

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL meeting on 'Preventing possible violence based on anti-government extremism on the local level'

24-25 March 2022, online meeting

Preventing possible violence based on anti-government extremism on the local level

Short summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a momentum for different narratives that are based on the idea of distrusting governments and political policies. These narratives have fostered a new style of "anti-government extremism" that seems to attract a wide variety of extremist groups, such as anti-vaxxers, conspiracists, right-wing extremists and left-wing extremists, and is reaching a broad audience of people who, in turn, become distrustful and sometimes even hostile towards (local) government. Anti-government extremism refers to any movements or actions with an antipathy towards the government's representatives and officials, and democratic institutions. This also means that it refers to the groups that oppose and resist the government's policies and are willing to incite or commit violence, not only against the authorities, but also against any institutions or individuals that comply with or implement the government's policies. In this context, the RAN LOCAL Working Group has convened an online meeting for local preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) coordinators and first-line practitioners to collect insights on how anti-government extremism is manifesting itself on the local level and discuss possible interventions to prevent violent or near-violent actions stemming from this kind of extremism. This paper is based on the insights of this meeting on 24 and 25 March 2022. The participants proposed, amongst others, the following recommendations:

- Use the interventions and action plans for violent extremism that already exist and see how they can be adjusted to deal with (near-) violent actions stemming from anti-government sentiments.
- Create new alliances to include community partners and civil society actors.
- Train and educate local professionals in recognising and acting upon predominant symbols and narratives used by anti-government extremist groups and how to reach out and engage with local communities.
- Use media to report hate speech and involve local key figures or influencers to stimulate public debate and promote campaigns against violence.

Context of the discussion

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, extremists from different groups have fed on conspiracy narratives **stating that the governments are misleading the public, ignoring their citizens' demands and taking away their freedoms**. This narrative is being used by different extremists' ideologies to further strengthen their cause and grind down trust in the governments, but it has also been embraced by other ordinary people filled with frustrations and uncertainty. **This narrative led to a new form of anti-government extremism that is manifesting itself through a combination of violent and near-violent actions.**

The degree to which anti-government extremism manifests itself through violent means **is greatly dependent on local and contextual factors**. While some participants described the level of violence in their countries as "high" and "growing", others indicated that the violence level in their countries remained "relatively low".

Manifestations of anti-government extremism on the local level

Type of manifestation	Example
Riots	The most prominent example is what many cities have recently witnessed: violent riots and clashes with the police . In Belgium, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and Austria as well as many other countries, protesters took the streets to demonstrate against their governments' policies regarding COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations policies. On several occasions, these protests escalated quickly and turned into violent riots in which rioters clashed with the police and demolished public properties, and set police buildings and cars on fire, such as the protest in Rotterdam in the Netherlands ⁽¹⁾ .
Vandalising	Another violent example of anti-government extremism is vandalising healthcare and vaccinations centres and assaulting and attacking their employees . Healthcare personnel, especially those working at vaccination sites, were victims of violent attacks by angry vaccine sceptics and conspiracy theorists who believe their governments are violating their freedoms. They vandalised and set the vaccinations centres on fire, one instance of which in Poland was declared by the Polish government as "an act of terror" ⁽¹⁾ .
Individual violent acts	Note that violent anti-government extremism does not always manifest itself through the acts of extremist groups, it is also portrayed by individuals who, out of anger and opposition to their government's policies, carry out violent acts on their own. One example is the killing of an employee at a gas station in Idar-Oberstein who was shot by a customer after asking him to wear the mandatory mask face ⁽²⁾ .
Threatening politicians	Nevertheless, participants also referred to another worrying aspect of anti-government extremism: threatening politicians and officials directly and indirectly via social media and in real life . Also, schools and healthcare personnel implementing the government's prevention and vaccination measures have been harassed and threatened. However, threats and attacks against the local and national politicians are not only aimed to threaten the officials representing the governments. These are also attacks on the democracy and the fundamental democratic legal order in the society. For example, politicians in France received direct emails threatening them with a "hail of bullets" if they pass new restrictions ⁽³⁾ .

