



# **Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right- wing extremist actors**

Authored by **Annemarie van de Weert**, RAN External Expert

Radicalisation Awareness Network



**Practitioners**

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## Abstract

Over the course of the previous years, counterterrorism has focused more on anticipating the threat of terrorism. In this context, institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the European Commission have increasingly emphasized that acts of terrorism cannot be prevented through repressive measures alone. Through countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE), the aim is to detect deviant attitudes in an early stage and promote social inclusion and cohesion at the same time. In particular, CVE consists of the early detection of radicalisation towards violent extremism and includes various approaches to increase the resilience of communities and individuals to the use of extremist violence and other related unlawful acts. In turn, the concept of PVE consists of systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of extremist environments. Both approaches emphasise tackling the context conducive to terrorism such as situational, social, cultural and individual factors. Because of their direct contact with society, frontline professionals are tasked with dealing with individuals who may threaten the rule of law, national security, and democratic values. This ought to be done by building normative barriers against violent extremism at an early stage, the so-called uncharted terrains between non-violent extremist ideology and terrorism. **The question remains: How can youth, family and community workers intervene in radicalisation processes without infringing on personal freedoms?** This overview paper focuses on right-wing extremism (RWE) and freedom of expression. It provides advices from first-line practitioners on how to deal with and respond to extremists publicly expressing their ideologies in a non-violent, but still potentially harmful, way. It also delves into the matter of how practitioners can protect themselves against potential backlash and threats of violence from extremist organisations or movements <sup>(1)</sup>.

## Introduction

In recent years, many western countries have suffered from terrorism and political violence. New groups are prepared to use, or at least propagate and facilitate, serious forms of violence. The ideological background is a dynamic object, with few salient ideologies: the motivation lies in political, religious, ethnic, ecological and/or nationalist convictions for instance, and there is an increasing intolerance towards dissenters, as well as distrust of governmental institutions. **While many right-wing extremist groups across the EU have not resorted to violence, they contribute to a climate of fear of and animosity towards minority groups in EU cities.** Such a climate may lower the threshold for some radicalised individuals to use violence against people and property, as witnessed all too often <sup>(2)</sup>.

## Definitions and concepts

There exists no commonly agreed legal definition of right-wing extremism (RWE) across European Union Member states and partner nations. A comparison study commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office in 2020 showed that six countries — Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) — all define “terrorism” in their national legislation, but often rely only on administrative practice or working definitions of “extremism” or “right-wing extremism” <sup>(3)</sup>. This seems to be the case in most EU countries. Despite the frequent warnings from practitioners that the lack of a standing definition of RWE (or radicalism) might be an issue, there seems to be a high degree of consensus about the characteristics of RWE in practice. This consensus advances a few general features to describe right-

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<sup>(1)</sup> N.B. The following overview focuses solely on dealing with right-wing extremist ideology and freedom of expression. For an overview of other challenges we refer to the publication '[Violent right-wing extremism in focus](#)' (May 2020). Here, the topic of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) will be addressed more broadly.

<sup>(2)</sup> Europol, Terrorism in the EU: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/terrorism-in-eu-geographically-widespread-and-multifaceted>

<sup>(3)</sup> Counter Extremism Project, transnational connectivity: [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study\\_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism\\_Nov%202020.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf)

wing extremist ideology, which are: anti-democracy, authoritarianism and nationalism <sup>(4)</sup>. Furthermore, there are two important elements in which non-violent RWE is expressed, namely: hate speech and provocation.

### **Nationalism**

Firstly, nationalism is seen as the core doctrine of “extreme-right” followers. It draws on the myth of a homogeneous nation that puts the nation before the individual and their civil rights. Right-wing extremist groups are therefore characterised by the effort to construct an idea of nation and national belonging by radicalising ethnic, religious, lingual, and other cultural and political criteria of exclusion, in which there is no place for the “other”.

### **Anti-democracy**

Secondly, the concept of extremism subscribes to the opposition to free democratic societies, be it through violence or any other related activity. This essentially means that right-wing extremists who do not necessarily support or resort to violence may also be seen as a threat to national security and the free society because they pursue anti-democratic goals.

### **Authoritarianism**

Thirdly, authoritarianism is a returning characteristic of the right-wing extremist movement. It is the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which strong belief in the importance of rules, hierarchical structure and order prevail. Authoritarianism historically is propelled around the presence of leaders deemed as “strong” to confront supposed “enemies”.

The outcome of the aforementioned recent study by the Counter Extremism Project also shows some similarities about the transnational connections of the extreme right-wing milieus in the six countries compared (Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US). It identified music, violent sports and finances as similarities, and shows that they work towards readying themselves for an upcoming outbreak of violence or wishes to accelerate developments towards such a situation (Day X narrative), as the drivers of the movement <sup>(5)</sup>.

More insights on RWE can be derived from the [RAN Factbook on Far-right Extremism](#), which provides an overview of fundamental elements of right-wing extremist movements across the EU and discusses the related implications for practitioners in their work on prevention of violent extremism. **In May 2020, RAN also conducted a webinar on the topic, discussing, amongst other things, the scope of the right-wing extremist scene, definitions, different ideologies, roles of women, and trends and challenges. The main presentation can be accessed [here](#).**

## Key strategies of non-violent right-wing extremism

### *Hate speech*

Although RWE features many important elements, one element stands out: hatred for what is perceived as ‘unfamiliar’, ‘unknown’ and/or ‘uncommon’. The following two examples have been selected because they use clear, comprehensible language to describe the concept of RWE that is useful for the professional field.

1. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) <sup>(6)</sup> speaks of extremism as the active pursuit and/or support of profound changes in society that could endanger the (continued existence of) democratic legal order, possibly with the use of undemocratic methods that could impair the functioning of the democratic legal order. The undemocratic methods used can be both violent and non-violent.

