

Opening speech: Luigi Soreca

Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Radicalisation Awareness Network's high level conference. It is a pleasure and a privilege to see so many practitioners from across so many sectors of our society, who have left their busy day jobs and come here today to share their experience, their expertise but also to raise awareness of their challenges.

The RAN was set up in 2011 in recognition of the essential role local practitioners play in identifying and addressing those deemed vulnerable to violent extremism, or those who have already turned to violent extremism. Five years on, the importance we attach to this role has not wavered but has been reinforced and amplified with each life that has been destroyed by terrorism. Recent atrocities have demonstrated how critical your work is. It comes down to the simple fact that the more we prevent individuals from being drawn into violent extremism, the better chance we have of preventing further attacks, preventing further lives from being lost, and preventing further individuals from a life-time of suffering.

It was with exactly those objectives in mind that last year, we, the European Commission, strengthened the RAN, committed a further €25 million and turned it into a Centre of Excellence.

The high threat our Union currently faces underlines the importance of ramping up our counter violent extremism efforts wherever and whenever we can. I am under no illusion of the scale of the challenge you face. Nor do I assume there is a quick or easy answer for each case brought before you.

The RAN was set up to help you. To ease the pressure. To put you in touch with your counterparts across the EU who have faced similar challenges and to help advise you and facilitate problem-solving.

There are some fantastic best practices out there. But we should also be honest and upfront about those practices which have failed or proved ineffective, possibly even counter-productive. Just as we must not shy away from sharing best practices, we must also not be ashamed to share the 'not-so-good' practices. It is far better to be open and up front than allow others in the Union to make those same mistakes. That is something we can ill-afford in the current climate.

And whilst the RAN was set up primarily for front-line practitioners, it is essential that we acknowledge the importance the policy and political level can play. Your experience can inform and enrich the development of national and EU policies, and have the opportunity to multiply and maximise the effect of local practices. That is why we have gathered policy and political representatives here today. It is important that they hear and understand the challenges you face, so that they can help provide the best possible support right across the 28 Member States.

This morning we will focus on the challenge posed by growing polarisation within our societies, and then the emerging challenge practitioners face with child returnees. The afternoon sessions will then focus on the challenge of returning foreign terrorist fighters, before ending with the general principles relating to Prevent strategies and the importance of a robust, local multi-agency approach.

Let me just conclude this intervention by wishing you a productive and stimulating day of discussions which should end with concrete and directly useful deliverables to tackle radicalisation on an EU scale.