

RAN Y&E

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CONCLUSION PAPER*Working Group Meeting Y&E**22-23 November 2023, Rome, Italy (#641)*

Explorative meeting on dealing with problematic manifestations of the extreme left

Key outcomes

Over the past years, terms like 'wokeism', 'cancel culture' and 'the extreme left' have become ubiquitous in public and political debate throughout various EU Member States. Statistically, fewer violent incidents and attacks have been attributed to the extremist left than to Jihadist extremism or right-wing extremism¹. However, developments like the increasingly divisive debate over identities, intensifying climate action and the confrontations between Antifa youth and the far right have increased concerns among youth practitioners.

On 22 and 23 November 2023, the RAN Youth & Education Working Group convened youth workers, school staff and other youth experts in Rome. The aim was to gain insight on this phenomenon and collect testimonies from participants on how far-left topics feature in their daily work in schools and youth work organisations, and the related impact on their professional responsibility to build resilience and safeguard pupils from exploitation by extremist recruiters.

Some of the key outcomes are below.

- In some cases, teachers and youth workers feel that due to 'combative and intolerant' left-wing attitudes, there is a limitation of freedom of speech and exchange of ideas, which are essential in a safe classroom/learning environment.
- Social exclusion, either between students and teachers or amongst students, occurs when someone does not share leftist ideas or is perceived to hold far-right beliefs.
- It's important to make young people aware of the possible harmful implications of their activist expression, e.g. by causing indirect harm to others or by getting themselves and their peers into trouble.
- Schools should take on a more formative (rather than reactive) role to developments in society: not judging one side of the argument, but always standing for peace and having an ethos of respectful and fruitful discussion.

This conclusion paper gives an overview of practitioners' experiences with problematic actions of pupils adhering to far-left ideology. Because manifestations of this ideology range from non-violent to effective extremism, we discuss this phenomenon across three levels: from problematic and affective polarisation, to escalating disruptive activism, to concrete acts of violence. For each of these tiers, we elaborate on how this poses challenges for prevention of

¹ [European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2023](#)

violent extremism (PVE) practitioners working with young people. Finally, we share practitioners' recommendations on how to deal with these cases.

Highlights of the discussion

We started the meeting by properly framing its focus. As with other forms of extremism, various different or overlapping subtopics fall under the broad 'leftist' umbrella. Based on publications, reports, media resources and public debate, we have identified a wide range of topics that are most often problematised in the context of far-left radicalisation: so-called identity politics, cancel culture and wokeism, intensifying climate activism and alleged eco-terrorism, anti-fascism and violent protests.

The various people that mobilise around these topics are not actually in the phase of violent extremism but are still subject to public concern. To also cover the challenging non-violent manifestations of the far left, we have structured the topics along three levels: from 1) problematic polarisation, to 2) escalating disruptive activism, to 3) acts of violence and agitation.

Tier 1: Problematic polarisation around identity politics

Practitioners in the meeting distinguished 'problematic' affective polarisation from 'constructive' polarisation. Positive societal change is often driven by polarisation and channelled in a constructive way. 'Affective' polarisation refers to polarisation where groups are opposed beyond the topic or ideology, and reject the other group emotionally, on a personal and generalising level. If polarisation escalates and the distance between opposing groups thus grows too large, this undermines the possibility of constructive solutions.

The fight for equal rights and acceptance of minorities is a very sensitive topic, as it often concerns aspects of people's identity such as ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual orientation, or pressing global affairs like the situation between Israel and Palestine. When polarisation concerns a perceived identity threat, people tend to be very defensive². Media and public debate over the past years indicate that this has led to polarised positions around 'wokeism' and 'cancel culture'. These terms refer to heightened political correctness and the practice of 'cancelling' people for having ideas or views conflicting with their own. Meeting participants provided the following examples of problematic leftist polarisation.

- Students with leftist ideas and those with conservative ideas refuse to interact and talk with each other. Young people are increasingly focused on identity issues and are categorising others.
- Some institutions do not provide a safe space for rather conservative pupils, who then self-censor their opinions. There might be an institutional bias with double standards favouring left-wing issues.
- Teachers might receive problematic backlash and accusations of sexism if they are not up to date with gender and 'queer' issues.
- In some countries, certain football clubs are ideologically affiliated. These affiliations might spill over in schools and youth work organisations, turning groups against each other.
- The Israel–Palestine conflict is a source of tension amongst students as well as amongst teachers. When a school or organisation is perceived to be taking sides on this subject, there are always people sympathising with either side of the conflict who feel left out and unrepresented, and who continue to agitate.

Implications according to practitioners

- Social exclusion and 'identity withdrawal' causes young people to end up in small identity-affirming groups. This limitation to one's own bubble reinforces affective polarisation, which could lead to outbursts when people are confronted with other opinions.

² [Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth](#)

- Institutions working with young people have the obligation to provide a safe space for every young person, regardless of their point of view. Otherwise, these alienated youngsters might isolate and radicalise.
- Feelings of social unsafety or refusal to discuss certain topics limits freedom of speech due to peer pressure. This is particularly problematic in academic environments.