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<sup>(4)</sup> Carter. Reconstructing the concept, p. 163.

<sup>(5)</sup> Counter Extremism Project, transnational connectivity: [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study\\_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism\\_Nov%202020.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf)

<sup>(6)</sup> AIVD, Rechts-extremisme: <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/rechts-extremisme>

Examples of non-violent undemocratic means are systematic hate speech, spreading fear, spreading disinformation, demonising, and intimidating. RWE meets the following ideas:

- xenophobia
- hatred for foreign (cultural) elements.

2. The independent Commission for Countering Extremism in Great Britain makes it clear in their mandate that they focus on challenging hateful extremism (7). Their summary of hateful extremism is more extensive:

- “Behaviours that can incite and amplify hate, or engage in persistent hatred, or ... [justify] violence;
- And that draw on hateful, hostile or supremacist beliefs directed at an out-group who are perceived as a threat to the wellbeing, survival or success of an in-group;
- And that cause, or are likely to cause, harm to individuals, communities or wider society.”

### Provocation

Threat analysis (8) shows that RWE is on the rise (adherents of racial nationalism, such as neo-Nazis, fascists and white supremacists, figure high amongst perpetrators of extreme-right violence). The most problematic non-violent groups are those that carry out non-violent but outrageous actions on purpose in order to provoke violent responses from their opponents. Tore Bjørgo, Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), states the following (9):

*“For example in Norway, SIAN (Stop Islamisation of Norway) have carried out burning and defiling of the Koran publicly. This provoked one (mentally unstable) Muslim migrant to arson two churches (one was severely damaged). SIAN’s intention is to demonstrate that Muslims are violent by nature. In Denmark, Rasmus Paludan, the leader of a far-right party, has also burnt the Koran in neighbourhoods with many Muslim inhabitants.”*

### Case example:

An example of a movement that would fall within the boundaries of non-violent extremism, but is a serious hazard for society, is the **Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)** in Sweden. This is a militant national socialist organisation. Its declared goal is to establish a pan-Nordic white state. The NRM has a violent ideology but acts most of the time within the limits of legality and non-violence — but they try to push the limits. For example, this group carried out many provocative public events, such as having hundreds of activists marching down main streets with their uniforms and banners. As such, the NRM leaders are highly sensitive to the legal boundaries set by the government and have become experts in manoeuvring the thin line between legal, non-violent publicity stunts and occasional violent actions by its members and followers. They also continuously try to test and expand these boundaries through violent behaviour against the police and political enemies, and by internally honouring rather than punishing activists who overstep the boundaries officially drawn by the leadership (10). Based on their beliefs, violence may be legitimate because they frame it as resistance to occupation and rejection of the status quo (11). Based on this ideology Finland banned the Finnish chapter of the Nordic Resistance Movement (12).

(7) Commission for Countering Extremism, Challenging Hateful Extremism: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/836540/Challenging\\_Hateful\\_Extremism\\_-\\_summary\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/836540/Challenging_Hateful_Extremism_-_summary_report.pdf)

(8) Auger, Right-Wing Terror.

(9) Bjørgo, email message to author, 6 October 2020.

(10) Bjørgo & Ravndal, the problem?: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2018/the-nordic-resistance-movement.html>

(11) Jupskås & Leidi, knowing what’s (far) right, p. 31.

(12) Forsell, T. (2017, November 30). Finnish court bans neo-Nazi group. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-finland-farright-court/finnish-court-bans-neonazi-group-idUSKBN1DU22K>.

**Case example:**

As stated in the opening of the annual threat assessment published by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research “Global events provided fertile grounds for already ascendant extreme right-wing ideology and violence to thrive. The global COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the November 2020 Presidential elections in the United States (US) and continuing anti-immigrant antipathy in Europe, all point to cleavages that are likely to continue to widen over the coming year. Fueled by an increasingly polarised global political discourse and growing dependence on easily manipulated social media, the problems currently remain most acute in North America, although a persistent roster of incidents, networks and plots across Europe, Australasia, and beyond, show how transnational the problem has become” (13).

Especially, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has spawned a group of anti-government protesters who have, in part, been radicalised and resorted to extremist activities. With governments imposing freedom-restricting measures to protect public health, e.g. in the form of stay-at-home orders, social discontent has increased. In 2020-2021, the heavy restrictions imposed on people’s movement and employment in the wake of COVID-19 has exacerbated the spread of extremist ideas as people spend a growing amount of time online (14). For example, in the Netherlands, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) made its concerns public in the quarterly report on the threat assessment. It mentions the “radical undercurrent” of these protesters in harassing politicians and journalists, intimidating police officers and putting private information about public figures online. This does not happen primarily for RWE-ideological reasons, but because of feelings of injustice, great unease or a different experience of reality (15). However, this discontent is further fuelled by conspiracy theories and disinformation via social media, and RWE consciously try to foster the anti-government sentiments within these protests for their own ends. People distrusting the government, science and traditional media can feel that their ideas and views are confirmed given the far-reaching scope of government-sponsored measures taken to combat the pandemic in the name of public health. These include people from different ideological backgrounds. An example of such a RWE-movement is QAnon. The group opposes the legitimacy of the pandemic, lockdown orders and the role of the law enforcement and other government officials. The result is a “militia-sphere” which has produced incidents of violence and aspirational plots. This ideology increasingly gets attention in the news because of bizarre conspiracy theories mainly based on the US political system and its elites. During the pandemic, European strands of this conspiracy theory have gained traction. The danger posed by QAnon is mainly that its believers deliberately seek to undermine state legitimacy and its institutions, and may challenge key principles of democratic rule (16). Followers continuously express their distrust of the rule of law, question impartiality, and thus may lead to polarisation and division.

