RAN HLC 2021

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CONCLUSION PAPER
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RAN HLC 2021: 10 years of RAN – Learning from the past, preparing for the future

Key outcomes

Every two years, the Radicalisation Awareness Network High-Level Conference on radicalisation (RAN HLC) provides a unique opportunity to facilitate exchange between a broad range of P/CVE stakeholders from across the EU. Marking the network's 10th anniversary, the 2021 RAN HLC offered an occasion to reflect on the achievements of the past decade while also looking to the future, discussing ways forward in terms of effectively tackling the emerging challenges of radicalisation towards violent extremism and terrorism.

Participants at the 2021 RAN HLC included representatives from the European Commission and the Member States, such as ministers and high-ranking officials. The conference also gathered first-line practitioners, researchers, policymakers, as well as other experts. As a hybrid event, the HLC took place in Brussels, Belgium as well as online, bringing together nearly 300 participants.

This document summarises the outcomes on the main issues discussed: the network's evolution, current challenges, emerging threats and narratives, as well as the future development of the network.

Conference highlights: Welcome by Chair Deputy Director-General Olivier Onidi & Opening Speech by European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson

During her opening address, Commissioner Johansson reflected on the current size of the network, which has grown significantly over the past decade. The network's membership currently counts over 6,000 first-line practitioners across the entire European Union. Commissioner Johansson highlighted how practitioners are the first ones to spot the early signs of radicalisation as well as to offer a helping hand and that in light of most recent Covid-19-inspired and incel-related attacks. Working in the shadows of terrorist attacks, the Commissioner praised practitioners' and policymakers' perseverance to not let themselves be discouraged but instead taking on the challenge of dealing with the complexity of the issue.

Furthermore, Commissioner Johansson pointed out the recent change in the network's structure, which since the beginning of this year is divided into two strands, RAN Practitioners and RAN Policy Support, the latter of which has been tasked with building a knowledge base informed by good practice and tailored research to inform Member

States' policymakers in the area of P/CVE.

Ms Johansson highlighted that adding this policy dimension was a very important step in the network's development: "*As a policymaker, as a lawmaker, I need your input to make policies based on realities. And I call on the ministers here today, to make full use of your policy support, to prevent and counter violent extremism*," she urged the audience. In this regard, some of the future challenges and emerging phenomena that the Commissioner referred to in her speech were the rise of the incel movement, the spread of disinformation, and conspiracy narratives, including such narratives linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, Ylva Johansson stressed the need for RAN to increase the sharing of inspiring practices and to expand the research base, so that practitioners and policymakers can better respond to these future threats.

Conference highlights: Reflection on the past 10 years by RAN founders, and making the link between the past, present and future

As the so-called founding 'fathers and mothers' of RAN, the former EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator **Gilles de Kerchove** and **Judy Korn**, co-founder and managing director of German practitioners' organisation Violence Prevention Network, were asked to reflect on the beginnings and progression of the network.

During her speech, **Judy Korn** highlighted the innovative nature of RAN at the time of its inception. Faced with the threat of terrorist attacks and extremism at large, it was a noteworthy decision at the time for the European Commission and the European Member States to address this emerging security issue by turning towards the expertise of first-line practitioners. What was clear even from then, as Ms Korn noted, was that the answer to some of these new threats lies in existing interventions, stemming from fields such as youth work and education, as well as probation and exit work. Ten years ago, it was this recognition that led to the network starting to bring together individuals from a broad range of professions and from across the entire Union to build a platform where first-line practitioners could exchange knowledge, experience and practices, thus filling a gap in the existing structures created to address violent extremism and terrorism up until that point. From a practitioner's perspective, this would mean:

- Preventing recruitment by violent extremist and terrorist groups and organisations.

- Supporting those wanting to leave such groups and organisations.

- Increasing awareness about the risks of radicalisation leading to violent extremism.

As Judy Korn recalled, this translated to three initial objectives for RAN:

- Sharing inspiring P/CVE practices.

