CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN study visit on VRWE
6 & 7 March 2023, Stockholm, Sweden

The Swedish approach to tackling violent right-wing extremism

Key outcomes

Violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) is continuing to grow as a threat in Europe and beyond. A country that has had extensive experience in dealing with various manifestations of VRWE is Sweden. During the **RAN Practitioners Study Visit on VRWE** to Stockholm, Sweden, which took place from 6 to 7 March 2023, 14 practitioners from all over Europe had the chance to gain first-hand insight into the workings of several organisations that are part of Sweden's whole-of-society approach to tackling VRWE and related issues.

The meeting's participants represented a diverse group of expert practitioners, including local practitioners, with a background in — among other areas — social work, alternative narrative campaigning, exit work and prison services. Participants learned about Sweden's history of VRWE and how international and geopolitical developments influence what the VRWE landscape looks like in Sweden. On Day I they visited two organisations on site: the Swedish government organisation **Center for Preventing Violent Extremism** (*Center mot våldsbejakande extremism* (CVE)) and the youth centre Fryshuset where the **Exit Sweden** programme is located. On Day II of the meeting, Sweden's history of VRWE was further discussed, as well as the manifestations of VRWE in different EU Member States and to what extent lessons learned can be taken back to the participants' own context.

Following are some **key points** that were discussed.

- National governmental institutions can be of great support for local authorities in sharing expertise and concrete support when dealing with (potential) radicalisation. Local authorities benefit from using national (support) structures instead of having to completely set up their own approach.
- Successful exit work is primarily based on building a trusting relationship and being a credible messenger for the client. Only then is it possible to nudge an individual away from an extremist environment. Bringing clients out of their comfort zone usually takes time and resources, but it is an essential approach to create change.
- Both in Sweden and other European countries the diversification of the VRWE landscape poses big challenges. Whereas 10 years ago VRWE movements were easily recognisable, right-wing extremists nowadays create their own 'salad bar' ideology and/or radicalise mostly online, out of sight of institutions. This makes tackling the issue more and more complicated. Building a strong civil society that can counter the normalisation of right-wing narratives in the public domain is an essential way to counter these developments.
- Media have a responsibility to assess whether their productions showing the workings of extremist groups can negatively influence vulnerable individuals and to adjust their work accordingly.
- Privacy and information sharing when dealing with cases are challenging for many stakeholders across Europe. Developing effective systems for practitioners' work is crucial for advancing the prevention of and responses to involvement in violent extremism. The practice of, for example, Info-houses was discussed as an example of bringing relevant stakeholders together for joint responses and approaches.

- Practitioners emphasise the similarity and overlap with adjacent fields (e.g. discrimination, hate speech, gender-based violence) and stress the importance of learning from and utilising already existing systems and approaches in adjacent fields when dealing with VRWE.

This paper begins with a short history of (violent) right-wing extremist groups in Sweden. Then, the approaches of the two organisations and their place in the Swedish national approach are explained, based on the presentations provided during the study visit. Lastly, the highlights of the discussion are formulated, as well as a way forward.

A brief history of VRWE in Sweden

VRWE has a long tradition in Sweden. The first Nazi party was founded in 1924 and soon after the Second World War, neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups reorganised during the post-war period ([1]).

Today's VRWE landscape has largely taken inspiration from, for example, the American neo-Nazi groups in the 1980s that promoted leaderless resistance, small-cell formation and accelerationism. Following the emergence of the violent racist skinhead movement in the 1980s and 1990s, modern VRWE in Sweden is shaped by a mixture of organisations, parties and loosely organised groups that fluctuate over time, often shattered by internal conflicts or disagreements. There are groups that established political parties to gain political influence, elitist-oriented organisations with a membership structure where potential members have to prove their commitment to the group and to the cause (often through committing violence), and loosely organised network groups that promote the ideas and strategy of accelerationism. The Swedish neo-Nazi movement is considered particularly violent after several murders and violent acts committed by members of various neo-Nazi groups since the mid-1990s.

During the last years, a number of lone actor school attacks have been carried out in Sweden where the perpetrators, like in many other countries, have a mixed ideology largely based on conspiracy narratives including VRWE elements.