An upcoming RAN paper will take a closer look at how right-wing extremists capitalise on societal crises, by using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study.

## 1. Non-violent right-wing extremist ideology in the EU: Challenges

In recent years, the fight against terrorism and political violence has focused more on anticipating the threats that they pose. Therefore, early detection of extremist ideas by local professionals has become an important part of the preventive approach in countering radicalization. Frontline workers who operate in the arteries of society are encouraged to identify processes toward violent behaviour at an early stage (17). The premise of P/CVE is the assumption that deviant behaviour and radical ideologies are often a harbinger of terrorism and

(13) Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses , January 2021, Vol. 13, No. 1, ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT, pp. 118. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26979992>.

(14) Finkelstein, COVID-19, Conspiracy and Contagious Sedition, p.5-6.

(15) Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses , January 2021, Vol. 13, No. 1, ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT, pp. 118-126. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26979992>.

(16) LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” The Atlantic, June 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567>

(17) van de Weert & Eijkman, Reconsidering Early Detection, 397-408.

political violence<sup>(18)</sup>. For that matter, governments have become highly concerned with early risk assessment efforts to identify susceptible individuals. In practice, that means that frontline professionals who are in close contact with society are mandated to be alert to early signs of radicalisation processes. The idea behind it is: not to take action when something has happened, but to act preventively. As a result, numerous first-line practitioners have become increasingly involved in prevention strategies focusing on behavioural change. The professionals in question work mostly in the social domain in the fields of education, youth, social and community work.

The aim is to detect attitudes prone to radicalisation at an early stage and promote social inclusion and cohesion at the same time. Various intervention approaches are developed to increase the resilience of communities and individuals to the use of violence and other unlawful acts which may be related to extremism. To date, however, little is known about how these professionals take on this screening task at their own discretion. Research<sup>(19)</sup> suggests that subjective assessment appears to exist due to the absence of a clear norm for preliminary judgments. This lack, however, affects prejudice or administrative arbitrariness, which may cause side effects due to unjustified profiling. Concerns are raised about the equity of an early detection approach by social workers. Equity meaning: justice according to natural law or right and more specifically: freedom from bias or favouritism. The discussion is based on the fact that no standard is provided against which such frontline professionals can test their observations<sup>(20)</sup>. With this in mind, research has shown a major pitfall:

- **The focus on the preventive monitoring by frontline workers of citizens within an intelligence and security framework could indicate any deviation in behaviour, expression and appearance as a potential problem. This can produce risk of criminalisation and undermining freedom of speech<sup>(21)</sup>.**

#### *The difference between violent vs. non-violent extremism*

Prevention is most of all based on a “battle of ideas” rather than on a “War on Terrorism”<sup>(22)</sup>. In this way, tackling non-violent extremism becomes anticipatory<sup>(23)</sup>. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on which ideas, and amongst whom, should be viewed as problematic. Potential threats posed by some ideologies take place in the so-called pre-crime phase, in which no actual unlawful behaviour has occurred<sup>(24)</sup>. In this phase, prevention is concerned mostly with the speech arena, as indications of radicalisation are looked for in ideas, expressions or attitudes. The result of the situation is that frontline professionals, who operate preventively in the area of social welfare have to make assessments, which are difficult to substantiate. This is by definition a subjective judgement because the degree of radicalisation or extremism we attribute to someone turns out to be rather personal<sup>(25)</sup>.

As for law enforcement entities such as the police, it is similarly clear that the use of violence is the legal basis for an intervention; thus they focus on violent-extremism. However, from an educational, youth, family and community work perspective, the focus is more on non-violent extremism. A response is than legitimate when it is based on social factors (e.g. to prevent risks, chaos and social instability). The argument for systematic preventive measures here lies on the role of educators and social workers to ensure the development of people — especially youngsters — as autonomous, reflective, critical, self-conscious individuals and to protect society against discrimination. Nevertheless, in order to stay within the boundaries of the democratic state, ethical guidelines are necessary to bear in mind.

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<sup>(18)</sup> Schuurman & Taylor, Reconsidering radicalization, p. 6.

<sup>(19)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, Reconsidering Early Detection, 397-408.

<sup>(20)</sup> de Graaf & de Graaff, performative power of counterterrorism, p. 261.

<sup>(21)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, Subjectivity, pp. 191-214; van de Weert & Eijkman, early detection, pp. 491-507.

<sup>(22)</sup> Borum, 2011, Rethinking radicalization, p. 9.

<sup>(23)</sup> Lomell, prevention, p. 101.

<sup>(24)</sup> Zedner, Pre-crime, p. 263.

<sup>(25)</sup> Eijkman & Roodnat, branding, p. 200.



Think of the United Nations mandate to reaffirm that terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any specific religion, nationality, civilisation or ethnic group <sup>(26)</sup>.

## 1.1 Why is countering non-violent action problematic?

Concerns are based on the fact that subjective judgement can lead to increased levels of stigmatisation and discrimination, as well as the criminalisation of certain undesired behaviours. In daily practice, legal boundaries are tested or crossed in the name of safety and security <sup>(27)</sup>. This relates to two main dilemmas of P/CVE at the local level.

### *Dilemma #1: Prejudice*

The first-line professional must be on the lookout for the first signs of undemocratic behaviour, ideas or worldviews, rather than action; however, no clear framework is provided for such a preliminary screening. When discussing risk assessment, it is important to realise that people evaluate risk from their own perspectives. In the case of extremist attitudes or behaviour, one is particularly inclined to evaluate others based on the decision-maker's own viewpoint. This is what social scientists and psychologists call "moral judgement"; it entails the consideration of (professional) values and norms <sup>(28)</sup>. Morality strongly depends on the dominant culture and is influenced by public debate. The social and political environment influences the way in which people experience the issues that we face <sup>(29)</sup>. Moreover, people are highly attuned to information that confirms their ideas and tend to interpret new information to confirm their own assumptions <sup>(30)</sup>. People exhibit this bias when gathering information selectively or when interpreting information subjectively <sup>(31)</sup>. This reflex is known as "confirmation bias" — the preference for confirming existing beliefs <sup>(32)</sup>.

