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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN event – Day-to-day challenges of violent right-wing extremism for police and possible responses
19-20 May 2020 (an online event)

DAY-TO-DAY CHALLENGES OF VIOLENT RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM FOR POLICE, AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

Recent terrorist attacks (from Christchurch to Hanau) and a string of foiled plots compelled many Member States (MSs) to prioritise violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) alongside the still present Islamist extremist (IE) threat. The Covid-19 pandemic, the economic recession and immigration to EU MSs in recent years have all contributed to the advance of VRWE. In the current climate, police must reorientate existing expertise and capacities for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to take VRWE into account.

This paper identifies some of the most important challenges for police dealing with VRWE, and highlights potential first responses.

- Understanding the opaque, volatile landscape of VRWE ideologies, movements and organisations is key. Police need to update their intelligence on perpetrator types, modi operandi and targets, especially regarding lone actors and international networking.
- Another challenge is learning how to tread the line between legal and illegal actions, and how to navigate the broad grey area that often gives rise to ambivalence and uncertainty on mandates and proportional interventions.
- The growing importance of VRWE use of online platforms and media must also be considered: police capacities must be expanded if they are to tackle this online dimension of the phenomenon.

Introduction

This century has seen the emergence of VRWE at different times and in several ways. In 2019, Europe suffered a number of mass attacks carried out by lone actors, inspired by the Christchurch attacks on 15 March 2019¹. Besides confronting the ongoing threat of IE, tackling VRWE is a renewed priority for many EU Member States and also for Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) actions. For most police, this means assessing, improving and updating the expertise, know-how, skills and capacities required to participate in multi-agency collaboration in this area.

Alongside the RAN Police and law enforcement working group (POL), police from different regions identified key challenges and formulated initial responses. This Conclusions paper aims to:

- raise police awareness of the urgency of the VRWE threat in Europe;
- invite police across MSs to contribute to a national and regional assessment, to gain a better understanding of potentially dangerous VRWE developments as well as potential responses to such developments;
- explore some pressing VRWE challenges for police, and describe how police colleagues deal with these in their daily work.

Key challenges and responses

Challenge 1: Understanding the opaque, volatile landscape of VRWE ideologies, movements and organisations, and their modi operandi

Compared to the threat of IE, the VRWE landscape is much more fragmented. While VRWE organisations do exist, there are also numerous VRWE individuals with hybrid ideologies. Movements and organisations change rapidly, and people easily switch between them. The May 2020 online RAN POL event highlighted the many shared similarities across countries, but also their significant differences.

International dimensions of a complex landscape

VRWE groups with international connections are not a new phenomenon, but the internet has accelerated the evolution of VRWE ideologies as well as their international mobilisation and networking. Alt-right, identitarian and anti-migration groups or movements inspire one another, connect online and visit each other. For example, the Nordic Resistance Movement and the Soldiers of Odin are Nordic groups that hold cross-border meetings and activities. In another example, the Hellenic police have encountered Identitarians who claim to be journalists from various EU MSs while in reality supporting anti-migration groups in Greece. VRWE movements use the internet to publish their activities (in demonstrations and events) and to increase visibility. Tackling these actions can be challenging, as many are not illegal; the risk of mobilising this kind of campaign is that individuals could be motivated to take violent action as individuals.

VRWE group members are known for infiltrating various movements and demonstrations of dissatisfied citizens, such as the Yellow vests movement and anti-Covid-19 policy protests. In Bulgaria, for instance, they have a long tradition of assimilating into and exploiting hooligan groups for their own ends. These hooligan groups may also have political connections, and in some cases are active in environments like mixed martial arts (MMA) clubs.

¹ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (Te-Sat) 2020* ([European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report \(TE-SAT\) 2020](#)).

VRWE connections and activities are also evident in areas of ongoing violent conflict, as seen in Ukraine, for instance ².

Lone actors

Police must update their knowledge and understanding of perpetrator types, modi operandi and targets, keeping in mind the rising threat posed by lone actors. VRWE is a volatile phenomenon that is currently prioritised less than IE in research. A recent trend report on right-wing terrorism and violence ³ notes the clear trend of a shift to perpetrators acting alone, albeit often inspired by online communities and ideologies. The study also highlights a worrying shift towards violence targeting politicians and state authorities; this is where violent extremism becomes terrorism threatening democracy.

