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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN FC&S multi-meeting
23-24 November 2021, Online meeting

Violent right-wing extremism in communities

Key outcomes

The RAN meeting of the Families, Communities and Social Care (FC&S) Working Group addressed the topic of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) in communities. The meeting served as an opportunity to explore how VRWE groups manifest themselves on a local level and to exchange ways in which administrative as well as civil society-led approaches can contribute to preventing or tackling VRWE local activities. The meeting gathered 25 practitioners, including practitioners running local civil society-led initiatives as well as local preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) coordinators.

In short, some of the main recommendations were*:*

- Before setting up strategies and/or initiatives against VRWE, **set clear boundaries by defining the problem** to be addressed and strive for a common understanding of what VRWE is in the local community.
- **Avoid stigmatisation** that results from labelling entire groups of people as violent right-wing extremists and misunderstanding the phenomenon, as this can lead to ineffective stereotyping and foster polarisation.
- **Set clear goals for collaboration** between different actors (such as police, municipality, civil society organisations (CSOs), etc.) and discuss the distinctive role of each in countering VRWE. An indirect approach can contribute to find a common motivation to act for all actors (more information can be found in this paper).
- **Take inspiration** from campaigning or mobilisation tools used by VRWE movements and use them to organise alternative events and promote a positive narrative.

This paper outlines the highlights of this meeting and presents some inspiring practices in the EU, followed by recommendations for first-line practitioners and (local) authorities.

Highlights of the meeting

Transnational dimensions of VRWE movements

Whereas violence of VRWE movements is often executed on a local level, it is important to avoid following individual/local VRWE acts only and to take into account how VRWE movements are transnationally connected.

A recent study by the Counter Extremism Project (November 2020) highlights that from around 2014, a leaderless, transnational, and apocalyptic and VRWE movement has emerged. Common characteristics of this movement are that it is staging itself as for example a victim of left-wing political domination, migration and refugee movements, and/or a global Jewish conspiracy (CEP, 2020). Also, national violent right-wing extremist actors, networks and scenes have increasingly become an "unorganised collective". However, this assembly of different groups/individuals are connected and united by shared values, enemies and narratives that conjure up the downfall of the entire "white race", and not just the respective national "people" ([1]).

Features that are enabling VRWE movements to expand over the past years are, for example, bigger events and more money. Big events, organised across different countries, often offer an ideal opportunity for the recruitment of new members, networking, fundraising and the spread of propaganda materials/merchandise during, for example:

- political marches and rallies,
- festivals with up to 6 000 participants,
- big mixed martial arts events.

Another characteristic of the extreme right-wing infrastructure that was presented during this meeting is the online dimension. The strong online presence of VRWE movements is not necessarily linked to the offline threat that they pose, but it is allowing them to spread their message more widely. Some key VRWE actors follow a new strategy of "extreme normalisation" on big social media platforms, focusing on economic interests (merchandise, music labels, etc.) to reach new customers and attract followers[2].

Impact and counter-activities in cities and communities

The meeting highlighted several examples of how VRWE groups have an influence in local communities across the EU. In line with the narratives of the transnational VRWE movement described above, the groups in these cities and communities for example perceive LGBTI communities, "liberals" and Jews (amongst others) as a common enemy. There are however different variations of the justifications of violence or intimidation against these communities in different contexts. The table below summarises the insights on the movement's impact in a number of communities and the local responses by the municipality and CSOs.