### *Dilemma #2: Arbitrariness*

Preventive monitoring focuses on early recognition of processes that might lead to possible violence by gathering information. Although called "prevention", it is still also a "repressive" approach — namely, targeting individuals and communities for intervention activities driven by the security priorities of the state <sup>(33)</sup>. There is a risk that the focus on the preventive monitoring of citizens could indicate any deviation in behaviour, expression and appearance as a potential problem <sup>(34)</sup>. Such practice increases the risk of "false positives" (i.e. people who are identified as potentially risky when, in all likelihood, they would never engage in violence). Vice versa, there is a risk of "false negatives" (i.e. people who are not considered dangerous and who eventually do engage in violence) <sup>(35)</sup>. Both outcomes have negative implications (see Section 1.3. on effectiveness). That immediately makes the policy controversial because it can create administrative arbitrariness <sup>(36)</sup>.

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<sup>(26)</sup> Rosand et al., UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy:

<http://www.cicte.oas.org/Rev/en/Highlight/Center%20on%20Global%20Counter%20Terrorism%20Cooperation%20document.pdf>

<sup>(27)</sup> Crank et al., The noble cause, pp. 103-116.

<sup>(28)</sup> Haidt & Baron, moral judgement, p. 201.

<sup>(29)</sup> Patt & Zeckhauser, Action bias, p. 45.

<sup>(30)</sup> Ariely & Jones, Predictably irrational:

<sup>(31)</sup> Plous, psychology.

<sup>(32)</sup> Kahneman et al., Judgment.

<sup>(33)</sup> Ragazzi, securitising, p. 163.

<sup>(34)</sup> Eijkman & Roodnat, branding, p. 200.

<sup>(35)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, Subjectivity, p. 191.

<sup>(36)</sup> Mattsson, Caught, p. 111.

## Ethics support

A sense of injustice can lead to the perceived legitimisation of violence. It is therefore necessary to counter ideas according to strict ethical codes of conduct. Violations of the basic democratic principles such as justice, equality and freedom of speech would not only cause individual adversity, it would also undermine trust and confidence in state institutions and the rule of law.

Michael Kowalski, head of the Expertise and Quality Center of the Inspectorate of Justice and Security in the Netherlands, states the following:

“Ethics can be viewed as an important additional source of guidance beyond the law. However, most of the ethical dilemmas facing local professionals are underrepresented in the literature on counterterrorism and security studies. Further, regarding the practice of counterterrorism itself, there are still limited documented experiences about how professionals deal with ethical challenges. Preliminary findings of an explorative pilot seem to suggest that local professionals see a considerable relevance and added value in ethics support like participating in moral case deliberations.”<sup>(37)</sup>

## 1.2 Is it possible to address radicalisation processes without infringing human rights?

Extensive research is being conducted into the relationships between the phenomena of “radicalisation” and “violence”, but there is no clear connection<sup>(38)</sup>. Terrorism experts therefore emphasise that it is not derailed individuals — or radical persons — that we should look for, but people who do not accept our legal order<sup>(39)</sup>. This means that when the limits of democracy and the rule of law for threats and abuse are overstepped, frontline professionals must react. This is easier said than done because preventive approaches focus on attitudes that deviate from democratic norms and values rather than action or on concrete criminal acts. Constitutional documents and fundamental rights guarantee the freedom of all to be entitled to their own opinions. However, in most European nations, there are limitations on how these opinions might be expressed in the public arena. The limitations mostly concern incitements to hate, intolerance or antidemocratic behaviour, as well as seeking to limit the freedom of others, which might in fact constitute a breach of fundamental freedoms and be deemed unlawful<sup>(40)</sup>.

When an individual engages in hate speech or an explicit incitement to violence, the government may intervene on judicial grounds — depending on the respective legal frameworks of the country. For example, in the Netherlands, incitement to hate and violence is criminalised under Article 137d of the Dutch Criminal Code<sup>(41)</sup>. According to democratic standards it may occasionally be deemed necessary to place restrictions on some forms of manifestation of freedom of ideology. For example, according to Article 18(3) ICCPR: “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to **protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others**”<sup>(42)</sup>.

### *Duty to protect*

Besides safeguarding human rights, governments also have a responsibility to maintain a peaceful society to maintain safety and social stability. For that matter, it is possible to address ideas and expressions that could form a threat to society at an early stage. In policy, this is often referred to as “soft intervention” — that is, intervention before violence occurs. This is part of the prevention strategy. However, intervening

<sup>(37)</sup> Kowalski, email message to author, 19 August 2020.

<sup>(38)</sup> Schuurman & Taylor, *Reconsidering radicalization*, p. 3.

<sup>(39)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, *Every Artery*, p. 1.

<sup>(40)</sup> Lawrence, *Violence-conducive speech*, p. 12.

<sup>(41)</sup> van Noorloos, *Hate speech*.

<sup>(42)</sup> United Nations Human Rights Committee, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

preventively falls within the theory of anticipatory justice. The adjective “anticipate” indicates that justice is foreseen — or that professionals sense it in advance. The changes in the local approach to potential risk require, in addition to good care provision, that the legal competences of primary care professionals are safeguarded <sup>(43)</sup>. Sufficient understanding of the norms underlying human and citizenship rights should be consistently present in local prevention policy and ideally also incorporated in trainings and webinars <sup>(44)</sup>.

