

CSEP

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CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN CSEP Thematic Event – looking back and moving forward
7 and 8 November 2022, Dublin, Ireland*

CSEP Thematic Event – looking back and moving forward

Key outcomes

As part of the EU Internet Forum, a total of 20 Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP) campaigns contributed to preventing radicalisation leading towards violent extremism across the EU by means of online alternative or counter-narrative campaigns. RAN Practitioners Staff supported the projects with (online) trainings and meetings, creating opportunities for learning, networking and exchange. With the funding of CSEP ending and no additional funding until at least 2025, a final meeting took place on 7 and 8 November in Dublin (IE) to look back and reflect on the lessons learned, while also looking forward to the future of online campaigning.

Key insights from the meeting include:

- There are various factors to consider when it comes to future programming, such as: 1. which stakeholders to include in project consortia from the outset (e.g. creative/marketing agencies and evaluators); 2. a greater need for flexibility that allows for necessary adjustments over the course of the funding period; 3. a need for monitoring and evaluation to be included on the programming side of future funding and setting out key performance indicators (KPIs) for impact measurement.
- The cooperation between preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) campaigns and tech companies is a two-way street: social media companies could appoint a point of contact for P/CVE campaigners, for example to make sure that their content guidelines do not limit the reach of the campaign, while campaigns must likewise fulfil the conditions set out by the social media companies for their support.
- Overall, a need was identified to explore more creative ways of implementing campaigns in the absence of institutional funding. This includes forging partnerships with the private sector, for example by working with creative agencies, as well as incorporating P/CVE-related narratives in mainstream culture, for example through 'older' media such as television.
- P/CVE campaigns found themselves to be drops in the ocean in light of some of the root causes contributing to radicalisation that are structural and systemic, related to the overall deteriorating economic situation, inequality, discrimination and an affiliated overall lack of trust in institutions. Additionally, the mainstreaming of right-wing narratives including by educators was highlighted as a major issue.
- There is an increasing need to work on the local level, creating the trust between citizens and government that is needed to address these systemic issues.

This paper presents the main conclusions of 2 days of presentations and lively group discussions. The first day looked back with a presentation of the CSEP evaluation and an interactive session on the lessons learned. The second day focused on the future of online campaigning with a keynote, a panel and group discussions.

Looking back

Exchanging on and drawing lessons learned from the CSEP

During the meeting, representatives from Ramboll Group and Kantar Public shared findings from their jointly produced evaluation of the CSEP in a presentation that was subsequently discussed with the participants. Overall, the report found that the CSEP was an important first step in EU-funded alternative and counter-narrative campaigning, while there is a need to ensure that programme and project objectives are more targeted and achievable in the future.

- The CSEP was found to be unique in that it directly targeted civil society organisations (CSOs), which had previously only been done on the local and national levels.
- Tailoring campaigns to hyper-local settings proved more impactful and effective as opposed to cross-border campaigns. Similarly, on the EU level, impact is more difficult to assess as opposed to the local level.
- With the diversification of the extremist landscape, most of the target audience of the campaigns was found to be limited to one single group.
- During the discussion, participants highlighted that they would have appreciated greater flexibility to adapt target audiences of the campaign over the course of the projects.
- Broad objectives such as increasing awareness or behavioural change allowed for interpretation when it came to assessing impact, but even more specific objectives were hard to prove regarding achievements (e.g. halting a radicalisation process) as they were often overly ambitious.
 - The fact that someone participated in an activity (e.g.) or viewed a piece of content (e.g.) does not mean that they have changed their mind, their behaviour, or have been empowered to act. Would they be able to talk back? Let alone in an intense situation?
 - It is difficult to ask projects to measure behavioural change.
 - Participants mentioned that they would be interested in measuring the overall impact of their project once again a year after the campaign has ended.
 - It is difficult to know who is best equipped for an evaluation (outside reviewers might not know enough about the topic, while practitioners might be biased or have blind spots).
 - No causal relationship between cost and impact of campaigns was detected.
- While there was a high perceived added value of the RAN events measured during the evaluation, overall participation in them was in fact low and it was not clear that trainings provided were actually having an impact on the work being done. For example, most campaigns did not apply a theory of change although this was suggested during the trainings.
- CSOs did not necessarily understand the full scope of technicalities related to campaigning at the outset of the funding period and as a result found that they lacked skills, for example related to placing the content online.

- CSOs are essential in their role as knowledge brokers, as they know the target group, where its members can be found and what they like. But there are other actors who best know how to place content and design communication effectively.
- A general societal lack of trust vis-à-vis government, institutions, experts, media and information more generally was identified as a major challenge to campaigning at large.
 - In this regard, applying the EU logo on finished products related to the campaign was highlighted as an obstacle to engaging the target group.
 - At the same time, increasing visibility of CSOs and their work in general could be part of the solution. Apart from countering the 'wrong' messages, this would mean amplifying the 'right' ones.
 - Building community should be considered as an antidote to the current prevailing lack of trust.
 - This also requires in-person deep engagement and empowerment in the offline sphere.