The organisations

The CVE centre (*Center mot våldsbejakande extremism*)

The Swedish approach to tackling VRWE (as well as other forms of extremism) is based on three pillars:
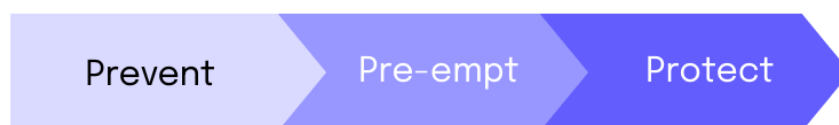
In order for a crime or violent extremist act to take place, three 'requirements' need to be met: (1) there needs to be a motivated offender; (2) there is an absence of a capable guardian; and (3) there needs to be a suitable target. The three pillars of Sweden's approach tackle these three aspects respectively; the **Prevent** pillar aims at taking away perpetrators' possible motivations and the **Pre-empt** pillar limits the possibilities for a violent act to take place. The **Protect** pillar, finally, tries to protect potential target groups when the first two pillars have failed. The work of the CVE centre falls under the first pillar of Prevention and acts at national level.

According to the CVE centre, the following advice is key when setting up a prevention strategy:

- Make sure that practitioners on the local level have the resources, structures and knowledge to spot and tackle VRWE.

([1]) Helené Lööw, Nazismen i Sverige 1924-1979. Ordfronts förlag.

- If there is a national strategy, local authorities should build on that; it's easier to use that than to develop own approaches locally or even going against the current.

Set-up of the CVE centre

Mobile support team

The mobile support team provides needs-based support to local authorities who might lack specific knowledge, expertise or practical skills. The team is very diverse: it is comprised of experts from the police force, social workers, religious leaders, etc. This diversity allows the team to offer various types of support to the local level.

After the first returnees — coming back from Daesh-controlled areas — arrived in Sweden, the support the CVE centre provides to the local level significantly changed. From theoretical training they moved to a more practical and tailored approach. This has similarly impacted the support provided in relation to VRWE issues on the local level. However, the CVE centre specifically aims to provide support, but decisions on whether (potentially) radicalised individuals and violent extremist offenders receive specific — vocational, financial, educational — support is decided by the respective local authorities. To what extent support is provided to these individuals can therefore differ per municipality.

Knowledge team

This team focuses on doing research and gathering knowledge and insights on current developments related to (right-wing) extremism in Sweden, and it consists of on-topic experts and researchers.

Additionally, the knowledge team is developing a tool to evaluate the work of the CVE centre. Evaluation is complicated by the fact that, in the last few years, violent extremist groups and individuals are developing constantly, which makes it harder to stay up to date on developments and tailor interventions.

Education team

The education team aims to disseminate the expertise gathered by the knowledge team, by organising seminars, webinars, podcasts, etc. for practitioners dealing with VRWE and radicalisation. These educational efforts are aimed at, among others, the police force, local authorities and NGOs.

In the experience of the CVE centre, local authorities often lack the expertise and resources needed to spot and tackle potentially radicalising individuals in their community, especially in small municipalities. To counter this, the education team developed an assessment tool that can help first-line practitioners such as teachers better assess the issues of individuals they worry about. This supports them in writing more thorough 'concern reports' when indicating an individual might need support.

Cooperation team

Lastly, the cooperation team facilitates and coordinates the network of (governmental and non-governmental) organisations that work in the prevention of violent extremism. The CVE centre itself does not have local operations, but it is in close contact with municipalities and organisations on the local level.

Exit Sweden (Fryshuset)

The interventions of Exit Sweden — located in the Fryshuset youth centre in Stockholm — are aimed at disengaging individuals from, among others, extremist environments. Their exit workers work with clients on a case-by-case basis, tailoring the approach to the individual's needs. An intervention can last anywhere between a couple of weeks to a year, year and a half, or even several years in very complicated cases. When a client has a good support system — which is mostly the case with younger individuals — a couple of sessions might be sufficient.

Although the details differ per case, Exit Sweden's interventions are based on a five-step approach that guides the exit worker during their work with the client. Although not impossible, especially the first three phases are harder to establish when contact only takes place online, so these phases preferably take place in in-person settings.

Analysis

In this phase, the exit worker aims to gather as much information as they can. As clients can sometimes try to manipulate this part of the process — for example, by making themselves appear to have been more important in the group than they were — it is recommended to not use questionnaires but gather the information through conversations. Additionally, it should not be one conversation where information gathering is the aim; it is best to create social settings where asking questions and sharing information comes naturally. Lastly, it is essential to be aware that clients might instinctively answer in the way they were trained to; this does not mean they don't want help, but certain behaviours need time to be unlearned.

The information gathered can be divided into three sections:

- **Hard facts** – e.g. how many siblings an individual has, how old they are, what level of education they have, what their employment history looks like, etc.

- **Soft facts** – these include social and emotional competencies, assessments of whether or not this person has mental health issues, their level of violence capacity, etc. In case the exit worker suspects the client to be a danger to themselves or others, medical or mental health professionals are called in for help.