For this, the local professional needs some knowledge of basic principles that are the cornerstone of democracy to be able to conduct their assessment. In relation to an early detection approach as discussed in 1.1., the two following principles are fundamental:

- **Freedom:** It includes the right to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of press, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom to form associations, freedom from arbitrary arrests and freedom to enjoy family life.
- **Equality:** All the people, without any discrimination, are treated as equal. All the people enjoy equal political rights, equality before law and equality of opportunity without any discrimination.

### What are deviating ideas?

An example of how to deal with attitudes that deviate from democratic norms and values rather than action is the [American government programme called SLATT](#)<sup>(45)</sup> that was developed back in the 1990s (translation: State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training). The training was later used by the FBI. The author of this is a forensic psychologist, Dr Randy Borum, Professor and Director of Intelligence Studies in the School of Information at the University of South Florida. He describes “deviating ideas” as follows <sup>(46)</sup>:

“From a social science point of view it can be an unanswered question. From a practical / operational point of view, the boundary lies with ideologies that justify or impose violent action - especially against civilians (to serve a broader “case”). Indeed, in law enforcement, it is not our job to track how “extreme” a person’s worldview or belief system could be. We need to focus on how those beliefs and worldviews can facilitate or cause criminal - especially violent - actions.”

## 1.3 Can early-stage interventions harm the effectiveness of preventing violent extremism?

In subjective judgement as described in Section 1.1., the legitimacy of P/CVE is apparent because it could lead to administrative arbitrariness and profiling <sup>(47)</sup>. It may even criminalise certain “suspect communities” <sup>(48)</sup>. Such practice places pressure on the equity of early detection and intervention because it relies strongly on “gut feelings” while legal details might not be as useful in this case to inform a practitioner’s actions <sup>(49)</sup>. It could also create side effects, because being labelled a threat by public officials, without clear indicators, could create strong negative experiences in both the individuals and groups that are subject to these countering processes. In the realm of pre-crime intervention, the principles of justice and fairness are then particularly relevant. This correlation is also reflected in basic criminology knowledge that has shown over time that feelings of injustice and unfairness are central factors in extreme violence in general <sup>(50)</sup>. In this way, countering radicalisation could paradoxically be a breeding ground for extremism <sup>(51)</sup>.

<sup>(43)</sup> Claessen et al., access to justice, p. 8.

<sup>(44)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, Subjectivity; van de Weert & Eijkman, early detection.

<sup>(45)</sup> State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training (SLATT) Program | Training | Bureau of Justice Assistance (ojp.gov)

<sup>(46)</sup> Borum, email message to author, 6 October 2019.

<sup>(47)</sup> Kundhani & Hayes, undermining human rights: Overeem, ethics, p. 19.

<sup>(48)</sup> Mythen et al., victimization, p. 736. Ragazzi, Suspect, p. 724.

<sup>(49)</sup> van de Weert & Eijkman, Subjectivity, p. 191.

<sup>(50)</sup> Agnew, Pressured; Brown & Abernethy, Sacred, p. 1003; Borum, vulnerabilities, p. 286.

<sup>(51)</sup> Borum, Understanding, p. 7.

*“Be cautious that we are not stigmatising legitimate political views. We must determine if the views a person holds would fall into your own country’s interpretation of ‘right-wing extremism’. If they do, and if they are demonising or vilifying people to reinforce or spread their ‘ideology’, then we should act. But if they reject violence and simply hold alternative political perspectives, then we should tread carefully or risk making the problem worse.”*

*RAN Expert Pool member and UK practitioner*

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## 2. Countering non-violent expressions of right-wing extremism

Reminder: We are talking about ideologies that could support the use of violence without its adherents engaging in violence themselves. All the traditional counter-radicalisation practices (counter-narratives, alternative narratives, attitudinal inoculation, etc.) are in play. But experts often make the argument that any one strategy is not sufficient in and of itself. Typically, effective approaches are multifaceted and targeted to specific individuals. This involves extensive group analysis to understand what kind of messages resonate with the right-wing extremist ideology and what kind of norms they adhere to.

### 2.1 What can we learn from theory and the experience of practitioners when dealing with right-wing extremist ideologies?

To prevent and counter the development of the intention to commit acts of violent extremism is unfortunately an understudied subject. However, at the moment, there are some programmes that could be considered “evidence-based”<sup>(52)</sup>. Pointing to the fact that “extremism” is a label used to interpret a certain behaviour, this gives a starting point. It is not the job of the first-line practitioner to track how “extreme” a person’s world view or belief system could be. The goal is to diminish beliefs and world views that facilitate or cause violent actions. The following section will provide a selection of approaches that could effectively counter hateful extremism.

#### *Approaches to change attitudes and behaviours*

Several pieces of research<sup>(53)</sup> informs us that affective commitment, based on emotions associated with reward and belonging, can lead to increased participation in a radical group. On the other hand, disappointing emotions — connected to reward and belonging — could lead to decreased participation. This gives the following scheme for success in countering extremism:

- Push and pull factors for leaving extremism behind can be clustered into doubts in the ideology (normative commitment), doubts in (group) behaviour (and leadership) (affective commitment), as well as doubts related to personal and practical issues such as the expected costs, e.g. social, economic (continuance commitment)<sup>(54)</sup>.
- Each field of doubt might cause a crisis in the related commitment and corrode the individually perceived bond to the belief system and/or with a group.
- Targeted interventions need to include working on three levels: affective, pragmatic and ideological<sup>(55)</sup>.

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<sup>(52)</sup> Pistone et al., A scoping review, p. 22.

<sup>(53)</sup> Altier et al., Turning away, p. 647.

<sup>(54)</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, Promoting exit, p. 100.