Moving forward

Continuing P/CVE campaigns beyond CSEP

The European Commission has supported the CSEP projects over the course of the past 5 years. While CSOs were successfully empowered, there were also important lessons learned along the way.

- Looking forward, the next 2 years are transition years for the Commission, as an EU Knowledge Hub will be installed from 2025 onwards.
- Once this transition is completed, future funding opportunities may be explored. Over the course of the next year, the lessons drawn from CSEP will be further discussed with stakeholders within the EU Internet Forum and RAN Policy Support.
- In the meantime, projects are encouraged to look into other funding opportunities (e.g. other EU-funded programmes, such as Horizon), including in national contexts.
- Within the Commission's plans is to further train and empower CSOs. CSEP projects are highly encouraged to follow RAN Practitioners' Communication & Narratives Working Group.

Meta's P/CVE strategies

A keynote speech was delivered by a representative of Meta's Safety Policy team, presenting the different approaches Meta is taking to ensure the safety of their platform, including from extremist content.

- For Meta, civil society engagement is part of preventing violent extremism. But the concept is changing and Meta's approach ranges from binary content policies to removing violations at scale.
- The focus is no longer solely on content removal but increasingly on users, addressing emerging harms and behavioural trends.
 - In this context, Meta has moved towards working with behavioural as opposed to identity factors. Manifestation and how people use the platforms are changing over time.
- A crucial challenge is developing an enforcement approach that encapsulates people who know how to avoid breaking the rules.

- Meta removes harmful content when there is praising and/or substantive support of extremism. This presented a challenge to practitioners, as their content on occasion was taken down too.

Three main areas of engagement

1. Policy consultations to refine policies: talking to stakeholders and CSOs and consulting society to think about policies.
2. Product interventions: safety messages to inform the interventions and create safety tools. Here, content is allowed if it is in the public's interest. But it should be weighed against the risk of harm and international human rights standards.
3. Civil society-led programmes: counter-speech practitioners who use Meta platforms should be supported with training, funds and added services.

What is needed for the future of online campaigning?

- Fostering dialogue between policymakers and practitioners by creating opportunities for continued exchange.
- Involving CSOs in the design of content removal policies.
- More strongly including evidence-based practices in programming. Taking stock of what has been achieved and what works to build on that.
- Instead of trying to create a game that is fun, think about working with existing gaming companies.
 - More broadly speaking, consider approaches to changing behaviour using entertainment products the audience already uses.
- There has to be support to go large scale with a campaign that has proven effective. For example, while a project cannot reach out to all schools, a national education ministry can.
- Extremist groups create offline community and immersive experiences (such as concerts, martial arts events, etc.), while counter-speech campaigns are often just scratching the surface by creating awareness. Offline elements tailored to local contexts should therefore be included in future campaigning.
- An acknowledgement that many factors creating vulnerability to radicalisation overlap with other phenomena, such as bullying, criminal behaviour, mental health or lacking social connections.
 - Future policy approaches should be more holistic instead of separated in categories such as radicalisation prevention, mental health, etc.

Exploring the future of campaigning

During four breakout discussions, experts from social media, marketing and research gave presentations on different aspects related to the future of online campaigning. The highlights of each discussion are listed below.

Strategies for civil society-led online counter-extremism in the future of platform governance and digital regulation

This session focused on the CSOs' role in promoting fundamental rights and democratic values by addressing and dealing with hate speech through the use of alternative and counter-narratives. First, insights from research were presented and, after, participants discussed the future possibilities in light of these research findings.

- Extremism is a problem that needs multi-stakeholder governance. Platforms have to deal with extremism, but dealing with Daesh has led to the development of multi-stakeholder approaches with involvement of social media platforms, governments and some (selective) incorporation of civil society.
- The approach to platform governance is primarily focused on content moderation and strategic communication as policy instruments to counter extremism. **Content moderation** refers to taking down users and content, **strategic communication** generally refers to use of counter-messaging (and more generally, propaganda techniques).

- CSOs can get involved in both content moderation and strategic communication.

- **Content regulation** focuses on the detection, evaluation and takedown of content and users who produce this content with 'trusted flaggers'.

- Can you identify illegal content (versus 'awful but lawful')? Trusted flaggers can challenge extremists when they violate the law.