⁽¹⁾ See: <https://www.vox.com/2021/1/26/22250380/violent-anti-lockdown-protests-netherlands>

⁽²⁾ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germans-shocked-by-killing-cashier-after-covid-mask-row-2021-09-21/>

⁽³⁾ See: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/french-mps-receive-death-threats-over-covid-19-restrictions/

Defend groups	Anti-government extremism is also manifesting itself through military-style “defend groups” and violent movements that have been organised to “defend” anti-vaccine demonstrations . These defend groups reject the legitimacy of their governments and seek to bring their politicians to the so-called common law courts. The groups’ members connect on social media platforms where they organise training camps for ex-soldiers to wage war on the governments and hit vaccine centres, schools, councillors and directors of public health in every area. These groups are known as “sovereign citizens” in the United Kingdom ⁽⁴⁾ and “Defend IJmuiden” in the Netherlands ⁽⁵⁾ .
Polarising atmosphere	Participants also shared concerns about the polarising and inciteful tone embedded in anti-authorities demonstrations, and particularly about the environment they provide for extremists to recruit and spread their message. This is because far right-wing and anti-Semitic groups were regularly spotted participating in these protests . In an attempt to spread their extremist ideas, some protesters would demonstrate while wearing Nazi symbols or even wearing a modified Jewish star to draw a parallel between the unvaccinated and Jewish citizens in the Nazi era ⁽⁶⁾ .

Who are the ‘anti-government groups’?

As mentioned above, the people who are liaising under anti-government extremism and using the narrative of distrusting the governments are diverse. **They come from different groups, such as anti-vaxxers, conspiracists, right-wing extremists, left-wing extremists, and “farmer defence” and climate extremist groups**. Persons affiliated with these different groups came together during anti-government demonstrations not only to protest, but they also saw in the dominant state of frustrations and indignation an opportunity to spread their extremist ideologies and reach more people.

However, not all participants in these demonstrations are extremists or belong to an extremist group or radicalised movements. Participants emphasised that **a considerable number of the protesters are adult and “first-time protesters”** propelled by a wide range of matters such as anti-vax, anti-Ukraine immigrants, anti-5G, conspiracy theories and gas prices.

This diversity in the people and groups of anti-government demonstrations has resulted in the absence of clear organisation and leadership. **Demonstrations against the governments seem to be unstructured, disorganised, and without clear organisation or identified leaders.** Even when these demonstrations are organised online on social media, participants indicated that it is difficult to identify the leading figures in these groups and therefore they have no obvious entry point to the group of demonstrators. In such a situation, the risk of escalation and violence needs to be mitigated in different ways than at a “standard demonstration”, with some sort of organisational committee that can be the point of contact for the local authorities.

What is the breeding ground for anti-government extremism?

Participants identified several situations that further the development of anti-government extremism:

- After almost 2 years of strict lockdown and isolation measures, many **people have experienced psychological and mental health difficulties**. This could be the result of the unprecedented pressure to cope with the prolonged lockdown or of becoming unemployed, losing family members, and being forced to spend a lot of time alone at home (on the internet). Subsequently, people’s perceptions of the

⁽⁴⁾ See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10384239/Alpha-Men-Assemble-Inside-anti-vax-group-members-taught-wage-war>

⁽⁵⁾ See: <https://www.nhnieuws.nl/nieuws/279636/politie-onderzoekt-defend-ijmuiden-wat-weten-we-over-deze-groep>

⁽⁶⁾ See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/26/germany-to-crack-down-on-covid-protesters-in-yellow-star-badges?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

new developments and their attitude toward the governments' imposed policies differ in the post-pandemic era.

- Many participants indicated that an important breeding ground for anti-government extremism is that people feel more and more ignored by their governments. **They spoke about shortcomings in the current democratic system in listening to people's genuine demands** which makes people become more discontented with the working mechanism of democracy. Ordinary people who feel excluded from the system take to the streets to express their desire for a democratic system in which they feel included. Nevertheless, extremists have heavily relied on people's discontent to present themselves as the protectors of people from the ignorant elites and to recruit people, like the above-mentioned defend groups or even to create new political parties to join the parliamentary elections.
- A last point is **the influence of social media on people's sentiments toward the governments**. In a time filled with uncertainties and conflicting information, people tend to look up answers on the internet where they find an immense amount of contradicting news and fake news. Without checking the credibility of the platforms where conspiracy-based explanations are being spread, people take for granted whatever answers they can find to their questions and start to question and distrust the news on governments' mainstream media. Even when it comes to the war in Ukraine, participants referred to situations where people refuse to believe the government's narrative regarding the war. In some countries, participants have observed that some citizens are more exposed to Russian online campaigns and do not accept the government's mainstream media. Especially in the eastern countries bordering Russia, where the impact of the Russian online campaign is at its highest. Moreover, participants indicated that **the war in Ukraine and Russia's influence in the region is the next big thing that could result in more anti-government protests**.