- **'X-factor(s)'** – the extent to which each individual wishes to disengage, differs, but each individual has a story of how they ended up in an extremist group and why they now want to disengage. This helps the exit worker assess whether EXIT Sweden is the right place for them to be (at this moment) and how realistic their goals are, based on their history and the situation they are in now. In case the client has a drug or alcohol problem, they might need to go to rehab before being able to participate in an exit programme, depending on the severity of the issue.

Credible messenger

An extremist individual will not be influenced to disengage by somebody they do not deem credible; the client needs to believe that the exit worker can understand them. When becoming a credible messenger appears to be problematic with a certain individual, it is possible to use somebody else as a 'bridge' — someone who *is* deemed credible by the client and who supports the exit worker. This can change the client's view of the exit worker.

Having a diverse team of exit workers is essential when wanting to provide a credible messenger; this makes it easier to find the most suitable person for the client.

It is possible to use formers as exit workers. In many cases, formers are easily seen as credible messengers, because they have a similar experience in an extremist setting as the client has. However, only a very limited number of formers are suitable to do exit work; organisations need to be sure an individual is actually deradicalised before working with them, and even then, formers might relapse, for example, when working with too many clients they identify with or if they meet a client whose story or particular trauma triggers them. Additionally, especially for young clients, formers — in their previous, extremist, role — can serve as a role model and can even further radicalise the individual. Therefore, it is key to use caution when working with formers.

Alliance

In this phase, the exit worker builds a trusting relationship with the client. They find things they have in common that do not relate to the client's previous, extremist, life. Trust is built through experiencing things together, preferably through activities, such as going camping, having lunch in a restaurant or going to the gym together; whatever activity the client feels comfortable with. In this stage, functional reintegration, solving practical problems together *with* the client, not just *for* them, is important to facilitate the change and to build trust and a working alliance. Having the basics of one's life in order — a home, a job, etc. — is a good foundation for building a new life and moving away from the extremist environment.

Whereas at the start it is key to only undertake activities that the client feels comfortable with, later on it is important to challenge the client to step outside their comfort zone. Exit workers can serve as an example by doing things they themselves they don't feel comfortable with and sharing their experience about this discomfort with the client.

When building trust, sincerity is essential. There are ways to manipulate building an alliance, such as through creating friction and then solving the issue, thereby creating a stronger bond. However, this has a risk: if the client discovers the situation was forcibly created, re-establishing trust will become even more complicated, if at all possible. Hence, trust building should build on genuine support and authentic willingness to facilitate change.

Also with regard to building an alliance, it is a risk to work with formers. Commonalities between the client and the exit worker can easily be found in the experience of belonging to an extremist group. However, this is the world you want the client to move away from. This does not mean working with formers is impossible, but exit workers who have an extremist past themselves need to be aware and not fall into the trap of exchanging 'war stories', comparing the old way of life, with their clients in order to build trust.

Normalise deradicalisation behaviour

In this stage, the exit worker helps the client realise what it is like to leave an extremist environment and how to behave and participate in normal society. The longer an individual has been part of an extremist group, the more learned behaviours they will have that were suitable in that environment, which do not work when interacting in a new pro-social setting, building a new social identity. The exit worker helps clients become aware of these inappropriate behaviours and to replace them with behaviours that are more suitable. Clients might also need to learn behaviour that compensates for how they are perceived by others; especially when they still dress a certain way that is associated with a certain violent or extremist group, or they have a lot of or specific tattoos, their behaviour needs to make clear they do not mean any harm.

Influence

In this last stage, the exit worker can start giving the client advice on what (not) to do and influence certain decisions. This can relate to, for example, ending a friendship or relationship that negatively influences the client's progress. There is often overlap between the previous stage and this last one.

This and the previous stage cannot be reached without **ensuring a trusting relationship** is built and the client perceives the exit worker as a credible messenger. Without it, nudging the client to move away from the extremist environment, and giving them advice on how to behave instead, will be more difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, the above-mentioned process is not linear. Phases 1 to 3 need to be established before being able to move on to phases 4 and 5, but throughout the process it might be necessary to gather additional information, or to re-establish trust and regain credibility in the eyes of the client. This might be the case when a big life event happens, or if it appears to not be possible to move the client away from the extremist environment. The latter might mean the exit worker missed essential information in phase 1, or that the relationship between exit worker and client is not as solid as it appeared to be.

Highlights of the discussion

In relation to the insights gathered through the organisations' presentations, the participants discussed manifestations of VRWE in their own countries, worrying developments they flag and gaps they identify in their country's response to the issue. Below are some key points that were discussed.