- Sharing insights between practitioners from different professions and Member States.

- Including the voice of practitioners in the policymaking process.

Indeed, these two objectives have been achieved over the course of the past decade. However, it remains somewhat difficult to assess the extent to which practitioner recommendations are informing policy, Judy Korn continued. What is clear, however, is that mechanisms such as the Steering Committee, the RAN Practitioners Plenary, and the HLC are platforms that give voice to practitioners and create opportunities to enter into direct exchange with the European Commission.

Ms Korn concluded by emphasising three distinct effects the network has had up until this point:

- RAN supports a diversity of approaches.

- RAN inspires practitioners to seek further qualification and strive for continuous development.

- As an open-source platform, RAN makes the knowledge of a few accessible to many, throughout Europe and beyond.

Ms Korn also stressed the importance of maintaining a flexible structure within the network to ensure the continued ability to respond to new challenges and that these challenges cannot be addressed by any one Member State alone. This is why RAN will remain central to the EU's response to violent extremism.

For **Gilles de Kerchove**, one of the most important aspects of RAN's creation was the structure of the European Union at the time, and the academic debate surrounding the issue. Scholars were (and still are today) divided on the drivers of radicalisation. He noted that some of the most prominent approaches have been taken by scholars like Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy, Francois Burgat and Farad Khoroskovar, who focussed on a range of issues like ideology, geopolitics, and (individual) discrimination.

Against the backdrop of this academic disagreement, RAN would primarily focus on three main sets of drivers:

1) Structural factors (feelings of injustice and discrimination)

2) Motivational factors (e.g. ideology)

3) Facilitating factors related to individuals' (social) environments (e.g. the internet, community, prisons)

Regarding the prominence of the issue within the Union at the time, Mr de Kerchove pointed out that in 2011, there was not yet a Security Union and that some Member States still do not have prevent policies in place. After long being influenced by the United Kingdom in this regard, the development of a distinct strategy within the EU would go on to influence actors such as the United States as well as the United Nations. This strategy of course includes RAN, a network representative of a bottom-up approach that covers not just practitioners but also researchers and policymakers. Within the past decade, Member States have become more proactive, Gilles de Kerchove said, taking as an example the Project Based Collaboration and growing ownership by policymakers.

RAN will remain a special project in the sense that it addresses a major security issue from the perspective of a civil society practitioner. This continues to be a fascinating aspect and distinct characteristic of the network. Concluding, Mr de Kerchove said RAN will continue to face new challenges in the future:

- The growing influence of technology, such as machines replacing human labour and younger generations spending lots of time in digital spaces.

- The disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration into societies of large numbers of violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs) to be released from prisons across the EU in the near future after having served their sentences.

- Continue working on understanding the ideological drivers of radicalisation.

- Extending the network beyond the EU, by means of setting up a knowledge and research hub, developing e-learning modules, strengthening approaches to online monitoring, and boosting media literacy.

Conference highlights: Panel with Ministers, reflection on achievements and current and future challenges

For the following segment, **Monique Pariat**, **Director-General of the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs,** set the scene by shining a light on some of the effects the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the field of P/CVE. Most notably, increased social isolation, distrust in governments, and unemployment. Acting as a catalyst for the spread of disinformation and conspiracy narratives, these developments collectively paved the way for rising numbers of politically motivated crimes that do not necessarily fit the current categories of extremism.

In his opening address, the **Slovenian Minister of Interior, Aleš Hojs**, who represented the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, said that despite the pandemic, counterterrorism will remain high on the EU agenda. He also noted that the effects linked to the pandemic are contributing to tensions both inside and outside the Union. Concerning the counter-terrorism strategy, the EU has come a long way, Mr Hojs reflected. He said it has become clear that better integration is crucial to efficiently counter violent extremism and terrorism, especially as the phenomena has become increasingly unpredictable.

