

## RAN YOUNG

### CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN YOUNG Platform*

*3 & 4 October 2023, Online*

# RAN YOUNG exchange with RAN Practitioners

## Key outcomes

---

On 3 and 4 October, the RAN Young Platform (RAN YOUNG) organised an online meeting for its participants. The meeting brought together 23 young people from 10 EU countries, all with careers and/or studies in different topics and approaches focused on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) or related societal issues. This meeting focused on collecting the most pressing issues facing the EU today (relevant for the field of P/CVE) from the experiences and perspectives of the young people. The young participants worked in five groups — based on the issue they felt was most critical — to draft a presentation that included desk research about why this topic is important to discuss and concrete examples from their respective countries. They also gathered input from peers in their communities with a specific focus to find different perspectives on the issue. They presented their findings to their fellow participants and three experienced P/CVE practitioners from RAN Practitioners to gain additional insights and explore varied approaches to addressing them.

The RAN YOUNG members researched and presented on the following five themes they feel most concerned about:

1. Violent right-wing extremism and decreasing support for democracy
2. Polarisation and the marginalisation of certain communities
3. Online dissemination of extremist propaganda
4. Gender: extremist misogyny and/or the role of women in extremist movements
5. Anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments

This conclusion paper documents key outcomes from this meeting.

## Allowing young people to set the focus

Young people are critical to P/CVE. As young people are targeted by extremist recruitment and victimised by hateful rhetoric and violent attacks, there is a need to keep Europe's youth engaged in the issue and take into account their perspective on these threats and include them as a key part of the solution. One important step is to capture youth perceptions and understandings of critical extremism-related issues. The RAN YOUNG platform was asked to name the most pressing topics related to P/CVE facing Europe. By creating the opportunity for young people to decide on the topics, this enabled them to set the focus for this meeting. The topics suggested by the youth were grouped into five key themes: Violent right-wing extremism undermining support for democracy; Polarisation because of communities being marginalised; Online dissemination of extremist propaganda; Gender: extremist misogyny and the role of women in extremist movements; and Anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments.

To prepare for this RAN YOUNG meeting, participants were divided into five groups along the topics above to research the topic and gather youth perspectives from within their own communities. Each group was given a brief and some resources to prepare a 10-minute presentation that included:

- an explanation of the topic and how they see it is manifesting across the EU;
- how it is impacting their countries and the EU more broadly, with concrete examples; and
- how young people around them perceive the threat and their awareness of efforts to address it.

The participants gave their presentations on day one of the meeting. Each presentation was followed by a vibrant discussion with their fellow RAN YOUNG members and RAN Practitioners. The following points outline the most important findings from the process of cross-exchange.

- This provided a productive environment where the youth could deliver their findings to their peers and practitioners, allowing them to practice giving concise presentations and hone their positions through discussions with relevant actors. By providing young people with opportunities to deliver their findings and perspectives to relevant stakeholders, both through written outputs and in oral presentations, it can help ensure that the data reaches practitioners who can benefit most from youth perspectives and present useful opportunities for young people to gain varied experience.
- The discussions also provided the youth with feedback and guidance from a range of actors, including practitioners, researchers and policymakers. This will help young people optimise their research approaches and understand how they can serve different kinds of P/CVE efforts.
- Finally, connecting young researchers and practitioners with established practitioners helps them understand how research helps inform and shape good practice. This will help promote critical and action-oriented thinking and build their understanding of the field. And this helps to encourage practical recommendations and tangible next steps. While research is critical to help enhance general understanding of an issue and the way it impacts different groups, research should ultimately be connected with practical outcomes to support effective P/CVE efforts.

## Topics

Presentations were to be based on primary and secondary research that also included input from youth in their own communities, gathered through short interviews and/or surveys. Since each team included young people from different countries and contexts, this helped ensure a mixture of youth inputs on each topic. The themes and results of their presentations are detailed below. The RAN YOUNG members received presentations on the work of experienced RAN Practitioners from RAN LOCAL, RAN REHABILITATION and RAN FC&S. They addressed the key challenges in their work through different P/CVE approaches, providing a range of perspectives and a wealth of real-world experience. After these presentations, the RAN YOUNG members discussed their presented topics in greater

detail with input from the experienced practitioners. Each section below outlines the findings of the young participants, the input they received from their communities, and the highlights of the exchange with the practitioners about the approach in daily practice.

### **1. Violent right-wing extremism and undermining support for democracy**

One group of young people has looked into the development of violent right-wing extremism and anti-democracy movements. They see a number of main drivers behind the spread and normalisation of violent right-wing extremism Europe-wide, namely: ongoing “permanent” crises that have disrupted people’s sense of stability and security, the proliferation of new technologies and online communication platforms, celebrity influencers normalising extreme views among their followers, and the mainstreaming of far-right political parties and politicians that utilise nationalistic and conspiracy narratives to mobilise their voter base. They also looked into far-right political parties in their countries specifically, noting a general rise in extremist world views among residents and a growing presence of far-right and nationalistic politicians.

From the input from young people in their own communities, the group found that the young respondents expressed dismay and feelings of hopelessness about the growing popularity of far-right political parties and fear about the current levels of political polarisation. The young people noted diminished trust in established political institutions and there was shared concern about the role that social media plays in furthering the spread of far-right narratives.

During additional discussions on day two, the youth and practitioners discussed the nuances of extremist thoughts and beliefs versus extremist actions and the importance of differentiating between the two in P/CVE approaches. When taking a policy approach to P/CVE, it is critical to ensure it does not become politicised, because political climates inevitably change. Other sectors, on the other hand, have more freedom to look at the intersection of politics and extremism. This emphasised the importance of multi-actor approaches.

