EX POST PAPER

Local-level management of far-right extremism

Summary

For local authorities, tackling far-right extremism (FRE) can be challenging: FRE differs from other forms of extremism, and there is a fine line between legal and illegal organisations. But it is crucial that EU countries and local authorities work to contain this phenomenon, in view of the ongoing and increasing violent and non-violent FRE and related hate speech and racism across Europe.

RAN LOCAL looked into how to deal with FRE on a local level during a meeting held in Rotterdam (Netherlands) on 23 and 24 January 2019. In this ex post paper a summary of the knowledge and information gained and recommendations of how to deal with FRE. This paper is written for local and regional P/CVE coordinators.

Introduction

Why tackle far-right extremism at local level

Far-right extremism (FRE) is **often overlooked** when it comes to (local) prevention/countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies ([1]). But throughout Europe, hate speech, racism, and violent and non-violent FRE are gaining ground ([2]). This is fostering a growing repudiation of political and democratic solutions for grievances at national level, fuelling societal hostility and polarisation, and could lead to the escalation of highly polarised conflicts between far-right extremists and their opponents, and attacks on minorities and refugees at local level.

Dealing with FRE is **a balancing act,** because of the fine line between legal and illegal FRE organisations. Repressive countermeasures that compromise core liberal democratic principles (such as freedom of expression, political freedom and/or the right to protest) might open the door to blanket censorship and make FRE even more persistent and aggressive. On the other hand, a lack of repressive measures might facilitate the emergence of FRE groups ([3]).

Far-right extremism: five salient points for local authorities

1) Definition

FRE is a **collective term for the radical and extreme right,** and it encompasses a diverse range of different ideologies that coexist with more traditional FRE ideologies (e.g. national socialism and fascism). Historical key ingredients of FRE are racism, xenophobia, (ultra-)nationalism, an anti-democratic or anti-establishment stance and a call for a strong state ([4]), although individual FRE ideologies may not incorporate all these components.

([1]) Abbas, T. (2017). Ethnicity and politics in contextualizing far right and Islamist extremism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *11*(3), 54-61. Retrieved from
http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/86974/1/Abbas_Ethnicity%20and%20politics%20in%20contextualising%20far%20right1.pdf
([2]) Busby, M. (2018, August 18). UK Has Not 'woken up' to Far-Right Threat, Says Ex-Counter-Terror Chief. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/aug/18/former-counter-terrorism-chief-says-uk-has-not-woken-up-to-far-right-threat
King, E. (2017, February 9). Counter-Terror Chief: Extremist Groups on the Rise in East Germany. *POLITICO*. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/counter-terror-chief-extremist-groups-on-the-rise-in-east-germany
Astier, H. (2017, April 5). French election: Young alt-right making waves. *BBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39433483
([3]) Ravndal, J., & Bjørgo, T. (2018). Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right. A Review of Past and Present Research. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *12*(6) 5-22. (p. 14). Retrieved from https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a1-ravndal-and-bjorgo.pdf
([4]) Mudde, C. (1996). The War of Words: Defining the Extreme Right Party Family. *West European Politics*, *19*(2) 225-248. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402389608425132
Carter, E. (2005). *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or failure?*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Retrieved from https://www.manchesterhive.com/view/9781847794420/9781847794420.xml