Mr Hojs stressed that cooperation and multi-agency partnerships within the EU are exemplary and go well beyond security responses, with most advanced actors having extended interagency cooperation in the field to employing full community approaches. One result of this cooperation is the establishment of RAN. While the network has become a key environment and inspires EU neighbours to follow each other's guiding examples, it remains important for the Member States to stay actively involved in the guidance and steering of related policies and RAN itself, for the network to continue thriving.

The **Portuguese Minister of Internal Administration Eduardo Cabrita,** described his country as an active partner in the field of P/CVE even though Portugal has (fortunately) not experienced any attacks. Regarding the concerns and challenges related to the pandemic, Mr Cabrita highlighted the threats of misinformation and in particular the denial of science for the Member States as well as for the European institutions and the links that these new actors have to far-right groups. In this context, Portugal has seen rising numbers of movements spreading misinformation regarding the pandemic, particularly about vaccinations. Looking ahead, Mr Cabrita highlighted the need to prevent the further usage of digital platforms for such purposes as well as limiting the capabilities of the actors behind the spread of misinformation and using digital platforms for mobilisation purposes.

The Portuguese minister's address was followed by **Akseli Koskela, State Secretary to the Minister of the Interior of Finland**. He pointed out two major pandemic-related developments that will remain on the Finnish P/CVE agenda for the future. Firstly, the fact that citizens and especially young people have been spending even more time online than before the pandemic, where they are faced with terrorist propaganda and conspiracy narratives. Secondly, many people without any prior history of extremism have taken to the streets during the pandemic to protest (some violently) against democratic decisions and decision-makers. A risk that anti-government movements are being fuelled by conspiracies will likely continue after the pandemic, according to Mr Koskela. He stressed the need for a better understanding of such narratives. While Finland has already seen projects aimed at strengthening youth workers in their abilities to protect young people from extremist recruitment online, more is needed. Mr Koskela said it is necessary to build on the many counter-narrative practices developed by the global coalition against Daesh both online and offline. What is crucial in this context is to have a cooperation between the third sector and authorities as well as to strengthen the credible voices of NGOs and CSOs. Throughout this entire process, RAN will have a key role to play, concluded Mr Koskela.

Mr Vendelín Leitner, State Secretary at the Slovak Ministry of Interior, also took the floor. He reinforced the observation made by Mr Cabrita about right-wing extremist (RWE) groups capitalising on the fears of the pandemic, especially in the online sphere, with fake news and misinformation rising steeply in the first months of the pandemic. Similar to many other EU Member States, RWE currently represents the biggest challenge in Slovakia, Mr Leitner said. Some of the specific challenges addressed this year include:

- Political actors with links to RWE mobilising the general public via social media and organising large protests.

- These protests are legal but tied to movements that work on limiting fundamental human rights.

- There is increasing polarisation in Slovak society and a lack of public trust in democratic institutions.

In a speech prepared for the HLC, **Deputy Minister of Interior of the Czech Republic Jiri Novacek[1]** thanked RAN for the fruitful cooperation in the field of P/CVE this past decade. He highlighted the many opportunities that have been created to not only exchange good practices, but also review legislative measures, provide training opportunities, and develop partnerships in order to be able to prevent radicalisation and react to evolving threats.

Mr Novacek expressed gratitude for the needs-based approach of this cooperation, including ongoing discussions between the Member States, their experts and the RAN Working Groups, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes. The Deputy Minister expressed his support to the French proposal to improve the European Cooperation Mechanism on preventing and countering radicalisation. The Czech Republic is ready to play an active role in further discussions and suggested exercises during their upcoming Presidency.

In turn, Mr **Christian Gravel, Secretary General of the Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalisation** in France, addressed the effects of the pandemic on P/CVE in his country. Mr Gravel said actors spreading extremism and hate speech were active prior to the pandemic. However, they are now able to use technology to reach a broader audience than in the past. On that note, Mr Gravel pointed out that the pandemic was utilised by different extremist actors, not just right-wing groups. For instance, Salafi and jihadist groups have exploited the pandemic by framing it as a divine punishment. Also, conspiracy narratives have skyrocketed not just in right-wing circles but also within left-wing extremist groups. As a result, right-wing extremist activities saw the largest (10-fold) increase that was achieved by utilising various conspiracy narratives. This situation will not disappear in the next few years, Mr Gravel warned.