Although lone actors are often not known to police, they may well be less secretive than expected, and be 'known actors' in their own environment. Their behaviour and activity can reveal indicators or warning signs of their extreme views or intent to act. For example, studies have shown ⁴ that some right-wing lone-actor terrorists were likely to post telling indicators online, where 41 % of their 'leakage' occurred ⁵. Research also shows ⁶ that the majority of lone actors have had ties to radical or extremist groups. There are two interesting aspects of terrorists' pre-attack behaviour: the tendency to disregard operational security measures (or to execute them poorly), and the desire to share with others their convictions and sometimes also (hints of) their violent plans. This 'leakage behaviour' offers police the opportunity to turn lone actors into 'known actors'. Police must monitor VRWE milieus, and be well-connected and trusted by those with access to the leakage indicators. Many lone actors appear to suffer from sociopsychological problems: this means that mental and social care practitioners could be involved. As police partners, these practitioners must be sensitised and made aware of potentially dangerous developments in such cases. The communication lines with police need to be kept open and must be trustworthy. Interesting examples of such cooperation between mental health practitioners and police exist in the UK (mental health hubs), Finland (Anchor teams) and the Netherlands (national Threat Assessment Centre).

Inspiring practice

A specialist national unit is supporting local police with expertise and knowhow on online monitoring. The Italian police have produced a handbook featuring the names of the most important organisations and the symbols and signs in use.

The RAN factbook *Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction* offers an overview of most important narratives.

Recommended response

Researchers, intelligence agencies and police organisations need to ensure there is up-to-date knowledge on the VRWE across Europe and in specific regions and countries. This knowledge should be translated into training programmes and practical guides for police officers.

² The Soufan Center, *White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement* (<https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-by-The-Soufan-Center-White-Supremacy-Extremism-The-Transnational-Rise-of-The-Violent-White-Supremacist-Movement.pdf>). This also contains references to EU MSs.

³ University of Oslo's Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), *RTV Trend Report 2020: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019* (https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/topics/online-resources/rtv-dataset/rtv_trend_report_2020.pdf).

⁴ De Roy van Zuijdewijn, and Bakker, 'Analysing personal characteristics of lone-actor terrorists: Research findings and recommendations', 42-49 (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82998744.pdf>).

⁵ Ellis, Pantucci, de Roy van Zuijdewijn, Bakker, Smith, Gomis, and Palombi, 'Analysing the processes of lone-actor terrorism: research findings', 4 (<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/499>).

⁶ Bouhana, Corner, Gill, and Schuurman, 'Background and preparatory behaviours of right-wing extremist lone actors: a comparative study', 150-163 (<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/70502/a10-bouhana-et-al.pdf?sequence=1>).

Challenge 2: Clarifying the line that separates legal from illegal action: this is a broad grey area, generating ambivalence and uncertainty on mandates and proportional interventions

A significant challenge posed by P/CVE lies in the ability of extremist groups to act just within the limits of the law, even though their messages seek to polarise society and marginalise certain groups in the population ⁷. Some of the wording used in the past by extremists is now occasionally evident in mainstream media and features in public debate. This challenge is compounded by the online culture of humoristic memes and the phenomenon of 'dog whistling' ⁸, where the intended meaning behind coded words and images is usually known only to supporters.

Without a clear delineation between legal and illegal actions, authorities cannot authorise the disruption or prevention of certain activities. This uncertainty causes ambivalence as regards mandates and interventions – which compounds the problem of the ambiguous role of police in preventive action. Fear of being seen to interfere in politics is another reason for police uncertainty.

Inspiring Practice

'Dialogue Police'

In Sweden, the so-called Dialogue Police are deployed at demonstrations and other public events. The Dialogue Police link organisers/demonstrators to the police command. Their work is carried out before, during and after a public event, especially when there is a risk of confrontation or large-scale public disturbance.

This approach is based on the principles of prevention and de-escalation of conflict and confrontation: knowledge, facilitation and communication as well as differentiation. Applying these principles fosters self-policing (i.e. crowds keeping the order themselves). It is an approach with proportional impact on organisations seeking to use their right of demonstration and free speech.

Dialogue with activists and extremists who use their right to demonstrate presents the opportunity for police to influence organisations and understand their actions, and to acquire information on concerning developments and related individuals.