Recently, FRE expert Tore Bjørgo, together with Lars Erik Berntzen developed **a new far-right typology,** based on their own research and on three other studies ([5]). This typology is shown in Figure 1, below.
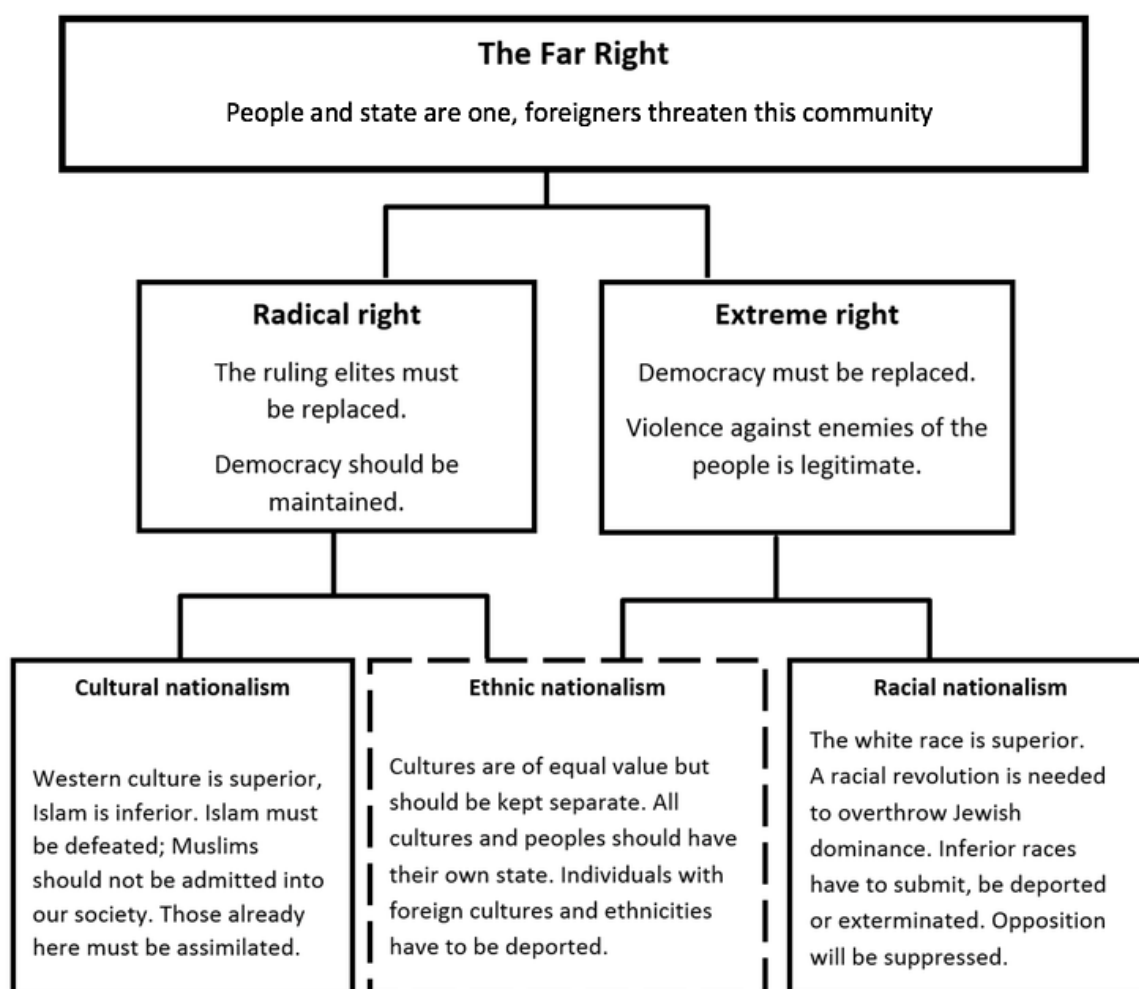

Figure 1. Tore Bjørgo and Lars Erik Berntzen's model, both from the Norwegian Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). They based this model on their own research and on three other studies: Mudde's *The ideology of the extreme right*, Berntzen's *The anti-Islamic movement: far right and liberal?* and Teitelbaum's *Lions of the north: sounds of new Nordic radical nationalism.*

([5]) Mudde, C. (2002). *The ideology of the extreme right.* Manchester: Manchester University Press. Retrieved from https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/27085/ssoar-2002-mudde-the_ideology_of_the_extreme.pdf?sequence=1
Berntzen, L. E. (2018). *The Anti-Islamic Movement: Far Right and Liberal?.* Florence: European University Institute (PhD thesis). Retrieved from http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/51864
Teitelbaum, B. (2017). *Lions of the North: Sounds of New Nordic Radical Nationalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190212599.001.0001/acprof-9780190212599

FRE supporters typically defend their right to express their opinions. RAN LOCAL meeting participants stressed that **FRE attitudes, behaviour and speech become problematic** when they call for a severe restriction of civil liberties or civil rights of specific religious and/or ethnic groups.