<sup>(55)</sup> Rabasa et al., Deradicalizing Islamist extremists, p. 41.

- Focusing on one form of commitment only tends to be insufficient (e.g. through theological and political debate) <sup>(56)</sup>.

### What works

Practices for micro-social intervention programmes should focus on psychological mechanisms of radicalisation but also be tailored to individual needs and personalities. The following approaches have strong empirical evidence <sup>(57)</sup>:

- motivation-focused approaches;
- mentoring methods to help the subject cope with negative life experiences;
- approaches protecting against fundamental uncertainty;
- skill-building to handle fundamental life tasks (e.g. education, employment);
- approaches to prevent a loss of personal significance.

## 2.2 Proven approaches and practices

Oftentimes, the reasons for ending a right-wing extremist state of mind are closely connected with the motivations to join. The C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism of the University of Oslo, distinguish between five ideal types of participants who join – and leave – extremist groups for very different reasons: Ideologists, followers, adventurers, the angry and frustrated, and traditionalists. They also state that “simplistic notions of radicalization and deradicalization fail to explain the complex processes of becoming involved in extremist activities and groups <sup>(58)</sup>. This insight helps to structure and plan the individual intervention through identifying potential access points for an intervention through a thorough analysis of the individual’s situation, needs and grievances that led them to join an extremist environment in the first place. In addition, preventive efforts only make sense if they are based on a thorough understanding of the “why” and “how” behind the pathways leading to far-right convictions. For this, the social environment is crucial in understanding why a person turned to right-wing extremist ideology. Meaning that youth, family and social workers should first of all look for possible positive contact with friends and family in search of sustainable interventions <sup>(59)</sup>. If it turns out that the family and circle of friends are part of the radical milieu, then individualised social work will become difficult. However, if a person is on a solitaire path towards violent extremism, research and practice shows that it is the inner circle around a person that could have the most impact on one’s belief system and risky behaviour <sup>(60)</sup>.

### *Family counselling*

Family counselling programmes allow to address the family of a person in the early or advanced stages of a radicalisation process towards violent extremism, with the goal of slowing down and stopping that process <sup>(61)</sup>. Family counselling programmes build on the above-mentioned framework using the premise that specialised counsellors can alter the affective commitment to the radical environment, as well as provide an attractive alternative to involvement, and subsequently change the continuance commitment. In consequence, the main goal is to corrode the forms of commitment through positive alternatives, in order to produce individual cognitive openings for ideological reconsideration as well. The intervention goal consists of strengthening the family as a counterforce against radicalisation; it does not aim at using the family as a

<sup>(56)</sup> Braddock, talking cure, p. 60.

<sup>(57)</sup> Gøtzsche-Astrup, empirical support, p. 93.

<sup>(58)</sup> What explains why people join and leave far-right groups? - C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism (uio.no).

<sup>(59)</sup> Williams et al., critical, p. 50.

<sup>(60)</sup> See for an overview: Koehler, Understanding deradicalization, p. 145.

<sup>(61)</sup> Koehler, De-radicalization, p. 120.

source of information and intelligence for the authorities. The initial work is carried out with the families and not the radicalised individuals.

### *Counter-narratives*

When wanting to change attitudes there is some substantiation that counter-narratives could be successful<sup>(62)</sup>. This approach fits within educational strategies of raising self-awareness, empowerment, and encouraging participation and good citizenship. In 2017, the RAN Centre of Excellence identified the following categories of right-wing extremist audiences<sup>(63)</sup>:

- mainstream,
- immigration obsessive,
- un-politically correct and proud,
- marchers,
- organised resistance.

Furthermore, audiences appear to share the same vulnerability factors<sup>(64)</sup>:

- they perceive that they have been victimised (or are still being victimised);
- they consider themselves subject to marginalisation and ostracism;
- certain behaviours can be triggering for these target audiences (e.g. authoritarian expression or the endorsing of violence and aggression);
- they often struggle with identity issues and finding a fulfilling sense of purpose in life;
- the need to belong to a family or brotherhood is often present;
- the anger and fear stemming from perceived sweeping injustices (e.g. “all our jobs are being taken”, “women are being mistreated”) can lead to a willingness to make “sacrifices for the greater good”.

Following up on this practical knowledge, there are three emotions that show promise for driving individuals away from extreme thoughts and ideas: **anger**, **hope** and **pride**<sup>(65)</sup>. Each of these emotions can be elicited through persuasive messaging with specific guidelines.

#### **For anger:**

- Highlight extremist acts that obstruct target audiences’ ability to achieve valued goals.
- Target individuals prone to agree to the content of a counter-radicalization message containing messages that provoke a high degree of anger. Then make recommendations on how to resolve or level their anger (these can be solutions that will require both a lot of effort and a little bit of effort).

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<sup>(62)</sup> Braddock & Horgan, counter-narratives, p. 381.

<sup>(63)</sup> RAN Centre of Excellence, Audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists, p. 2: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran\\_c-n\\_audiences\\_of\\_right\\_left-wing\\_violent\\_extremists\\_2-3\\_11\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_audiences_of_right_left-wing_violent_extremists_2-3_11_en.pdf)

<sup>(64)</sup> RAN Centre of Excellence, Audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists, p. 3: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran\\_c-n\\_audiences\\_of\\_right\\_left-wing\\_violent\\_extremists\\_2-3\\_11\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_audiences_of_right_left-wing_violent_extremists_2-3_11_en.pdf)

<sup>(65)</sup> Mitchell Turner, Using emotion, pp. 114-119.

- Target individuals with no predisposition to agree with the content of a counter-radicalisation message with messages that emphasise the importance of challenging violent extremist behaviours and ideologies and recommend behaviours to resolve their anger that do not require significant effort.
- Incorporate content into anger appeals that communicate the ease with which behaviours that challenge the violent extremist group can be performed (i.e. increase the efficacy of target audiences).