"Trusted" Flaggers

- Selected by platforms on unclear criteria, or by actors "vetted" by states (voices of communities impacted)
- Code of conduct appears to have included a variety of NGOs and watchdog organizations
- No transparency on who sends reports
- Extent of trusted-flagger based tags decreasing in absolute numbers

- Law enforcement can recommend takedowns to platforms through Internet Referral Units or statutory mechanisms. But platforms themselves have the final say and ultimate authority in content moderation.
- **Strategic communication** is in some way built on scientific foundations to provide counter-messages and counter-propaganda. There are multiple providers of strategic communications services within the public and private sectors.
- Requirements on all platforms to engage in content moderation raises an opportunity for CSOs to work together to monitor extremist narratives and flag them to both national competent authorities and platforms (it will be easier to do this as a trusted flagger).
- CSOs need tools and training to analyse transparency reports, data dumps from platforms and other actors, to scrape data and to monitor narratives. This is an opportunity for collaboration with the scientific community.

Sustainable cooperation with tech

From the tech industry, only Meta was present at the thematic event. The question for this session was: What should Meta bring to the table from a programmatic level?

- The content of the projects was recognised as extremist content instead of a counter-campaign. With this challenge, it was hard to reach Meta. Advertisement also got blocked and not being able to reach a contact person has been consuming a lot of time.
- Meta does not see the EU as a single market. And as a result it applies different regulations across countries, which has proven troublesome for international campaigns.

- Key lessons:
 - A national network is needed to share tools and lessons learned in campaigning with the CSEP projects, to create synergies and to effectively cooperate with tech. This will serve as an addition to any EU-wide network.
 - For each one of these national networks, a contact person from Meta is needed to solve issues and foster successful cooperation with CSOs.
 - Improvement in the appeal process is needed and the transparency rules could be improved.
- One of the recommendations was to work with trusted advertisers. In this way, the content would not be blocked. A challenge with this is that Meta cannot take a political stance.
 - In collaboration with the European Commission, CSEP messaging can be pre-approved on the programmatic level.
- The ad credits provided by Meta have been very valuable. This could be addressed on a programmatic level. However, there are also some challenges to work on with this point:
 - There are some prerequisites from Meta to provide ad credits and some projects have failed to meet them.
 - Funds need prioritising, because not all problems are equal.

Working on alternative/fringe platforms

Next to the mainstream platforms, there is a rise in the use of alternative and fringe platforms. This session looked into this development. Should the CSEP project engage on these platforms as well? What would that engagement look like? After an introductory presentation on the (cross-)use of mainstream and alternative/fringe platforms, the group discussed their role in this changing landscape. Additionally, in this session, textgain presented their dashboard 'European Observatory of Online Hate' in which hate speech can be monitored across different platforms.

- Although fringe platforms are by definition smaller in size, they are also important social media platforms that display and have an impact on public discourse. However, currently there is a lack of application of moderation policies on smaller platforms. This creates an environment that facilitates extremist communication.
- Fringe platforms take away the visibility of extremism. Users have a platform where they will not be banned for their extremist content.
- The thin line between mainstream and fringe platforms: radical/extremist actors use regular/mainstream platforms to attract people to fringe platforms.
 - For example, sharing a link to a Telegram group chat in the Twitter bio, "to talk more openly on Telegram".
- Should the campaigns be active on fringe platforms? How?
 - Disconnecting totally will allow further polarisation, which cannot be risked.
 - There should be some understanding — perhaps even interaction — of what is happening on fringe platforms. The goal is to monitor the activities without engaging with the group.
 - Campaigning on fringe platforms is almost impossible because there is no advertising. That makes campaigning one-on-one; intervening with nuanced responses and messaging with individuals.

- Watch out for an us-vs-them attitude when monitoring fringe platforms. Building trust and empathy are important, and be open to a possible dialogue.
- While working on fringe platforms, there should be an understanding of the real problems generating and giving rise to such activities. Therefore, also think of rebuilding communities to prevent people going online for communities.

Digital marketing and civil society collaborations: How to play the system for good

In this session, representatives from a creative agency highlighted the resources required for a successful creative campaign and provided helpful recommendations to campaigns that are interested in exploring collaboration with the private sector.

- Cooperation with marketing agencies can be a crucial success factor for P/CVE campaigns, as not all competencies required for a successful campaign can be expected to be provided by a CSO implementing a campaign. Working in such partnerships in the absence of institutional funding will mean that three players will be involved. Namely the CSO, the creative agency, and one or more private companies (brands).
 - All actors have something to gain from the cooperation. CSOs require awareness and/or funding for their purpose; agencies want to receive distinctions that will advance their market position, which comes in the form of creative awards (e.g. Cannes Lions), and companies want to improve their image.
 - Surveys have shown that the majority of consumers believe that brands must act for the good of society and the planet, while similar numbers doubt that companies will deliver on their promises ⁽¹⁾.
 - In this context, it is important to consider cultural fit. Private sector partners such as agencies and companies selected for collaboration have to match one's values.
- Before approaching a creative agency, a set of questions should be addressed, including: What is the goal of the campaign? What insights can you share?
- Working in a creative way and taking risks requires trust to be built.
 - All actors included in a campaign can be afraid of boomerang effects (fear of being criticised about a project not working / its form, whatever).