In the case of France, the country continues to be affected by Islamist extremism, as recent attacks such as the murder of Samuel Paty have shown, with reciprocal effects between Islamic extremism and right-wing extremism fuelling each other. Gravel stressed the need to study this phenomenon closer. The dimensions of Islamic fundamentalism and its networks also need to be examined more closely, to protect French citizens from future harm, including Muslim citizens. Gravel ended his statement by urging for continued French engagement, not just in the offline but most importantly in the online sphere. He highlighted the establishment of an online unit to identify and counter extremist narratives, the creation of prevent toolkits in the educational sector and the drafting of a paper together with 12 other countries to take stock of what has been accomplished and what remains to be tackled in the future.

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[1] Due to technical difficulties, Deputy Minister of Interior of the Czech Republic Jiri Novacek did not address the HLC. This is based on the speech he had planned to deliver.

Lastly, **Director for European and International Affairs at the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, Rob Huijser,** focussed on the challenge of undesirable foreign financing in the context of P/CVE. He referred to non-transparent financing of religious and cultural institutions. Mr Huijser stressed that the EU and the Member States must work to ensure that organisations operating within the Union but working against its values should not be able to secure funding. This is due to concern that non-transparent financing from third countries enables Islamist extremists to further their agenda. While the Netherlands are addressing this issue, Mr Huijser underlined the added value in further exploring this issue together with other Member States as well as with the European Commission.

Secondly, Mr Huijser shared his concerns regarding the Dutch security services alert to the government about the growing international right-wing extremist scene attracting Dutch youngsters. There is concern that right-wing extremism can turn into terrorism and that the EU needs to take an active role in countering this development. As such, collaboration and sharing of inspiring practices are deemed necessary to counter violent extremism and terrorism in the online sphere (on mainstream platforms and in more alternative online communities).

Conference highlights: Panel "Prison, exit & rehabilitation including returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters"

During the first of the two thematic panels, first-line practitioner and **psychologist Gaby Thijssen** set the scene by sharing impressions of her work with violent and extremist terrorist offenders (VETOs) in prisons in the Netherlands. Ms Thijssen explained the rationale behind the Dutch approach of concentrating VETOs in one prison wing as a form of risk management. It is considered important to get to know the person the practitioner is trying to rehabilitate, in order to carry out successful interventions. This is done by gathering information on the detainee with the help of first-line practitioners such as prison guards, psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as religious counsellors and feeding this information into a risk assessment tool called VERA (Violent Extremism Risk Assessment). In addition to the risks, however, it is also important to understand the needs and responsiveness of the detainees. In determining these factors, six motivational profiles of VETOs can be distinguished and should be considered when planning interventions. These are: criminal opportunities, friendship seeker, meaning seeker, morally obligated, ideological seeker, and status seeker. Ms Thijssen concluded that the strategy of harnessing the power of cognitive dissonance when engaging with the target group can be useful. This applies when the actions of those engaging with the detainee do not fit his/her narrative, for example by exhibiting faith in their ability to change.

Co-chair of the RAN PRISONS Working Group and **Head of International Cooperation and Training of Staff Department at the Bulgarian General Directorate, Nadya Radkovska,** stressed the need for tailored interventions, as there is 'no single profile of a terrorist offender'. One of the main challenges related to interventions and disengagement programmes is the lack of evaluations that determine their effectiveness, Ms Radkovska stressed. What is clear, however, is that multi-agency cooperation is required both inside and outside of prison in order to ensure consistency in the programming. For this purpose, trust needs to be built in order to be able to share information between agencies and the different actors involved. Other important challenges in the prison context that Ms Radkovska highlighted included a lack of gender-sensitive tools, initiatives to work with parent returnees and individuals whose citizenship has been revoked.