Case 1 - In Bulgaria, violent right-wing extremist actors have increasingly targeted the LGBTIQ+ communities and their efforts to secure equal rights for LGBTI people in the past few years. In 2021, violence also intensified and there have been over 20 attacks on LGBTI gatherings and events, most	Case 2 - Another local example is the involvement of skinhead subculture groups in football hooliganism, hate crimes, graffiti, demonstrations, vandalism and desecration of Jewish cemeteries, amongst others. The experiences of a middle-sized **Polish city** in a rural area show that such incidents at	Case 3 - In the City of Dortmund, several developments served as a breaking point for the city to take decisive action and come up with a holistic strategy: the expansion of long-standing VRWE actors into public spaces (prompting national media coverage on the city as a "hotbed" for VRWE) and a very

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([1]) More information about transnational characteristics of VRWE can be found in: Counter Extremism Project (2020), Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures.
[2] CEP Policy Brief, November 2021, The extreme right-wing infrastructure on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter in Germany

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notably in relation to the Pride taking place in two big cities, but also intensified hate speech, different acts of provocation and physical attacks on the premises of a local LGBTI hub. These VRWE pressure groups label LGBTI people and communities as enemies to the traditional family and values, who aim to create a different version of society without heterosexual people, and corrupt children with "liberal" values and "gender" ideology.	local level can serve as a tipping point to generate momentum for local action, especially when there is a combination of active CSOs and progressive political leadership willing to openly take a stand against VRWE.	attentive and active local civil society frustrated with the aggravating situation.
Example of local reaction: The local LGBTI community in this case has counter-mobilised through advocacy, positive social awareness campaigns (e.g. prior to national elections – 'Vote with Love'), and petitions for strengthening the legislation criminalising hate crimes. Takeaways: ➢ When developing awareness campaigns as response to VRWE actions, lower the threshold to participate by conveying positive messages that large groups can identify with, and including a call for action.	Example of local reaction: The incidents above led to the creation of a multisectoral local expert group of approximately 20 people, initiated by the Institute of Social Safety. The group brought together participants from the city, active NGOs, police officers, and cultural and sports institutions, meeting once per 2 months. During their workshops, they developed over 60 different actions that could be organised by the city or community in this situation fitting to their local context (such as lectures in schools, cooperation with the local Jewish community, and building cooperation with the city guards and police). Takeaways: ➢ Find a common ground when bringing together diverse stakeholders to the table – e.g. public safety. ➢ Keep the city context in mind: Approaching and engaging the local administration might be harder in bigger municipalities due to more complex structures.	Example of local reaction: In response to the above, the city administration developed a local action plan against VRWE and appointed a special representative for diversity, bringing stakeholders together and laying the basis for citizens' participation in tackling VRWE at the local level. The new office for diversity's proximity to the mayor ensures the issue is taken seriously and also that civil society has more direct contact with city administration. Takeaways: ➢ CSOs and local authorities are a key factor for the success of the local strategy. Undertake actions collaboratively by CSOs and the administration within the local strategy. This could include for example: active reporting, removal of graffiti and propaganda from public spaces, regular roundtables between CSOs on threats and actions, setting up a specialised commission on VRWE within the police, and establishing a network against anti-Semitism, amongst others.

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Besides the above mentioned examples, participants discussed several challenges for communities and CSOs stemming from the mainstreaming and normalisation of VRWE in public spaces, including in politics. These may be linked to, amongst other factors, the reluctance of local decision-makers to undertake decisive action against some manifestations of VRWE, and polarised public opinion at local level that makes it harder for CSOs to gather support for their initiatives.

Other inspiring examples

1. The 'Grannies Against the Far Right' (Omas Gegen Rechts) are active in several cities and countries and speak up against threatening developments in their cities, such as anti-Semitism, racism and misogyny.
2. The grassroots initiative 'Not in Our Town' raises awareness and mobilises and plans preventive actions for the general public and in schools as an answer to an increased VRWE in their town of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.

Recommendations

The main recommendations for practitioners (such as CSOs and local coordinators) and authorities are summarised below.

Insights for practitioners

Set clear boundaries by defining the problem to be addressed:

- Before taking action, strive towards a common understanding in the city/area/town/community of what VRWE is, based on available evidence and local assessments of threats and manifestations.
- There should be a broad and inclusive dialogue, but narrow (specific) goals and objectives on what is to be tackled and how. It can help here to follow the 3-level prevention model of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Avoid stigmatisation that results from labelling entire groups of people as violent right-wing extremist and misunderstanding the phenomenon, as this can lead to ineffective stereotyping and sweeping generalisations:

- Include different groups in dialogue at local level (conservative and progressive circles).
- Counter all forms of extremism instead of only VRWE to avoid stigmatisation and victimhood claims.