Recommended response

Member States should study the VRWE phenomenon and explore this grey area, to clarify and enable P/CVE activities. It's important to determine whether related material needs to be updated accordingly, e.g. national legal and policy frameworks, and police methods/approaches for monitoring VRWE activities, movements, organisations and individuals.

Challenge 3: Expanding police capacity to tackle the online dimension of VRWE, to address the growing importance of related online platforms and media

The internet plays a major role in recruiting and mobilising people. Online communities are partially replacing traditional right-wing extremist groups. VRWE groups are not as dependent on media coverage as they were in the past, because social media offers a wide audience for their messages and videos. When broadcasting VRWE narratives through social media, extremists tend to play cat and mouse with social media companies and online platforms: constant pursuit, takedowns and many comebacks on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,

⁷ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), *Lessons from crime prevention in preventing violent extremism by police* (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran_pol_lessons_from_crime_prevention_012020_en.pdf).

⁸ Wikipedia, 'Dog whistle (politics)' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog-whistle_politics).

WhatsApp, Gab, Parler, Telegram and VK. Furthermore, there is a shift from relatively open platforms to more secured, closed channels.

The Italian police expanded their focus from traditional organisations to include these online dynamics. This move called for an improvement in open source intelligence and a skills update, since the new VRWE symbols, narratives, communication strategies and methodologies differ in several respects from the traditional ones.

As the online dimension garners support and gathers impetus, the dynamics within VRWE have changed: its evolution is more volatile, with online gatherings and movements that pop up, grow and morph into other movements. Sometimes these new movements are initiated and supported by long-standing, known VRWE individuals and organisations, but they are also launched by individuals who are new to the scene.

Inspiring practice

A recent publication that could prove helpful from the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) is *A Guide to Online Radical-Right Symbols, Slogans and Slurs* (May 2020). This details the principal symbols, slang, coded references and terminology used online by radical-right extremists today.

Recommended response

Police need to invest in improving online capacities and skills. RAN POL will organise a dedicated exchange on the online dimension of P/CVE.

Conclusion: six key recommendations

- 1. Police need to invest in understanding, identifying and managing VRWE. Because of the fast-changing modi operandi and landscapes of narratives and organisations, police need supporting expertise, up-to-date intelligence and knowledge on related developments and manifestations.**
- 2. Police need clarity and guidance on mandates and areas for intervention, owing to the broad grey area, political sensitivities, and the extensive range of hate crimes, extremism, violent extremism and terrorism. Greater clarity will help police to better understand roles, responsibilities and possible methodologies for intervention through P/CVE activities.**
- 3. Existing P/CVE strategies and approaches need to be reassessed, and if needed, updated to address the current challenges for police dealing with VRWE.**
- 4. The online dimension is key, and it is essential that police have the skills and capacity to properly monitor this aspect of VRWE. This calls for special units that can perform this task as well as support and train other units in their operations.**
- 5. Police need to invest in identifying potential 'lone actors' from the 'known actors'. Lone actors are often known to a circle of concerned practitioners, friends and relatives. Police need to raise awareness in these circles, while keeping police communication lines open and trustworthy.**
- 6. It takes a network to contend with a network. Because VRWE supporters employ international networking, actions and training, police need to share information and optimise cross-border preventative policing.**

Suggestions for follow-up

- RAN POL could explore further the lone actor threat, including the mental health dimension.
- Police officers working in the field lack easily accessible guides or other resources to increase awareness about the latest VRWE trending movements, groups, memes and symbols. RAN could further explore this kind of practice in place in EU MSs.

Further reading

[Far-Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction](#) (RAN, 2019): This RAN factbook presents the scope of the FRE scene, including 'classical' militant neo-Nazi groups, local protest groups opposing perceived 'Islamisation', and like-minded online people who consider themselves members of the alt-right fringe movement. The focus is on violent extremist groups and groups that promote or condone violence.

[RTV Trend Report 2020: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990–2019](#) (C-REX, 2020): The University of Oslo's Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) presents a unique data set that portrays the dominant trend of online-inspired lone actors and 'organised groups' and their shifting target. Restricted to western Europe.

[European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report \(Te-Sat\) 2020](#) (Europol, 2020): The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) pulls together facts and figures on terrorist attacks and arrests in the EU in 2019.

[A Guide to Online Radical-Right Symbols, Slogans and Slurs](#) (CARR, 2020): The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) reports on the principal symbols, slang, coded references and terminology used online by radical-right extremists today.

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