First recommendations on how to deal with anti-government extremism

The ways to deal with this kind of extremism on the local level can be grouped into four categories: the use of already existing interventions and action plans, the cooperation between stakeholders on the local level, training and education, and the use of media.

1. Use what is already there

"Don't reinvent the wheel but adjust and adapt the structures already in place"

Look at P/CVE cooperation structures, action plans and interventions already in place and see **how they can be adjusted** to deal with (near-) violent actions stemming from anti-government sentiments. Only when these are currently lacking was it deemed worthwhile to set up a new structure (?). Adjustments could encompass several aspects, like **expanding the scope of extremism, (type of) interventions, the audience(s) reached, and/or partners to cooperate with**.

2. Cooperation

"Build bridges and coalitions in peaceful times to use in difficult times"

It is likely that **new alliances** need to be made within local multi-agency cooperation structures to deal with (near) violent acts related to anti-government extremism. It is therefore important to know **the background** of the

(?) If you are setting up a new P/CVE structure, this RAN Policy Paper can provide some guidelines: ['Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles - Part 2'](#)

demonstrators or the people involved in (near-) violent actions. Who are they, what are their grievances, how and by whom they are influenced?

Then, identify and create a list of various communities and organisations in your city or town that could be of importance. Which organisations and communities are (socially) active in a community or neighbourhood? Who do they reach? Are they in contact with the people you are worried about? **Who can reach the people vulnerable to anti-government sentiments?** It is likely these will not be state authorities but can be found within **civil society actors**. New partners to consider could be psychologists, people who deal with sects and cults (in church), food banks, and community advisory groups with, for example, local business owners. Try to get in contact with them and talk to them; how does the current situation influence their work, what do they notice? Use that as a starting point for further cooperation.

Additional recommendations for cooperation between different stakeholders on the local level:

- **Support families and people close to radicalised persons.** They are probably worried about the person dear to them and may not know what to do. They could also be an entry point to reach the radicalised person.
- Knowing a few active demonstrators can not only help in identifying an entry point to communicate with the groups but can also help to identify actors who disagree with the use of violence and **who can discourage others from using violence**. Depending on the group and their sentiments, **peace police forces** can also be used as a gentle approach to try and prevent people from using violence.

Example of good cooperation between local government and police

Following the examples above, the cooperation between local government representatives and police is of great importance — yet a very sensitive endeavour — when it comes to preventing and countering (near-) violent acts stemming from anti-government extremism. In one of the examples shared during the meeting, a close cooperation between local civil servants and police helped in preventing escalation of a local protest movement. The cooperation was started as soon as there were signs of the protest, allowing both police and local government to already share information before the demonstration took place, in the planning and preparing phase. Together they established communication channels for during the demonstration and in case of violence. They decided on having the police engage as spokesperson for the demonstrators. The local government was in charge of communication with and informing other relevant institutions and organisations, like public transport, during the demonstration.

3. Training and education

"Local authorities need to keep investing in training frontline practitioners in how to engage with communities and take people's grievances seriously"

Professionals on the local level as well as other stakeholders involved in multi-agency cooperation structures need to be **educated and trained** to be able to recognise and deal with this type of extremism. As the violent or near-violent acts deriving from anti-government sentiments include a whole range of extremist and conspiracy narratives, a full training and education programme might not be feasible in terms of resources. There are however some known aspects in training and education that are beneficial for local actors and can be used in these contexts too:

- **Train local professionals to listen to people's grievances:** remember it is about how these grievances are *perceived* by someone that causes them to think or act in a certain way. You can validate someone's emotions and grievances without validating what they are saying. Discovering someone's underlying grievances can be a first step in overcoming them ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ Also see p. 4 of the RAN C&N Conclusions Paper '[Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU](#)', 2021.

- Train local actors in **how to engage with a community**, as communities can challenge radical ideologies, can provide early warning, and can help conceptualise and deliver campaigns ⁽⁹⁾. See for example this [step-by-step approach](#) to setting up and maintaining successful collaboration between local authorities and communities.
- **Educate local actors regarding the most commonly used symbols and narratives in different extremist ideologies**, including the ones that anti-government extremists tend to use. Ensure they also know what to do when they encounter these narratives and symbols, both online and offline. Some examples of commonly referred to symbols and narratives have been gathered in earlier RAN publications ⁽¹⁰⁾.

