; however, their messages and actions aim to polarise and divide the local community, which necessitates the need for effective responses and interventions.

The **key challenges** identified could be summarised as the following:

1. How do you, at the local level, discuss and make visible (V)RWE online and offline in your community?
2. How can one reach (V)RWE individuals at an early stage of radicalisation nowadays?
3. How can one deal with non-violent behaviour from right-wing extremists? An example of this is intimidating people by standing in front of a local or religious building, claiming to use the right to freedom of speech.

⁽¹⁾ RAN Factbook, [Far-right extremism. A practical introduction](#), December 2019.

Recommendations

The discussions on the second day were focused on the challenges identified on the first day. Some suggestions and recommendations following the discussions are mentioned below.

1. How do you, at the local level, discuss and make visible (V)RWE online and offline in your community?

- Develop online practices and strategies and **find ways to include online activities in your preventive work**. Practitioners can do that either by engaging online themselves or finding ways to ask about online activities during offline interactions. Teachers can ask students whether they've seen hate speech online or fake news. **Having the conversation about online activities, democracy and critical thinking in the classroom** can help to foster resilience. A comparable manner might be used in approaching the online environment as the offline environment of youth and vulnerable people to the extent possible. For example, as outlined in the RAN YF&C paper on doing digital youth work in the P/CVE context, open up dialogue, build trust, and start with planting doubts instead of directly countering the radical opinions and ideas (Jansen & Verdegaal, 2019).
- **Raise awareness on the importance of the online dimension of VRWE** and ensure practitioners are aware of the online echo chambers that violent right-wing extremists and extremist groups tap into. Thus, **train practitioners to gain the relevant social media and internet skills** to grasp the strategies and the online tools that VRWE uses to groom, recruit or inspire vulnerable individuals. Hence, ensure that practitioners understand the technical aspects of online security, confidentiality and anonymity (Örell, 2020).
- **Empower families and friends to function as a support system for radicalised relatives**. Family and friends can play an important role in signalling worrisome online behaviour and can support an individual themselves or can contact other services for support.

2. How can one reach (V)RWE individuals at an early stage of radicalisation nowadays?

In order to reach out to vulnerable individuals, there is a need to be able to capture the early warning signs of radicalisation and to understand the VRWE context on the local, regional and national levels in your country: Who are we talking about, what are their grievances, what do they believe and what actions do they take? The complexity and ambiguity surrounding the VRWE context requires practitioners to take into account several distinctions when reacting to the signs of radicalisation or when applying their P/CVE strategy:

- First, use a tailor-made approach. **Differentiate between the various aspects of vulnerabilities that individuals might experience and act in accordance**. Prevention is about understanding and identifying what makes someone vulnerable. Every case is unique as the factors causing someone to radicalise are divergent — relations with parents, childhood trauma, school bullying, etc.
- Second, **be aware of the risks of your approach** when reaching out to individuals and make sure that the characteristics of the society and the local community are well understood. An effective approach is an approach that corresponds to and fits in with the underlying context of VRWE.
- Third, **make sure that the signs of radicalisation are not being misunderstood**. A sign of radicalisation does not always mean the person is particularly radicalised. Assess whether it is a radicalisation case or maybe the person would benefit more from working on underlying grievances or psychological help.

- 3. How can one deal with non-violent behaviour from right-wing extremists?** For example intimidating people by standing in front of a local or religious building, claiming to use the right to freedom of speech.
- **Set boundaries for VRWE groups or individuals who are seeking the “grey zones” of legislation.** An example could be to allow them to demonstrate, but to change their desired location to somewhere less provocative.
 - **Build a dialogue and get involved with the communities affected by the non-violent behaviour** to ensure that non-violent activities do not harm the social cohesion or feed marginalisation in your local community. Make them feel supported.
 - When it’s difficult to reach the members from the RWE group themselves, then **engage with groups that are linked to them** or groups that are active in the same neighbourhood. This can be sports clubs, NGOs or even gang members. Help them turn away from violence and hate speech. Youth workers can also play a crucial role here.
 - **Pay attention to the language used**, both by the RWE groups and in your own communication. Promote shared values or shared identities instead of joining an “us versus them” narrative.

Relevant practices

RadicalWeb – Save the Children Finland

As part of the Finnish national P/CVE action plan, it aims to identify and prevent online extremism and radicalisation that threatens the welfare and rights of young people. The main focus of the project is training youth workers and other professionals working with young people on this phenomenon (right-wing extremism in particular), as well as on how to intervene both face to face and online. Save the Children Finland is responsible for training youth workers, whereas actors from the University of Helsinki and the Finnish National Agency for Education focus on the training of teachers and the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare trains health practitioners and social workers.

Follow-up

- A follow-up expert meeting on the role of the military in P/CVE. Even though military establishments with their highly structured and disciplined systems appear to be very appealing to young people and many vulnerable men enter the military, these establishments do not have a P/CVE strategy.
- Another meeting on the changing landscape of extremism and radicalisation. It has been discussed that COVID-19 has shown that extremism can take different shapes. VRWE, for example, is no longer limited to anti-migrants groups or neo-Nazi-affiliated individuals; its scene is changing over time and adopting new (online) recruitment techniques.
- A follow-up meeting on the role of COVID-19 in fuelling polarisation and radicalisation in the local community and its impact on the working dynamics of P/CVE practitioners.

Further reading

- Conway, M., Scrivens, R., & Macnair, L. (2019). [Right-wing extremists' persistent online presence: History and contemporary trends](#). ICCT Policy Brief. doi:10.19165/2019.3.12
- CTED. (2020). [Members States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism](#). CTED Trends Alert | April 2020, United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).
- Gssime, Y., & Meines, M. (2019). [Tabletop exercises: Practicing multi-agency cooperation](#), Ex Post Paper. Dublin, Ireland: RAN Centre of Excellence, 7-8 November.
- Jansen, A., & Verdegaal, M. (2019). [Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context](#), Ex Post Paper. Copenhagen, Denmark: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 29 November.
- [Meines, M. \(2017\). How to measure the impact of your online counter or alternative narrative campaign, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: RAN Centre of Excellence, 13-14 February.](#)
- Örell, R. (2020). Delivering interventions online. In [Violent right-wing extremism in focus](#) (pp. 36-43). Radicalisation Awareness Network.
- [RAN Centre of Excellence. \(2017\). Cooperation between local authorities and schools in multi-agency interventions and the prevention of radicalisation, Ex Post Paper. The Hague, the Netherlands: RAN Centre of Excellence, 22-23 February.](#)
- Ranstorp, M. (2018). [Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles - Part 2, Policy Paper. RAN Centre of Excellence.](#)
- Sieckelinck, S., & Gielen, A.-J. (2018). [Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation](#), Issue Paper. RAN Centre of Excellence.
- Sterkenburg, N. (2019). [Far-right extremism. A practical introduction](#), RAN Factbook. RAN Centre of Excellence.
- [van de Donk, M. \(2018\). Communicating with radicalised individuals in an exit setting, Ex Post Paper. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: RAN Centre of Excellence, 25-26 April.](#)
- Verdegaal, M. (2018). [How can online communications drive offline interventions?](#), Ex Post Paper. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: RAN Centre of Excellence, 22-23 November.m