Elisabet Modée, **Senior Adviser at the Swedish Ministry of Justice Unit of Crime Policy** and chair of Project Based Collaborations (PBC) on Prisons, advocated for engaging more preventively in prisons. She highlighted that there have been ample examples of prisoners who have no involvement in extremism radicalising within prison walls. Prisons should provide safe environments and for this purpose must be provided with sufficient staff, and staff trained in these issues. Implementing risk and needs assessment tools is also critical and RAN has been very helpful in offering the Member States examples of inspiring practice. Ms Modée also noted the need for a multi-agency approach to reintegration. She highlighted the opportunities offered for Member State cooperations in this regard also within the framework of the PBC. In this format, a group of Member States meet over periods of time

to discuss challenges and deliver knowledge to other Member States. Sweden and France have chaired the PBC on prisons for the past three years. In this regard, research is also crucial, Ms Modée underlined.

As the last speaker on this panel, the **Director of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)** and **Senior Associate Fellow at the Belgian Egmont Institute, Thomas Renard** shared three critical observations with regards to the prison context. Firstly, despite years of experience in the field, it remains unclear what lessons have been learned and that we still seem to be experimenting when it comes to radicalisation in prisons. Secondly, data is lacking. While recent publications speculate that we might have reached a peak in terms of VETO incarceration, we cannot be certain unless we measure more and obtain better data. Thirdly, while many promising practices have been identified over the course of the past 10 years, we need to understand more about their effectiveness in order to better streamline them and implement them in a more concerted way. Practitioners also need to consider the momentum for VETO management in prison passes, including the funding and resources currently available in this field. He said this puts us at risk of losing the knowledge gained during the past 10 years. For this reason, we must speed up data collection, Mr Renard stressed, because history shows that we will likely be confronted with similar challenges again in the future. In order to determine what works under which circumstances, we have no better platform than RAN.

In response to subsequent questions from the audience, the evaluation of rehabilitation programmes was raised as an example to highlight persisting challenges. The question was about the metric that should be used to determine their effectiveness. In utilising recidivism rates as a metric, which are extremely low for VETOs, what are we really learning as opposed to monitoring former offenders for extended periods of time after their release?

Conference highlights: Panel on "The prevent architecture for the future: how can we effectively respond to current and future challenges, including the challenge of digital prevent work?"

The first speaker on the second thematic panel was **Vasileios Theofilopolous**, former Working Group co-chair of RAN Police and **member of the Greek police force**, who shared some of the challenges facing Greece in the present and near future. Firstly, Mr Theofilopolous echoed P/CVE challenges connected to the pandemic as also being visible in Greece, such as the creation of social media groups spreading hateful narratives and calling for disobedience of government measures related to the pandemic. He stressed the importance of countering anti-vaccination and anti-governments narratives. In this context, socio-economic factors such as unemployment should not be neglected as drivers of polarisation and radicalisation. Secondly, repercussions of the situation in Afghanistan can be expected to spill over to the EU in different ways, such as increased migration flows fuelling tensions between far-right and far-left groups. He also pointed to escalations in large reception centres, and to the situation in Afghanistan which is becoming a hub for European FTFs.

The second speaker on this panel was **Claudie Baudino**, **Network Coordinator of the Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalisation in France** and member of the Network of prevent policy makers on radicalisation. According to Ms Baudino, achievements over the past 10 years include an increase in national capacities to address radicalisation. Examples include the formation of new national units, recruiting and training staff, adapting legislation, and developing partnerships with civil society actors, resulting in increased multi-agency approaches in many Member States. With RAN Policy Support having been kicked off during the Covid-19 pandemic, this has deprived Member States of the opportunity to meet and discuss. Nevertheless, in

the long run this collaboration on policy amongst the Member States will allow for the communication of clear work assignments to RAN.