Tier 2: Escalating and disruptive protests

As climate change continues and the housing crisis persists in several countries alongside the rise of far-right discourse, some left-wing young people feel the need to elevate their level of involvement in activism and take more radical action. Some activist groups try to amplify their message by increasing the shock value of their actions, targeting public and private infrastructure or property. In various countries, there is significant public concern about such movements, and in some cases even judicial action. Meeting participants described how the young people they work engage in escalating and disruptive protests.

- Graffiti in, on and around schools, containing anarchist or communist symbols, and messages aimed at government, police or political opponents.
- Squatting on private property, blocking roads and other public infrastructure or chaining themselves to trees.
- Handing out flyers at school entrances glorifying and justifying violence.
- Organising or joining counterprotests at far-right events, either to boycott gatherings or to silence speakers.
- Doxing: sharing people's private information online with the intention to expose or harm them.
- Pupils joining protests of extremist organisers, without being aware of the goals of these organisers.
- Students protesting the election of a right-wing government by refusing to go to class and blocking the corridors for others.

Implications according to practitioners

- Some of these actions raise issues of public order, for example when there are spontaneous mass gatherings. Also, blocking people from entering buildings might lead to clashes.
- In some cases, protesters get in trouble with the law for damaging public property, or even put themselves in danger when opposing violent groups.
- When youngsters unknowingly join protests organised by extremist organisations, they might be at risk of being recruited, or being associated with these organisations by security institutions.
- In some cases, protesters might endanger other students or deny them their human rights, for example the right to education.

Tier 3: Instigating and committing violence

The further along people are in the radicalisation process, the more acceptable they find it to use violence in support of their cause. Often in left-wing ideologies, people make a clear distinction between violence against infrastructure and material damage, and refrain from using violence against people. However, there have been various cases of terrorist attacks or violent provocations targeting government representatives or far-right actors and groups, as follows.

- Damaging private property and causing intimidation due to ideological disagreements.
- Violent agitators hijacking peaceful protests to provoke security forces, which leads to riots.

- Instigating violent counterprotests or clashes, e.g. throwing stones at Quran burnings, or other far-right demonstrations.

Implications according to practitioners

- Committing violence and damage is illegal and might negatively impact young people's futures in terms of prosecution, safety, or job opportunities.
- Acts like these have a devastating societal impact and might develop into a spiral of retaliating violence.
- Acts of violence might negatively impact the public discourse around the cause the perpetrators are supporting.

Recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners in youth work and education

- To promote democratic citizenship, do not ignore challenging discussion topics in the classroom. Instead, address them.
- Formal education should take a formative role, rather than a reactive role. Promote peace, human rights values and justice continuously, not only when a situation has escalated.
- Teach pupils about disinformation and foster their critical thinking skills.
- Ensure the school/organisation is a safe space for everyone; do not, as a school/organisation, take a stance on controversial topics that might exclude someone and make them feel unsafe. Focus on the values and ethics, rather than on the stance.
- Listen, don't judge. Ask about underlying feelings and emotions that might lie behind extreme behaviour.
- If your students want to participate in protest, whether in school or elsewhere, prepare them beforehand. Inform them about the topic, the goals and the organisers. Leave room for debate and the voices of students who do not necessarily agree with the protest; use it as a teachable opportunity. Also inform them about the implications that their protest could have on others.
- If your young people have been involved in violent protesting, do not ignore this. Instead, make it a topic of discussion. Ask them why they felt the need to resort to violence and show them alternative ways to express their opinions and need for activism. Do not exclude them from the group but integrate them into it.

Recommendations for policymakers

- Provide teachers and youth workers with guidelines to address difficult situations, to allow schools to take a more formative role.
- Multi-agency work should feature in early intervention; start fruitful discussions before situations escalate.
- Include or maintain critical thinking skills and digital literacy in teacher training courses.

Follow up

More conceptual clarity on the contemporary far-left in the preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) framework is needed. In climate activism, for example, it may be difficult to distinguish the extremism aspect, and some issues, like the Israel–Palestine conflict, cannot be framed within left-wing or Islamist ideology. Moreover, while these topics and manifestations can be categorised as indicated above, in practice this distinction is far more ambiguous and non-linear across levels one to three. It is challenging for practitioners to estimate how problematically involved their pupils are, and not to overreact or miss crucial warning signs.

Further reading

- RAN Overview paper (2021): [Contemporary Violent Leftwing and Anarchist Extremism \(VLWAE\) in the EU: Analysing Threats and Potential for P/CVE](#)
- RAN Y&E Short handbook/Conclusion paper (2020): [COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise](#)
- RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2023): [Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth](#)
- The [EUROGUIDE Project](#) created an extensive handbook and online training programme for teachers dealing with religious and socio-political arguments in schools. It provides concrete examples of different ideologies, topics and possible ways to act. The handbook is available in Dutch, French, Hungarian, Italian and Swedish.