- The role of (mostly traditional) media was extensively discussed. Participants from different Member States mentioned media productions, created by mainstream media, that they think could negatively influence vulnerable individuals. On the one hand, the media wish to share information on a wide array of topics, but on the other hand such media productions can help promote the ideology of extremist groups. Examples that were shared are:

- o 'Ons Moederland' (Our Motherland) is a Dutch documentary on Constant Kusters, leader of the right-wing extremist group *Nederlandse Volks-Unie* (Dutch People's Union). The documentary profiles — among other things — Kusters as a dedicated father; this might make viewers more susceptible to his ideas or give viewers an example of how to raise children in an extremist environment.

- o 'Generation Hate' is an Al Jazeera investigative series on the French *Génération Identitaire* (Identitarian Generation), in which a reporter infiltrates the extremist group. The series shows members of the group attacking Muslims and Arabs and infiltrating a French political party.

Participants agreed that — especially when it comes to government-funded media — the government has a responsibility to make media outlets aware of how disseminating these messages can support the spread of extremist ideologies.

- In several Member States, right-wing extremist movements abuse the country's Independence Day to spread their narrative:

  - o In Finland, the 6 December 'Independence Marches' are presented to the general public as aiming to celebrate independence but they are in fact actively excluding 'non-Fins'. At previous editions, the police have had to remove right-wing symbols, among others of the Nordic Resistance Movement, which has been banned in Finland.

  - o In Poland, too, right-wing groups hijack Independence Day celebrations. Festivities are presented as gatherings 'for the whole family', but in reality right-wing ideas are promoted, and members of other European right-wing groups are invited to join in the celebrations.

It was flagged that many countries do not seem to know how to respond to the hijacking of these nationally important days, especially because many of the extremist groups know how to stay exactly within the limits of the law when organising these demonstrations.

- As in Sweden, many EU Member States struggle with how the VRWE landscape is developing in recent years. The diversity in ideologies and the 'mixing and matching' of those creating their own 'salad bar' ideology make tackling the issue more and more complicated. Moreover, the normalisation of right-wing (extremist) narratives in the public and political arenas creates even more challenges. What is considered 'normal' is thereby moved to the right, creating a breeding ground in the general public for the acceptance of more and more extremist views. An essential approach to counter this normalisation of right-wing narratives is investing in creating a healthy civil society. An example is the German "Live Democracy!" programme, which 'facilitates projects all over Germany which develop and trial new ideas and innovative approaches in promoting democracy, shaping diversity and preventing extremism' ([2]).

- The SMART Hubs, Stakeholder Multisectoral Anti-Radicalisation Teams are part of the EU-funded project INDEED ([3]) dedicated to developing and strengthening evaluation in the preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and deradicalisation field in Europe. The SMART Hubs gather various stakeholders such as first-line practitioners, policymakers, and representatives of education and academia actively involved in designing, planning, implementing and evaluating P/CVE and deradicalisation initiatives such as policies and strategies, long-term programmes, short-term actions and ad hoc interventions. SMART Hubs will be established in the 15 countries represented in the INDEED consortium across Europe to discuss, evolve and spread the evaluation culture in the P/CVE and deradicalisation field.

([2]) See: https://www.demokratie-leben.de/en/programme
([3]) See: https://www.indeedproject.eu/

Follow-up

Based on the discussion about the role of (traditional) media, the question was raised as to what extent documentaries and reports showing the workings of extremist groups can influence vulnerable individuals. A follow-up meeting, discussing this issue with media representatives, aiming to create guidelines on how to approach such topics, is recommended.

Gaining insight into a country's approach to tackling a specific issue, such as VRWE, was deemed highly relevant by the participants and others interested in attending this study visit. This is especially the case for the approach to VRWE, as it is not acknowledged as a serious issue in all EU Member States. Organising more study visits looking into this topic — whether to Sweden or also other EU Member States — would therefore be beneficial to first-line practitioners in Europe. Participants acknowledged the continued importance of training, awareness raising and sharing practices in relation to the currently changing and dynamic nature of the VRWE movements, so in addition to study visits, RAN should continue to focus on VRWE in papers and other types of activities.

Further reading

- RAN Conclusion paper, 2021: New offender types & appropriate measures of Exit work

- RAN Specialised paper, 2021: National hubs supporting local actors in P/CVE – practitioners' insights

- RAN Specialised paper, 2022: The role of civil society organisations in exit work

- INDEED EU project SMART Hubs introduction video

- RAN, 2019: Factbook – Far-right extremism

- RAN Spotlight, 2020: Violent right-wing extremism in focus

- RAN Conclusion paper, 2021: Digital EU-USA study visit

- RAN FC&S Conclusion paper, 2021: Violent right-wing extremism in communities