Peter Neumann, **Professor of Security Studies at the Department of War Studies at King's College London** as well as a key player within RAN Policy Support and **Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)**, focussed on the challenges. He noted that developments triggered with the proliferation of the internet will continue to challenge P/CVE work in three ways. Firstly, the fragmentation of ideologies. According to Mr Neumann, far-right actors in particular have started applying a 'pick-and-mix' approach, where narratives are created based on what can be found online, drawing from misogyny, Satanism, gaming culture and pandemic-related conspiracy narratives. Also, perpetrators of recent attacks have all advanced their own versions of what they believed to be true, making it more complex to respond. Secondly, there has been a loosening of structures. Not just in terms of the content but also how extremists organise themselves has changed significantly through digital spaces, with lone attackers becoming an increasingly serious threat. Thirdly, and connected to this point, the modus operandi of how attacks are carried out is diversifying and simplifying. Examples of this include knife attacks or crashing vehicles into large crowds. Therefore, it is important that prevention providers become even more present in digital spaces in the future.

Research Director at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish Defence University and RAN Practitioners Special Adviser **Magnus Ranstorp** raised three additional points for discussion for preparing for the future of P/CVE and RAN. Firstly, Mr Ranstorp echoed the need for further research and better understanding of ideology, specifically with regards to non-violent Islamist separatism since this can fuel jihadism by undermining democratic values. For this reason, violent extremism embedded in communities should be mapped, taking into account factors such as transnationalism as well as foreign funding. This applies not just to Islamism, but also to far-right extremist groups. Secondly, Magnus Ranstorp underlined the call for further online engagement and to address the question of how to digitally connect with young people, in light of changing platforms and technologies. Thirdly, he advocated the deployment of mobile expert teams within RAN (agile teams able to work in different cities and districts on specific prevention issues). Within these teams, more experienced Member States could help other Member States tackle specific issues, drawing on RAN's expertise on the local as well as national level.

Questions tabled following the second panel mainly concerned the online sphere, lone actors, and non-violent radicalisation. With regards to the question about how to work in a more holistic manner in the context of online P/CVE, Vasileios Theofilopolous stressed the need to adopt new approaches specifically addressing youth. Peter Neumann outlined that efforts must be increased to transfer the knowledge gained with regard to P/CVE offline into the online context and better understanding the online/offline nexus.

Answering a question about lone actors and whether they are alone or create an alternate sense of togetherness, Mr Neumann said their radicalisation does not take place in a vacuum. As such, social bonds exist online for these lone actors.

Claudie Baudino responded to the question about non-violent radicalisation by stressing the need to better understand the dynamics at play in so-called radicalisation hotbeds and the environments that allow for individuals to radicalise.

Mr Onidi closed the meeting by remarking once more on the great dedication behind the work of everyone involved in RAN, highlighting the network's unique strength of bringing together so many professions, perspectives and expertise, as well as the humble nature of the inputs presented throughout the event. RAN is beyond "tackling the tip of the iceberg". In fact, RAN has been tackling the "body of the iceberg" for years, Mr Onidi stated. The network has proven its great capacity to understand the issues addressed throughout the meeting, to work on them and to adapt stunningly quickly to understanding new extremist phenomena. Now is the time to better convey to the outside what extremism is all about, what impact it really has on societies and what will happen if the topic is not being taken seriously.

Further reading

RAN Practitioners paper on Repatriated foreign terrorist fighters and their families: European experiences & lessons for P/CVE, June 2021.

RAN Practitioners paper on Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices, 2021.

RAN Practitioners paper on Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE, 2021.

RAN Practitioners paper on Ethical Guidelines for Working on P/CVE in Mental Health Care, 2021.

RAN Practitioners paper on Rehabilitation work with convicted offenders outside of prison, 2021.

EU (2020) Security Union Strategy.

EU (2021) Strategic orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation.

European Commission (2020) A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond.

Europol (2021) EU Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2021.