Figure 1. In-house resources within a creative agency required to design and implement a campaign. Source: Grabarz & Partners

¹ The following website offers a tool to check on companies' and private individuals' actual levels of charity. [Did they help? Find out how a company or celeb behaved during the coronavirus pandemic](#)

Key recommendations for future campaigning

1. Impressions and length of view should no longer be considered key metrics for success. Consider what comes after reaching people, such as engaging them in an offline context.
2. Continue the work on measuring campaign impact, including identifying KPIs, and learn from evaluation in adjacent fields (e.g. the INDEED project).
3. Don't patronise the target group, work with them peer-to-peer, for example by including representatives of the target group in the development of the campaign.
4. Engage national governments to fund existing strategies (also from other countries) and customise them to local contexts.
5. With regard to future programming, a differentiation should be made between content-related and technical aspects of campaigning so as to map all skills required and the actors able to provide them.
6. For policy and grants: sample resources for evaluation have to be included already in the programming stage when it comes to campaigning. Campaigns should take into account the needs of tech companies when designing the campaign.
7. Knowledge about regulatory laws affecting campaigns should be made accessible by social media companies.

Additional recommendations to further explore

- When building a counter-narrative and/or targeting your audience, explore the impact of far-right extremism being mainstreamed across social and traditional media (making it no longer possible to operate on the assumption that media are neutral).
- Overall, take into consideration what rising militarism will mean to the field.

List of CSEP projects and further inspiring practices

1. [Breaking the ISIS Brand](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Breaking the ISIS Brand](#)
2. [CICERO](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [CICERO](#)
3. [COMMIT](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [COMMIT – Communication Campaign against extremism and radicalisation](#)
4. [Counter@ct](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Counter@ct](#)
5. [Dare To Be Grey](#). Please also see their partners: [textgain](#)
6. [DOBT](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Do One Brave Thing \(DOBT\)](#)
7. [DECOUNT](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [DECOUNT](#). RAN Practitioners Collection of inspiring practices [DECOUNT - the Game](#)

8. [Eurotopia](#)
9. [Extremely EUnited](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Extremely EUnited](#)
10. [Game Changer](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Radicalisation Awareness Game Engagement \(RAGE\): Game Changer](#)
11. GAMER, RAN CSEP Briefing: [GAMER - Generating Awareness to Mitigate Extremism and Radicalisation](#)
12. [OLTRE](#) (Oltre l'orizzonte. CONTRO NARRAZIONI DAI MARGINI AL CENTRO).
13. [OnarVla](#)
14. [OPEN](#)
15. [PRECOBIAS](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [PRECOBIAS – Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness on Cognitive Biases](#)
16. [RAGE](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Radicalisation Awareness Game Engagement \(RAGE\): Game Changer](#)
17. [Resilient and united](#) Preventing and countering extremism and radicalisation: An action plan for Portugal
18. [RETHINK PROJECT](#) – ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM
19. [Resonant Voices Initiative](#)
20. [YouthRightOn](#), RAN CSEP Briefing: [Resilient Youth against Far-Right Extremist Messaging Online \(YouthRightOn\)](#)

Further inspiring practices

1. [Maria weint](#) is a campaign by the organisation Eckiger Tisch e.V. that calls for reparations from the Catholic Church to victims of child abuse.
2. [Nazis against Nazis](#) was a campaign implemented by EXIT-Germany that turned a neo-Nazi demonstration into a charity walk. For every metre the neo-Nazis marched, money was donated to EXIT-Germany, creating a dilemma for the Nazis: either walk and collect money for EXIT or stop marching.
3. [The European Observatory of Online Hate](#). A 2-year investigation into and reporting on the fundamental nature of the dynamics of online hate, how hate manifests itself, and the connections between the perpetrators and their influence as well as disinformation strategies. At the centre of this investigation is the development of a monitoring tool using cutting-edge AI that will be available in the 24 working languages of the EU and integrate data from a broad cross-section of mainstream and fringe social media platforms.
4. In 2021, Meta worked with Exit UK to include a P/CVE-related story line in the Christmas episode of the famous UK soap opera Eastenders, which ended up reaching a total of 8 million viewers.

Further reading

- Kantar & Ramboll (2022). [CSEP Evaluation report](#).
- [Overview of the CSEP Network database](#)
- RAN (2022). [Countering the misuse of gaming-related content & spaces: Inspiring practices and opportunities for cooperation with tech companies](#)
- RAN C&N (2022). [Digital frontrunners: Key challenges and recommendations for online P/CVE work](#)
- RAN (2022). [Lessons Learned from Alternative Narrative Campaigns](#)