2) Different routes, different motives

It is important **to differentiate between the routes** far-right extremists take that lead to them becoming active in FRE. Under each FRE formation ([6]), different routes correspond to different motives for participation in FRE (although activists can switch between routes). These routes are shown in Figure 2, below.

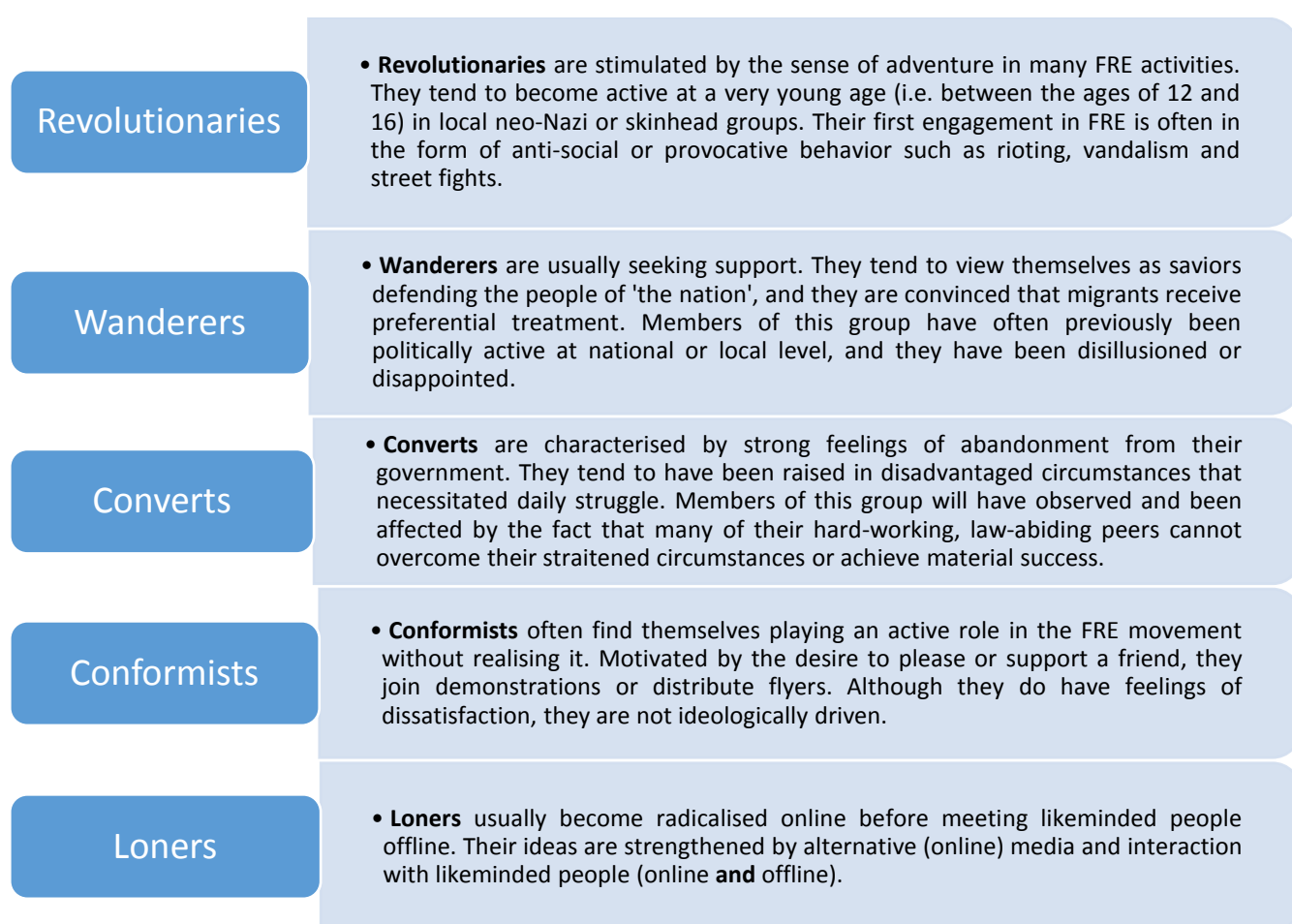|	
Revolutionaries	• **Revolutionaries** are stimulated by the sense of adventure in many FRE activities. They tend to become active at a very young age (i.e. between the ages of 12 and 16) in local neo-Nazi or skinhead groups. Their first engagement in FRE is often in the form of anti-social or provocative behavior such as rioting, vandalism and street fights.
Wanderers	• **Wanderers** are usually seeking support. They tend to view themselves as saviors defending the people of 'the nation', and they are convinced that migrants receive preferential treatment. Members of this group have often previously been politically active at national or local level, and they have been disillusioned or disappointed.
Converts	• **Converts** are characterised by strong feelings of abandonment from their government. They tend to have been raised in disadvantaged circumstances that necessitated daily struggle. Members of this group will have observed and been affected by the fact that many of their hard-working, law-abiding peers cannot overcome their straitened circumstances or achieve material success.
Conformists	• **Conformists** often find themselves playing an active role in the FRE movement without realising it. Motivated by the desire to please or support a friend, they join demonstrations or distribute flyers. Although they do have feelings of dissatisfaction, they are not ideologically driven.
Loners	• **Loners** usually become radicalised online before meeting likeminded people offline. Their ideas are strengthened by alternative (online) media and interaction with likeminded people (online **and** offline).