### **2. Polarisation and the marginalisation of certain communities**

This group of four young people looked into how marginalisation of certain groups and poor social cohesion are driving extremism. The group considered a range of extremist threats, including those from right-wing, left-wing and Islamist extremism, concluding that while poor integration and marginalisation — including discriminatory policymaking — can drive vulnerabilities to extremism and bolster its rhetoric, inclusive discourse that promotes social cohesion can help counteract its spread. They note hate speech is on the rise across the EU, especially online, and more work is needed to counter these narratives and address their effects on targeted communities. There has also been a rise in hateful actions taken towards minority groups, such as Quran burnings, and discriminatory practices, like the banning of headscarves in different settings.

During additional discussions on day two, the youth and experienced practitioners discussed the challenges in practice of dealing with systemic biases in how states especially prioritise their P/CVE approaches. Participants noted that even with the rise of far-right extremism, there has been some reticence to shift focus away from Islamist extremism and that this may help normalise Islamophobia. This was particularly concerning where far-right politicians are reinforcing anti-Muslim discrimination through nationalistic and Islamophobic rhetoric.

### **3. Online dissemination of extremist propaganda**

A group of six young people looked at the dissemination of propaganda online and how it can drive extremism. They found that there has been an increase in the presence of right-wing extremist content and a general lack of regulation across platforms — especially social media channels — that has enabled this trend to manifest. Extreme content comes from a wide range of actors, from organised movements to politicians to everyday users utilising platforms to target victims of terrorism and spread hate speech. These actors have been adopting new platforms and adapting their messaging to evolving online trends. Extreme content is not only found in the content posted by creators but also in the comments section of popular platforms like Instagram and TikTok where viewers will post hate speech and extremist propaganda even under mainstream content. Beyond mainstream platforms, extremist content is even more widespread as unmoderated sites like 4chan and messaging platforms like Telegram allow for a much wider range of extremist viewpoints and propaganda.

The group members each interviewed young peers and found that many young people are concerned about this trend and fear the accelerated spread of online extremism and its impact on political and societal polarisation, as

well as the personal consequences from cyberbullying and harassment. Many young people see the encroachment of extremist rhetoric into social media and recognise that it is a powerful tool for spreading extremism.

The additional discussions on day two between the youth and practitioners highlighted the balance between freedoms of speech and the kinds of regulations that could help curb the spread of hate speech and extremist propaganda. Participants were divided on how to maintain freedoms of speech and expression while meaningfully curbing hate speech — especially when content is not overtly extreme and is instead packaged in seemingly mundane content, like lifestyle videos. However, they all agreed that online social platforms are not doing enough to regulate harmful content and must have more transparency around their policies and approaches.

#### **4. Gender: extremist misogyny and the role of women in extremist movements**

This group of five looked at the role of gender in extremism, considering both extremist misogyny and, in contrast, the participation of women in extremist movements. After defining and contextualising anti-feminism and “incel” movements, the group provided background on how gender-based hatred had gained in popularity across Europe and the narratives that have driven it. Gender-based hatred has become infused across several extremist ideologies and movements in Europe, overlapping in places with mainstream reactive conservatism in ways that can make the threat difficult to understand and respond to. The groups also looked at the role that women are playing in extremist movements, including the misogynist “manosphere”. Women play a wide range of roles in extremist movements across the spectrum, although their culpability remains a topic for debate as they are widely seen as victims or passive actors — often referred to as “wives” — rather than actors with real agency.

Through a series of interviews, the group found that their peers — particularly young women — were worried about anti-feminist extremism and the threats facing women both online and offline. While the interviews showed an acute awareness of the threat facing women from gender-based extremism, they revealed limited understanding about the role that women play in advancing these narratives and little awareness of the incel movement specifically.

During additional discussions on day two, the youth and practitioners discussed the ways in which extreme anti-feminism and the reverence of traditional gender roles has affected women in Europe. For many women — especially those living in more rural and conservative areas — anti-feminism has become mainstreamed and creates social pressures that restrict women’s choices in life. It has also manifested in structural inequalities in many European criminal systems that have affected the way female extremists are handled. Women are less likely than men to be portrayed as perpetrators, regardless of their role, and are therefore not persecuted the same way in extremism-related crime. This has been particularly telling in the prosecution of returning foreign terrorist fighters. This inequality could also impact women’s access to reintegration programmes.

#### **5. Anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments**

A group of five young people presented anti-Islam and anti-immigrant sentiments. Their presentation focused on the mainstreaming of narratives that openly promote anti-immigrant views as part of a call to securitise EU borders. These movements have targeted Muslim migrants in particular, especially in the wake of attacks from Islamist extremist groups, and have incorporated anti-Muslim actions — like the burning of Qurans — into political rallies.

Through peer interviews, the group found that many young people are concerned that the political landscape in Europe has changed over the last 10 years with the rise of more far-right parties and that anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic rhetoric have become more commonplace, especially online and in places with smaller Muslim populations where people are less likely to have had contact with them.

During additional discussions on day two, the youth and practitioners discussed different forms of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions and their consequences for the target community and the wider society. The group noted that gendered narratives have also become widespread, manifesting in anti-Islamic claims that Islam oppresses women and assertions that they need to “save women” from their hijabs. The group discussed the challenge in understanding how religion intersects with other forms of identity — such as national identity — and how a person’s overlapping identities can make it challenging to untangle how religion has been weaponised by extremist movements, and how it can instead be embraced to support community cohesion. The importance of the focus on community cohesion was highlighted for daily practice.

For more information on youth participation, take a look at the [RAN YOUNG webpage](#)