When it comes to **increasing resilience** to anti-government extremism:

- pay attention to **recognising and stopping the spread of fake news, through promoting media literacy and democracy and democratic values** within schools or other educational organisations ⁽¹¹⁾;
- **promote and use mentoring programmes**, where people susceptible to radicalising influences are paired with someone who can help them to find alternative paths and voices, within the democratic system.

4. Use of media

"Do not forget the possibilities that media bring for (online) interventions"

Media play an important role in spreading anti-government sentiments. It is therefore important to include this aspect when looking to prevent and counter violence stemming from anti-government sentiments and extremist beliefs.

- Use the possibility of **online interventions** such as **reporting** of hate speech and extremist content, as well as **actively spreading alternative narratives**.
- Use **influencers or key figures within communities to stimulate public debate and promote campaigns against violence** ⁽¹²⁾. Let different voices be heard in a constructive way, depolarising the debate rather than fuelling polarisation.
- Especially in eastern European countries close to Russian borders, Russian propaganda may cause anti-government sentiments through spreading conspiracy narratives and fake news. It is therefore important that **media partners play a role themselves in countering fake news and in raising awareness** about fake news. Social media partners could **moderate content** in different languages (e.g. Russian) as well as **proactively raise awareness through campaigns in local languages**. **Mainstream media** could **add disclaimers in their content** when they cover a sensitive topic, thus facilitating to pre-bunk conspiracy narratives ⁽¹³⁾.

⁽⁹⁾ See the RAN Ex Post Paper '[Engaging with communities in P/CVE](#)'

⁽¹⁰⁾ See the RAN Paper '[Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism](#)' (2021) or the RAN '[Factbook on Far-Right Extremism](#)' (2019).

⁽¹¹⁾ See pp. 17-18 of the RAN paper '[Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism](#)' (2021).

⁽¹²⁾ For examples of how to develop counter- and alternative narrative campaigns with local communities, please consult this RAN Issue Paper: '[Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities](#)'

⁽¹³⁾ See the RAN C&N Conclusions Paper '[Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU](#)', 2021.

Relevant practices

1. When it comes to training local partners on recognising symbols and acts and providing an action framework when such symbols or acts are encountered, the **Institute of Social Safety** in Poland provides an inspiring example. They have recently trained staff at the Auschwitz-Birkenau site in response to a number of incidents. Find out more about this practice [here](#).
2. **Landeskoordinierungsstelle Bayern gegen Rechtsextremismus**: the specialist office against right-wing extremism in Bayern, Germany, has recently expanded its scope to deal with the fast-rising spread of fake news, conspiracy and anti-democratic narratives, and the resulting growing distrust in mainstream media and government. They have actively formed new alliances with partners they didn't cooperate with before and work from a joint approach with civil society actors. In addition, they have educated and trained relevant partners and set up support systems for family and friends of radicalised individuals.

Follow-up

A follow-up meeting with the C&N Working Group about developing and implementing fact-checking tools and media literacy trainings for frontline practitioners to recognise fake news and prevent conspiracy theories.

A joint meeting with local P/CVE coordinators and police to explore the possibilities of intensive collaborations to prevent and counter (near-) violent acts stemming from anti-government extremism.

Further reading

On conspiracy narratives, right-wing extremism and anti-government sentiments:

- RAN Paper '[Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE](#)', 2021.
 RAN C&N Conclusions Paper '[Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU](#)', 2021.
 RAN '[Factbook on Far-Right Extremism](#)', 2019.

On establishing and strengthening community cooperation:

- RAN Issue paper '[Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities](#)', 2018.
 RAN Ex Post Paper '[Engaging with communities – Collaboration between local authorities and communities in PVE](#)', 2018.
 RAN Policy & Practice Ex Post Paper '[Engaging with communities in P/CVE](#)', 2018.
 RAN YF&C Ex Post Paper '[Strengthening community resilience to polarisation and radicalisation](#)', 2017.
 RAN Ex Post Paper '[Study visit to Northern Ireland on community engagement and resilience](#)', 2017.

On (establishing) multi-agency cooperation:

- RAN Policy Paper '[Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles – Part 2](#)', 2018.
 RAN H&SC Policy paper '[Multi-agency Working and preventing violent extremism: Paper 2](#)', 2018.