Figure 2. This typology is based on the work of Bert Klandermans and Annette Linden, 'Revolutionaries, wanderers, converts and compliants. Life histories of extreme right activists'. More recently, Nikki Sterkenburg (Leiden University) has added new elements to this typology.

([6]) Linden, A., & Klandermans, B. (2007). Revolutionaries, Wanderers, Converts and Compliants. Life Histories of Extreme Right Activists. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *36*(2) 184-201. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0891241606298824
More recently, Nikki Sterkenburg (Leiden University) has added new elements to this typology (PhD expected to be completed by the end of 2019).

3) Forms of far-right extremism and changes in the far-right extremist landscape

Local authorities seeking to tackle FRE may encounter different representations of the phenomenon: it may take the form of a **disorganised and loose network,** lacking a website, official ideology, Facebook page and/or structured membership. This can make it challenging to identify FRE recruiters, because they **may be present in diverse social formations**, e.g. neo-Nazi groups, anti-immigrant or anti-Islam protest groups, ultranationalist groups, study groups, elitist groups, youth gangs, football hooliganism groups, (online) social media outlets, friend groups and political parties, or they may be lone wolves. During the RAN LOCAL meeting, it was noted that recruitment also takes place at graduate schools and universities, in gyms and schools for mixed martial arts, and in the field of online gaming.

Tore Bjørgo's presentation on behalf of the C-REX on **how FRE has changed** in Norway over the past 30 years offered useful insights into the direction the phenomenon may take in future (with the disclaimer that this is not necessarily applicable to other EU countries). According to Bjørgo, the Norwegian FRE movement has undergone **four key changes**; these are shown in Figure 3, below.