#### For hope:

- Identify specific behaviours that target audiences can perform that help them achieve valued goals and are inconsistent with violent extremist propaganda/objectives.
- Indicate how recommended behaviours are superior to those advocated by violent extremists for achieving valued goals.
- Highlight the ease with which recommended behaviours can be performed.

#### For pride:

- Identify different kinds of groups that target audiences can identify with that do not engage in violent activity.
- Highlight audience goals that the groups have achieved without using violence.
- Emphasise similarities between target audiences and non-violent groups with which they identify.
- Highlight activities performed by the non-violent group that contradict the violent extremist ideology.
- Identify behaviours that target audiences can perform to support the non-violent group.

These recommendations are heavily summarised, and there are nuances to communication intended to arouse emotion that must be considered prior to persuasive message development. Interested message designers could turn to the work of Richard Lazarus and Carroll Izard for a firm grasp on discrete emotions and how they influence behaviour <sup>(66)</sup>.

The **RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (C&N)** has developed practical guidelines for carrying out effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. The guidelines combine lessons learned and key elements from the RAN C&N meetings with an easily accessible overview of relevant research. See: [Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#).

#### *Former extremists*

The credibility of the messenger is critical. Former extremists have been recognised as one potential group of credible spokespersons for these initiatives: “These individuals are able to talk to the futility and flaws of violence and extremism, describe the grim day-to-day reality of such networks, and delegitimize violence-promoting narratives” <sup>(67)</sup>. Again, it is reasonable to assume that many factors play a role in determining the counter-narratives’ effects, such as individual-level reasons for attraction, perceived credibility of the former extremist, context of message reception and knowledge about the messages’ “true” intentions, or those of the conveyors. In addition, the status of being a “former” does not suffice to convey the message. Nevertheless, the role of former extremists speaking out against violence and radicalism has an enormous potential for CVE, especially in the preventive field. Credibility derived from the formers’ biographies and personal experiences strongly outweighs most alternative sources’ credibility <sup>(68)</sup>.

<sup>(66)</sup> Lazarus, Emotion and Adaptation; Lazarus, changing outlooks, p. 20; Izard, Human Emotions.

<sup>(67)</sup> Briggs & Feve, Review programs, p. 17: <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/444/review-of-programs-to-counter-narratives-of-violent-extremism-what>; Susan, lessons, p. 65.

<sup>(68)</sup> Koehler, Understanding deradicalization, p. 150.

An initiative in this context is the online platform Against Violent Extremism (AVE) coordinated by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). It brings together former extremists, victims of terrorism and potential experts on one social media platform. See: <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/>

RAN has organised several meetings on the topic of extremist narratives. At the end of 2017, the C&N Working Group held a [meeting](#) <sup>(69)</sup> on both left- and right-wing audiences, where target audiences were identified as well as the different audiences' narratives and messaging strategies. During this meeting, lessons learned to promote counter- and alternative narratives were identified and shared. In 2019, RAN C&N worked together with the [RAN Police and Law Enforcement Working Group \(POL\)](#) to further identify current and future narratives and strategies used by violent Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist groups. The 2019 '[Factbook on Far-Right Extremism](#)' also includes information related to narratives, symbolism and strategies used.

In 2020, there was a more extensive focus on conspiracy narratives, with a small-scale expert meeting focused on [the role of conspiracy myths in processes of radicalisation](#), a webinar on the same topic, and a RAN Youth and Education Working Group (Y&E) meeting dedicated to (post) [COVID-19 narratives that polarise](#).

### *Critical thinking and active citizenship*

One of the latest research findings is the use of communication theories to counteract violent actors. This approach is developed by Kurt Braddock, advisor to several entities, including the United Nations Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security. Braddock addresses political communication and health communication strategies to support counter extremism efforts. There are four theories related to persuasion tactics applicable to practitioners. Practitioners are taught how to understand common persuasion practices utilised by extremists and violent actors and use them in return. However, it requires skills and training to use this approach as "closed thinking" is a possible bias. Meaning: every counterargument can fuel extremists' original argument or even facilitate conspiracy theory.

There are three key themes when trying to persuade a person into defecting from violent ideology <sup>(70)</sup>:

1. ideological doubt
2. doubt related to group and leadership issues
3. doubt related to personal and practical issues

Practical recommendations for external interventions providers are that they:

- should stay close to the potential exit person's own doubt,
- make the influence attempt as subtle as possible
- use narratives and self-affirmatory strategies to reduce resistance to persuasion, and
- consider the possibility to promote attitudinal change via behavioural change as an alternative to seeking to influence beliefs directly.

More specifically, this should be done through:

- (re-) humanisation of the enemy (e.g. respond to understanding and compassion),

<sup>(69)</sup> RAN Centre of Excellence, Audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran\\_c-n\\_audiences\\_of\\_right\\_left-wing\\_violent\\_extremists\\_2-3\\_11\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_audiences_of_right_left-wing_violent_extremists_2-3_11_en.pdf)

<sup>(70)</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, Promoting exit, p. 101.



- preventing the glorification of violence,
- leveraging internal strain and conflict within and between the extremist group(s) (e.g. debates on a mismatch between actions and impact),
- leveraging bad leadership (e.g. dictatorial and oppressive character traits),
- leveraging personal and practical issues such as guilt feelings, longing for a normal life and burnout.

