

## RAN LOCAL

08/12/2021

### CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN LOCAL: Dealing with the changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism  
25-26 November 2021, online event*

# The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism

## Key outcomes

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The landscape of polarisation, radicalisation, and extremism has gone through many developments in the last few years. Local coordinators have focused and structured their P/CVE strategies on the threats coming from violent Islamist extremism. However, the current landscape of radicalisation contains new trends that might live up to the same level of threat as violent Islamism. This paper is based on the insights from the RAN LOCAL meeting on 25 and 26 November 2021. It presents practitioners' views on the landscape of polarisation, radicalisation, and extremism that is currently visible at the local level, how has this landscape changed? And what is needed to prepare the local P/CVE strategy to deal with it?

The key outcomes of the discussions are mostly aimed at local P/CVE coordinators but can also be of interest for first-line practitioners working in the field of P/CVE and dealing with (parts of) the changing landscape.

Conspiracy narratives and their breeding ground for violence and right-wing extremism were the most prominent developments mentioned as well as, to a lesser extent, left-wing extremism and radical environmentalism. As such, participants and local coordinators shared concerns about maintaining the (online) multiagency cooperation and the political support and funding for their P/CVE activities as well as the need for new knowledge and skills. Yet, participants have recommended the construction of an inclusive, flexible, ideologically neutral local P/CVE strategy in which human rights and democratic values are guaranteed and respected.

## Highlights of the discussion

The objectives of this RAN LOCAL meeting on 'dealing with the changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism' were to collect tips and insights on how to make the local P/CVE strategy more flexible to be able to deal with the changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism. The setup of the digital meeting was to promote exchange amongst the participants in order to learn from each other, focusing on:

1. Identifying the changes and discussing the developments that are visible in the local context.
2. Exchanging experience on how the local P/CVE strategy, especially the multiagency cooperation, political support and funding, and the practitioners' competencies, has reacted following the developments in the current landscape.
3. Sharing and generating ideas and insights on how to adapt the local strategy to this changing landscape.

On the first day of the meeting, participants discussed what developments are currently visible in the local P/CVE setting, what is the most challenging development as well as how these developments are causing changes in political support & funding for P/CVE, cooperation with other organisations or in the need for new knowledge and / or skills for practitioners.

Regarding the **developments currently visible** in the local P/CVE setting, it became once again clear that over the last few years, the local landscape has changed a lot. Nearly all participants are currently experiencing the *consequences of conspiracy narratives*. Due to the current pandemic situation this topic is particularly prominent. It is also quite visible because many people are organising and participating in demonstrations (and even riots). Conspiracy theorists are a very mixed group of people. There are families participating in the demonstrations with their children. People who do not belong to any ideology and had nothing to do with radicalisation before the pandemic. We are dealing with a new quality of violence and a very heterogeneous group. A specific challenge is the fact that government employees, also wearing their uniforms, are taking part in these demonstrations.

Next to conspiracy narratives, roughly three out of every four participants are witnessing *right-wing extremism* now. This is partly overlapping with conspiracy theorists, as there is an increasing connection between the far-right scene and QAnon observed, for instance.

Opposed to the situation of some years ago, only a minority of participants (roughly one out of every three participants) are dealing with *Islamist extremism* nowadays.

*Left-wing extremism* and *radical environmentalism* were also mentioned by some participants. Left-wing extremists are visible in Belgium for instance, where they are taking part in demonstrations against the state measures regarding the pandemic situation, however little knowledge is currently available about this security-aware group.

While discussing the **most challenging developments**, concerns were raised about being able to *work online*, where the vulnerable target groups are. Also, the need to deepen the *understanding of what is going on* right now and use a 'multi-perspective' for this were mentioned. But at the same time, non-violent Islamism was put forward as a current challenge, as well as normalisation of far-right narratives.

**Political support and funding** are a cause for concern for some participants, as due to the economic backlash of the pandemic an overall cutback in funding is expected over the long term. Also, the fact that for quite some years there haven't been any large-scale terrorist attacks in the EU, is leading to less attention and therefore less financial and political support for local P/CVE work. Lastly, the fact that somehow the threat of Islamist extremism in Europe seems to have diminished after the fall of Daesh maybe a reason to decrease funding and support. There is a risk that the current challenges like conspiracies and right-wing extremism are being less associated with P/CVE work.

Regarding the **cooperation between organisations** a mixed image was visible during the meeting. For some participants, working online has led to an increase in contact and cooperation. However, for other participants, it has not improved over the last period of time as topics like organised crime are more in the picture than P/CVE work.

The majority of participants shared their opinion that more (and new) knowledge and / or skills for practitioners are needed to deal with the current developments in P/CVE. However, they stressed that the existing skills and knowledge can still be used and built on. The specific needs that have been mentioned here were:

- Promote media literacy, fact checking and recognising fake news and conspiracy narratives
- Social media analysis
- Adapting frameworks like prediction factors to new circumstances
- Creating more awareness of the new forms of radicalisation

During the meeting, the efforts that the **city of Amsterdam** has made in **broadening the scope of the P/CVE programme** were presented and discussed. The process of adapting the P/CVE programme is still ongoing, so no clear-cut answers were given. Speaking about the experiences and challenges of Amsterdam, proved to be an interesting way to discuss the current changes in the local P/CVE approach.