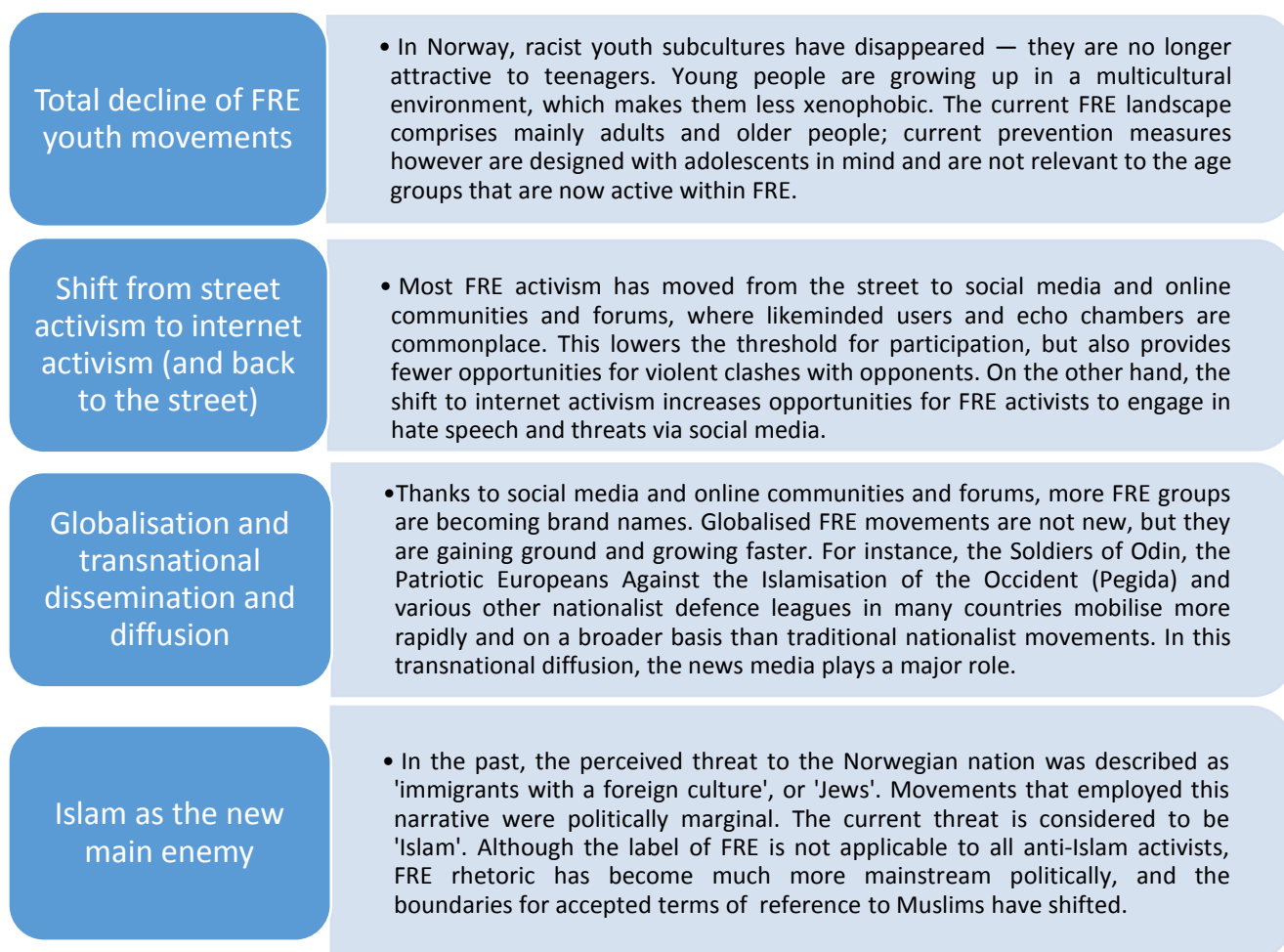| Total decline of FRE youth movements	• In Norway, racist youth subcultures have disappeared — they are no longer attractive to teenagers. Young people are growing up in a multicultural environment, which makes them less xenophobic. The current FRE landscape comprises mainly adults and older people; current prevention measures however are designed with adolescents in mind and are not relevant to the age groups that are now active within FRE.
Shift from street activism to internet activism (and back to the street)	• Most FRE activism has moved from the street to social media and online communities and forums, where likeminded users and echo chambers are commonplace. This lowers the threshold for participation, but also provides fewer opportunities for violent clashes with opponents. On the other hand, the shift to internet activism increases opportunities for FRE activists to engage in hate speech and threats via social media.
Globalisation and transnational dissemination and diffusion	•Thanks to social media and online communities and forums, more FRE groups are becoming brand names. Globalised FRE movements are not new, but they are gaining ground and growing faster. For instance, the Soldiers of Odin, the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (Pegida) and various other nationalist defence leagues in many countries mobilise more rapidly and on a broader basis than traditional nationalist movements. In this transnational diffusion, the news media plays a major role.
Islam as the new main enemy	• In the past, the perceived threat to the Norwegian nation was described as 'immigrants with a foreign culture', or 'Jews'. Movements that employed this narrative were politically marginal. The current threat is considered to be 'Islam'. Although the label of FRE is not applicable to all anti-Islam activists, FRE rhetoric has become much more mainstream politically, and the boundaries for accepted terms of reference to Muslims have shifted.