Set clear goals for collaboration between different actors (municipality, police, CSOs, cultural and sports institutions, etc.) and discuss each actor's distinctive role in countering VRWE:

- Use an indirect approach ([3]) when finding support for tackling VRWE proves difficult in your context.
- Focus on topics where a common ground can be found between different actors in the community, such as ensuring public safety, removing graffiti, reducing specific forms of violence, or addressing the spread of conspiracies and disinformation.

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[3]More information on an example can be found here: https://www.bigs-potsdam.org/en/research/completed-projects/integration-at-eye-level/

Indirect approach

Goals: The indirect approach can be used in primary/secondary prevention and serves to not trigger emotional and/or defensive mechanisms.

It can be used to discuss highly controversial topics such as politics, extremism, religion, anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, and many more.

- Example of a lead question: How do we want to live together?
- In-depth exchange over values, freedoms, obligations and societal rules and how to collaborate on this.
- Prerequisite: a "safe(r) space", with no tolerance for extremist positions and extremists. So: define and enforce rules of discussion in advance.

Take inspiration from campaigning and mobilisation tools used by VRWE and use them to organise alternative events and promote a positive narrative.

Keep the security for practitioners working on VRWE in mind.

Insights for (local) authorities

Enable training for local authorities to support them in the strategic prioritisation in fighting VRWE:

➢ They should be trained in identifying, understanding and tackling the hubs, "movers and shakers" who give rise to the VRWE milieus, share the core narratives and provide networking opportunities to supporters.

➢ Be aware that focusing too much on the periphery may fuel stigmatisation perceptions and victimhood claims.

Follow a "strategic disruption" strategy.

➢ Banning and designating VRWE organisations could be combined with administrative interventions like banning alcohol during their events (such as marches, demonstrations), visa restrictions for event participants, etc. Similar to the fight against (organised) crime, joint investigations into the illegal financial activities of VRWE networks should be stepped up, combining efforts of different law enforcement agencies in a taskforce.

Engage with companies that might knowingly or unknowingly cooperate with VRWE actors and their commercial activities, raise their awareness and highlight reputational risks, expose such cooperation publicly and/or investigate potential tax fraud. In addition, raise awareness that the companies need to enforce their own terms of service and terminate those profiles since some VRWE movements have adjusted their online-strategies and use Social Media and videosharing platforms to redirect users to their propaganda and online-shops,

Improve the general relationship with CSOs before engaging the civil society sector in countering VRWE. This also entails ensuring funding sustainability.

Follow-up

Evaluation of local initiatives and strategies against VRWE was also brought up by participants as an important field to be further explored. Practitioners also felt they needed to better understand how to recognise signs of VRWE, define its boundaries, and make more informed decisions on what actions/signs require what kind of interventions.

Further reading

- RAN Consolidated Overview - Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices, 2021

- RAN Focus - Violent right-wing extremism in focus, 2020

- RAN Consolidated Overview - Far-right extremists' use of humour, 2021

- RAN LOCAL - Violent Right-wing Extremism in the Local Strategy, 2020

- RAN Factbook - Far-right extremism, 2019

- RAN Conclusion Paper – Small-scale expert session - The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation, 2020

- RAN Webinar Readouts - Right-Wing Extremism: Local Lessons and Transnational Dimensions, 2021

- CHAMPIONs - European concerns – local interventions. City-based approaches in CHAMPIONs, 2021

- Counter Extremism Project - Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures, 2020

- Council of Europe - Protecting LGBTI people in the context of rising anti-LGBTI hate speech and discrimination: The role of local and regional authorities, 2021

- C-REX RTV Trend Report 2020 - Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990 - 2019