There are four constituting elements in the P/CVE programme of Amsterdam:

1. Providing a *knowledge and information centre* for the municipality and its partners to gain insight in trends and developments and to analyse them. Risk assessments, analyses of phenomena and monitors are being written, in cooperation with scientific partners like the University of Amsterdam.
2. Organising a *professional network*, including different kinds of professionals that work with people vulnerable to radicalisation. The professionals involved are being offered a training programme. Account managers within the professional organisations are the bridge builders between the municipality and their own organisations. In dialogue with the professionals in the network, the city of Amsterdam creates an image to describe what is going on in the city and to signal possible radicalisation within the city.
3. *General prevention* programme: a programme to prevent vulnerable people from radicalising, using interventions aimed at increasing resilience.
4. *Mitigate risks*: when concrete risks of non-violent or violent radicalisation are visible, a case-based approach is used to try to bring the people involved 'back into society'. These risks can be flagged by professionals, using a specific hotline.

*How is the city adapting it's P/CVE approach?*

Every six months the city writes a threat assessment. Over the last period, this assessment has been diversified. Currently, different types of extremism are incorporated in the assessment (Islamist, right-wing, anti-government sentiments, left-wing, animal rights and environmental extremism and / or activism). Mostly activism can be observed from these ideologies and currently, a diffused and fragmented landscape is visible in Amsterdam.

The city has tried to make their analytical frameworks (for instance the framework to assess an individual's behaviour) more *ideologically neutral*, as it used to be focussed on Islamist extremism. This has been done to be able to determine the risk of violence coming from different types of radicalisation. Incorporating forms of non-violent extremism, is also challenging. The city has tried to define the key elements of the democratic legal order, in order to be able to determine, when the democratic legal order is (possibly) being undermined.

Thirdly, Amsterdam has reached out to their *network of professionals* to create awareness of diverse forms of radicalisation and to offer training. A survey was used to learn from the practitioners about their ideas and experiences. Most professionals and others (press, politicians) in the city only think of Islamist extremism, when speaking about radicalisation. To broaden the scope, the mayor of Amsterdam is frequently speaking about new forms in the city council, for instance. And as right-wing (accelerationist) extremism tends to be visible with rather young people, there has been an improved commitment towards secondary schools.

Especially regarding focussing on *right-wing extremism*, Amsterdam faces some *challenges*. There are difficulties in identifying the vulnerable or radicalising young people due to restrictions regarding the abilities to work online. GDPR-frameworks restrict these opportunities. To be able to identify possible cases, the network is being enlarged and the city is rethinking its preventive policies as they are still mostly focussed on migrant groups. Where and how to find people vulnerable to right-wing or conspiracy narratives?

During the following discussion the [behaviour barometer](#) from the Canadian Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) was mentioned as a ideologically neutral tool to make estimations about someone's behaviour.

Besides the experiences from Amsterdam, also two short presentations were shared about the current *developments and challenges* in **Greece** and **Italy**. In *Italy*, from the perspective of someone working with the refugee community, there are important developments regarding the *Afghan refugees*. They were welcomed very warmly in Italy, while not all of them were actual helpers of the Italian army in Afghanistan. This welcoming attitude by the Italian government has created discord amongst refugee groups, as some groups felt that the Afghani refugees were preferentially treated, especially when it comes to the continuation of their asylum procedures. This situation created clashes between different group of migrants and might also influence the way refugees are thinking about the Italian government and possibly lead to anti-government sentiments. From *Greece*, the perspective of an expert on conspiracy narratives and violent extremism during COVID-19 was shared. The pandemic has proven to be a new breeding ground for radicalisation. New grievances have built up (worsened economic position, high levels of stress and anxiety), causing people to radicalise. During the pandemic, a 'Big Bang' for fake news, disinformation and conspiracy narratives have been observed, also reinforcing conspiracy thinking about ethnic groups. As seen in attacks around the globe (Christchurch, El Paso, Halle and Hanau), conspiracy narratives are playing an important role in current extremism. In Greece, left-wing and right-wing groups have changed their behaviour to reach new people during the pandemic. To deal with this situation, local coordinators could aim for:

- improvement of research and online detection tools
- vulnerability assessment
- addressing social isolation and strengthening resilience
- development of alternative and counter narratives and strategic communication tools
- polarisation management

## Recommendations

Formulating recommendations to make the local P/CVE strategy more flexible to deal with the rapid changes in the landscape of polarisation and extremism was the focus of the discussions on the second day of this meeting. Participants have come up with essential tips that can help recalibrating the local P/CVE strategy:

### Overall recommendation:

As the landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism has witnessed some fundamental changes, other fundamental changes should be consequently brought into the local P/CVE strategy. Participants have agreed that now is the time for local authorities and practitioners to start critically questioning their P/CVE strategy, redefining its objectives and rethinking what it is we mean when we speak about radicalisation. Some have even suggested to start thinking of an alternative P/CVE strategy (2.0) that suits the Western open democracy and **respects human rights** and which is **inclusive, flexible, and ideologically neutral**.