Figure 3. This figure is based on the presentation by Tore Bjørgo, Norwegian Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the RAN LOCAL meeting in Rotterdam (Netherlands) on 23 and 24 January 2019.

4) Online presence

The online presence of the FRE movement has increased, and its messages are reaching a broader audience ([7]). FRE messages disseminated online might be identified as hate speech, although they are often **much more sophisticated**. Justified grievances and emotionally charged topics are hijacked and reduced to oversimplified political demands and solutions. Against this backdrop, FRE messages disseminated online help foster a sense of belonging and identity, where FRE is represented as a reasonable alternative vying for support ([8]).

These looser **online communities are replacing traditional FRE organisations**; they are recruiting a younger generation that is less affiliated to one particular movement. These young online recruits support groups based on an affinity with particular opinions expressed in group messages or with a single issue put forward by the group. These communities are also useful for FRE when its supporters are mobilising protesters for spontaneous demonstrations **and** scheduled events.

Another online strategy is the creation of FRE social media **accounts to disseminate messages that appear neutral and are not factually untrue**, e.g. when reporting on crime and the presumed racial or religious background of perpetrators. Whilst the messages themselves pose no threat of violence, the selection of displayed topics and large number of similar messages cultivate an atmosphere where FRE rhetoric is fostered and promoted.

Recent research indicates that social media can also act as **a propagation mechanism** between online hate speech and real-life violent crime ([9]) and that lone actor terrorists are influenced by online activities of existing movements ([10]).

([7]) Lowles, N., & and Collins, M. (2018). 'Right-wing terror threat as high as ever'. *The state of hate 2018. HOPE not hate, 35*. January-February 2018. Retrieved from https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/State-of-Hate-2018.pdf
Bundesamt für Vergassungsschuts. (2013). *Right-wing extremists and their internet presence*, Berlin, Ministry of Interior. Retrieved from https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/embed/publication-2013-08-right-wing-extremists-and-their-internet-presence.pdf
Caiani, M., & Parenti, L. (2011). The Spanish extreme right and the Internet. *Análise Social, 46*(201), 719-740. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41494870
General Intelligence and Security Service. (2018). *Right-extremism in the Netherlands. A phenomenon in flux*. The Hague: Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations. Retrieved from https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2018/11/01/publication-aivd-right-wing-extremism-in-the-netherlands-a-phenomenon-in-flux
([8]) Simpson, P.A., & Duxies, H. (2015). *Digital Media Strategies of the Far Right in Europe and the United States,* Lanham: Lexington Books.
([9]) A recent study on more than 3 300 anti-refugee attacks showed that German towns with heavier Facebook usage saw more anti-refugee attacks.
Müller, K., & Schwarz, C. (2018). *Fanning the Flames of Hate. Social Media and Hate Crime.* Warwick: University of Warwick (Working Paper Series, No 373). Retrieved from
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/cage/manage/publications/373-2018_schwarz.pdf
([10]) Kaplan, J., Lööw, H., & Malkki, L. (2014). Introduction to the Special Issue on Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *26*(1), 1-12. Retrieved from
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263241403_Introduction_to_the_Special_Issue_on_Lone_Wolf_and_Autonomous_Cell_Terrorism
Berntzen, L. E. and Sandberg, S. (2014). The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *26*(5), 759-779. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2013.767245

5) Transnational networks and the rise of the alt-right

FRE movements are utilising the internet to create **virtual FRE communities** of likeminded individuals ([11]). Groups like the Soldiers of Odin and Pegida exist in various EU Member States. Transnational neo-Nazi groups like the Racial Volunteer Force and Combat 18 routinely meet with people holding similar belief systems from abroad, in order to build a coalition in defence of white supremacy. Even in cases without a shared 'brand', leaders of local or national FRE formations will suspend national or local activity and exchange ideas and information on ideology and strategy with FRE formations in other countries ([12]). At the same time, there is also a **transnational flow of information and consensus-building** between American alt-right groups and their European counterparts ([13]). The unambiguous ideology of the alt-right is often characterised by a rejection of liberal democracy and a strong advocacy of racialism ('scientific racism') and anti-Semitism ([14]).

How is FRE different from other forms of extremism?

Just like other forms of radicalisation, FRE radicalisation takes place at the intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory, where the process is triggered by personal experiences, kinship, friendship, group dynamics and socialisation ([15]).

Participants in the RAN LOCAL meeting discussed why FRE might be better tackled with **a different approach** to that used for other forms of extremism.

FRE seems **to originate in different conditions** than, for instance, Islamist extremism (IE). Although both stem from a search for identity and belonging, IE is partly orchestrated by organisations and networks abroad, and is fuelled by ongoing armed conflicts. While the IE narrative is quite clearly and broadly rejected within communities, messages of FRE are located **just within the mainstream discourse** ([16]). FRE appropriates

([11]) Caiani, M., & Parenti, L. (2013). *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781409409618

Caiani, M. and Kröll, P. (2015). The transnationalization of the extreme right and the use of the Internet. *International Journal of Comparative & Applied Criminal Justice*, *39*(4), 331-351. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01924036.2014.973050?src=recsys&journalCode=rcac20

Mammone, A., Godin, E., & Jenkins, B. (Eds.) (2013). *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe*, London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781136167515

([12]) For example, see: Macklin, G. (2013). Transnational Networking on the Far Right: The Case of Britain and Germany. *West European Politics*, *36*(1), 176-198. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402382.2013.742756

([13]) Applebaum, A., (2019, January 13). The anti-Europeans have a plan for crippling the European Union. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-anti-europeans-have-a-plan-for-crippling-the-european-union/2019/01/13/d8af6ab0-15ed-11e9-b6ad-9cfd62dbb0a8_story.html?utm_term=.02ff34a00332

Gabbam, A. (2016, November 21). Hitler salutes and white supremacism: a weekend with the 'alt-right'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/21/alt-right-conference-richard-spencer-white-nationalists

([14]) Main, T.J. (2018). *The Rise of the Alt-Right*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/book/the-rise-of-the-alt-right/

([15]) Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation. (2008). *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism*. European Commission. Retrieved from http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20080500_cscp_report_vries.pdf

([16]) Kundnani, A. (2012). *Blind Spot? Security Narratives and Far-Right Violence in Europe*. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (Research Paper). Retrieved from https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Kundnani-Blind-Spot-June-2012.pdf

national symbols that appear harmless, shaping them into political and nationalist statements in the FRE context (e.g. using national flags).