### Specific recommendations:

- **Redefine the local strategy** by regularly implementing evidence-based evaluation of the interventions and programmes to modify the strategy accordingly. Sometimes we do not have to reinvent the wheel as our knowledge and the already existed practices can help counter the new challenges.
- The local P/CVE strategy should not be concerned with specific extremist ideologies. **Work towards a more ideologically neutral strategy** that also counts for the individual and societal factors.

- Even though some developments might seem new to the local context, some of them are not completely new, they just have embodied new aspects, e.g. conspiracy narratives. **Set up specialised arrangements to monitor and counter the threats of these developments.**
- **Make the Local P/CVE more inclusive.** Ensure that the contributions of professionals from different cultural backgrounds and the gender perspective are being integrated into the P/CVE work and the P/CVE team.
- Constantly **re-examine the sources of threats** in society and focus on the main task, mainly: the prevention of violence. Keep in mind that local practitioners are not a 'thought police' and their job is to prevent acts of violence.
- Some forms of radicalisation and polarisation, e.g. anti-vaccine and anti-refugees sentiments, are not only present in the local communities, but they are also found inside the local statutory bodies. **Find ways to address and prevent these issues inside (governmental) organisations.**
- The local strategy should **uphold the democratic values and human rights** such as the freedom of speech and expression. To remain trustworthy, make sure the local P/CVE strategy is being carried out within the legal frameworks.
- Reaching out to vulnerable individuals has become more challenging. Local coordinators recommended **intensifying the contact with the civil and local actors from different sectors** to stay on top of the new developments and keep people at risk on the radar.
- **Execute more research on the similarities and connections between different radicalised groups.** What do they have in common? What drives their extremist views? For example, anti-vaccine and anti-5G movements, right-wing and anti-minority groups and Islamist extremism groups share their distrust in governments, and to some extent, use each other's narrative to further erode faith in our democratic values and institutions.
- **Keep investing in online prevention and detecting tools** as the online dimension is present in each part of the changing landscape. Online platforms are being used to mobilise people, spread the extremist narratives and plan activities.
- Lastly, **raising awareness in the local community** of the current landscape of radicalisation is of huge importance. Make sure the emerging phenomena and their breeding grounds and potential threats are being addressed and discussed in the public debate as well as among practitioners.

#### Recommendations regarding multiagency cooperation:

- Enhance your understanding of the current landscape by **making use of the expertise and knowledge gathered by civil society organisations and other NGO's.**
- Many forms of polarisation and radicalisation, such as lone actor, conspiracy believers, anti-vaccine, anti-5G, and anti-government extremism, may seem unorganised and without any hierarchical structure. This makes it difficult to address the issue in the local community as you cannot point out your target audience. Therefore, it is important to **include all relevant actors in taking stock of the current local context** like youth workers, social media experts, social and health care workers, teachers, etc.
- Mutual trust between the different partners is needed to be able to adapt to the changing and challenging landscape. **Build and sustain confidence between the different partners** and make sure all stakeholders involved understand both, the decision-making process and the thinking behind it.

#### Recommendations regarding political support and funding:

- Clarify the nature and extent of the changing landscape in the local context. **Build consensus around the need for setting up new units of expertise** in preventing and countering these 'potential' threats.
- While seeking more funding for the activities and the interventions you would like to implement, **outline concretely, but also realistically your targets** and provide a clear baseline against which the progress can be measured.
- Keep identifying relevant resources and partners that are available to support your action plan. **Provide a transparent plan for the allocation of funding** and the role and responsibilities for the implementation of the action plan.

### Recommendations regarding skills and knowledge:

- For responding to the new trends in radicalisation and polarisation, new knowledge and skills are needed. Discuss with the first-line practitioners what are the difficulties they are currently facing, what skills and tools do they need to overcome these challenges? **Provide suited trainings to upgrade their competencies.**
- First-line practitioners may have the right tools and knowledge to deal with the changing landscape, but they might need assistance in re-orienting and transforming their skills to the new landscape. **Identify the factors that may limit the implementation of their expertise and increase their preventive skills.**

## Follow up

A possible follow up meeting to this one might be a meeting about the human rights aspect in the updated local P/CVE strategy. To what extent do the local strategy and its interventions and programmes reflect and respect basic human rights? Do we need to fine-tune the local strategy to guarantee human rights are not being violated?

An exploratory meeting to outline the needs of first-line practitioners to better deal with new forms of polarisation and extremism could be suitable. Which trainings, tools, the expertise do they lack, and how to gain them?

## Further reading

European Commission. (2020). What are conspiracy theories? Why do they flourish? [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifyingconspiracy-theories\\_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifyingconspiracy-theories_en#what-are-conspiracy-theories-why-do-they-flourish)

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