In some countries, **FRE is politically represented** at national and local level ([17]). The rise of nationalist parties influences public debate, policy and social norms. Because of the electoral success of nationalist parties, other political parties do not shy away from engaging in the same topics, using firm language ([18]). During elections, topics such as immigration policy, integration and perceived 'Islamisation' are often addressed more frequently than economic topics ([19]). In so doing, the political conversation engages in the discourse of FRE — something that would not happen with IE discourse.

Recommendations for local P/CVE coordinators

- **Local authorities can play a key role** in preventing and countering violent FRE, because recognition, open-mindedness and dialogue might be more effective than exclusion, public repression or aggressive confrontation.
- **FRE attitudes, behaviour and speech are problematic** when they support the severe restriction of civil liberties or civil rights of specific religious and/or ethnic groups.
- When dealing with FRE, it is often difficult to find **key persons** who can provide information to local authorities and help them map and navigate the local FRE landscape. Therefore, it is important **to make new connections** with actors in key positions, so as to allow local government to learn more about FRE-related groups, **educate first-line practitioners and other actors** and build multi-agency cooperation. Local authorities, law enforcement and prosecutors must reach an agreement on how to deal with FRE, and take action accordingly.
- To ensure that the FRE agenda does not manipulate public opinion, local authorities should **develop an active communication strategy addressing a wider audience** (both online and offline), to raise awareness on why they are stepping in and what is at stake — this includes exposing the FRE agenda and its intentions. It is important to use accessible language without resorting to a populist approach.
- Local authorities can pre-empt the FRE strategy of hijacking and manipulating justified grievances (e.g. related to housing and unemployment) **by addressing the root causes of these grievances**. Even if these issues cannot be resolved, initiating dialogue on these matters can break the monopoly FRE may gain on these key concerns.

([17]) Europe and nationalism: a country-by-country-guide. (2018, September 10). *BBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006

([18]) Pellikaan, H., de Lange, S. L., & van der Meer, T. W. (2018). The centre does not hold: Coalition politics and party system change in the Netherlands, 2002-12. *Government and Opposition*, *53*(2), 231-255. Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/centre-does-not-hold-coalition-politics-and-party-system-change-in-the-netherlands-200212/7ACFCBF820AC9839B6C8BEEF42953210

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=2ahUKEwi8_MaV4czgAhXKyKQKHWhrB8cQFjABeg QICBAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.pacedifesa.org%2Fpublic%2Fdocuments%2FCas%2520Mudde%2520Populist%2520Radical%25 20Right%2520Parties%2520in%2520Europe%2520%25202007.pdf&usg=AOvVaw375xkmIR68b9y0qEYDaGMU

([19]) Goodwin, M.J. (2011). *New British Fascism, Rise of the British National Party*. New York: Routledge (pp. 29-30, pp. 323-325). Retrieved from https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781136665912

Norris, P. (2005). *Radical right: voters and parties in the electoral market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 4). Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/radical-right/BAF243A4A4761F35954CD075EE5C8876

- It is also crucial that FRE-related **criminal violations be qualified** as hate crimes or ideologically driven violence. They should not be downplayed as 'incidents' or 'provocative behaviour'. Even though the police might lack capacity, it is vital to step up efforts to solve these cases. Victims of hate crime **must receive support**, so as to prevent recruitment from other extremist groups. Probation services must seek opportunities to **bring hate crime perpetrators into contact with minorities**, in order to prevent and/or reverse the processes of dehumanisation, marginalisation and discrimination.

- Local authorities might well benefit from partners who can support them in **online monitoring** — after all, the online presence of FRE often outweighs its offline presence. A great deal of information can be gathered from open sources.

- To avert the formation of divisive and polarising environments that foster violent radicalisation, it is important to tackle the social disconnection many citizens feel in modern times. There is a need for informed, open debate with government about the rights and obligations of being a citizen. The **concepts of participation** can be used to stimulate citizens to participate in local decision-making, while the **creation of spaces** that are free of charge (e.g. a free library) can encourage them to meet and socialise.

- Empowering young people with the **skills needed to identify fake news** might be more effective than creating a counternarrative to the extremist narrative.