A RAN Expert Pool member substantiates why the practice of persuasion is so important to help start to break down a person's attachment to extreme groups/thinking <sup>(71)</sup>:

*“Scapegoating of ‘the other’ is difficult to break down – people need to be convinced their arguments have flaws and while they might not agree with your perspective, they only need to see that there is another, plausible perspective. The groups or ideologies they adopt offer them something that is missing from their lives – an unmet need. Unless we replace it or offer a viable alternative, they have no need to listen to us. Therefore, identifying what that unmet need is can be challenging –use a multi-agency partnership of statutory services to determine what that is. There is also a misconception that extreme right-wing actors just need to embrace a liberal perspective, but they will weave this into their narrative and believe you are attempting to ‘brainwash’ them to a “left-wing view of the world”. Lastly, we need to empathize with genuine anxieties, e.g. is immigration too high and is it legitimate to be anxious about it? It is okay to hold this view and okay to disagree with this view, but it is not okay to demonize migrant communities because of it or to legitimize violence as a way to reverse the situation. This is where our task lies.”*

### Toolbox

Both the [RAN Collection of Inspiring Approaches and Practices](#) and the [CVE database search of Impact Europe](#), provides details on a range of counter extremism/radicalisation interventions, including specific RWE interventions. Its aim is to inspire practitioners to produce well-designed and evaluable interventions. You can search for examples of interventions by different variables, within three categories: interventions, radicalisation factors and evaluations. You can add more than one selection for each variable and more than one variable for each category.

## 2.3 A promising new technique?

In the previous section, some known but effective tools and methods have been described. In this part, we delve into a new promising technique to prevent the development of the intention to commit acts of violent extremism: attitudinal inoculation.

### *Attitudinal inoculation* <sup>(72)</sup>

Research in several domains has shown that attitudes can be inoculated against propaganda in much the same way that one's immune system can be inoculated against viral attacks. By exposing individuals to a persuasive message that contains weakened arguments against an established attitude (e.g. a two-sided message, or a message that presents both counterarguments and refutations of those counterarguments), individuals are likely to develop resistance against future persuasive ideological messages. It is proven to be

<sup>(71)</sup> Baldet, email message to author, 16 October 2020

<sup>(72)</sup> Braddock, Vaccinating, p. 5.

effective for preventing the adoption of beliefs and attitudes consistent with violent extremist ideologies. When people are exposed to an inoculation message before reading extremist propaganda, they show psychological reactance, which, in turn, reduces intention to support the extremist ideology. Inoculation also detracts from the extremist group's credibility, which will diminish support intention. Neither the apparent source of the inoculation message nor the ideological focus of the propaganda moderates any of these relationships. Research has shown that inoculating individuals against extremist propaganda helps those individuals resist being persuaded by it. As such, inoculation could make for a useful tool in the ongoing fight against extremist groups and their efforts to draw otherwise peaceful people into violence. This has implications for the development of messages intended to prevent persuasive outcomes consistent with extremist ideologies.

## 2.4 What are the key challenges while working with right-wing extremist actors? – Practitioners' insights

Countering non-violent expressions of RWE is a process of constant customisation. Therefore, it is useful to hear the experiences and stories told by frontline practitioners. A diverse mix of civil servants discuss some pitfalls they have come across. They will remain anonymous throughout the text.

A CVE practitioner's general advice <sup>(73)</sup>.

**Start early** – for example through education to undermine conspiratorial thinking and highlight the contradictions of conspiracy theories.

**Emotions matter more than facts** – it is no use showing people statistics about the benefit immigration brings a country, but powerful stories and testimonies of individual migrants for whom their settlement in another country has saved their lives or an emotional tale that shows how someone from a migrant community has contributed (saved a life, charitable deeds). It may sound manufactured, but it is important to portray 'the other' as 'just like us' and undermine the 'them and us' narrative of right-wing extremism.

**Know your audience** – the message that resonates with a cultural nationalist (patriots, pride in their country, not always inherently racist yet are often anti-Muslim and anti-immigration) won't necessarily resonate with a White Nationalist (go further than Cultural Nationalists and want white-only areas, favour forced repatriation of non-white communities, anti-Semitic, racist).

**Focus on the conspiracy beliefs that underpin ideologies** – it avoids a confrontation with people's identities / politics and undermines the nonsense that drives suspicion, hostility, and violence. This can then weaken the more 'extreme' elements of a political view.

**Respect basic liberties** – for those with genuine political grievances, allow them a pressure valve (marches, demonstrations) and avoid them seeking that release through more extreme methods or groups. But be clear on policing violence, bigotry, and hate. This is a difficult balance and requires engagement with communities who will feel most affected by such protests.

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<sup>(73)</sup> Email message to author, 16 October 2020.

## Practitioners' experiences

When comparing different strategies from different countries, three general approaches are adopted:

1. the Scandinavian approach, centred on P/CVE measures (e.g., Norway);
2. a multifaceted approach combining security-related measures and a preventive approach (e.g., the Netherlands and Germany); and, finally,
3. an approach that centres on counterintelligence/counter-crime measures (e.g., France).

The following practitioners are selected based on these differences in approach. However, since dealing with non-violent actors in the uncharted terrains between right-wing extremist ideology and freedom of expression is situated in the P/CVE area, the counterintelligence approach will not be addressed here.

### Prevent coordinator from Norway <sup>(74)</sup>:

*“The groups in Norway have «toughened» up. When working in the 90s many right wing extremists were marginalized youth (boys mainly) – where it was possible to cooperate with them, their parents and other public actors around. Now (mainly with the Nordic Resistance Movement) they have a stricter internal policy of not cooperating with municipality and/or police and are harder to reach. In addition it is the same issues as with many extremist groups/milieus; exit is hard for people wanting to leave, with threats and loss of social network. And the whole disengagement/deradicalization discussion.”*

### Consultant in counter extremism from Germany <sup>(75)</sup>:

*“One needs to keep a distance in order not to be trapped in ideology, either when preparing to deal with right-wing extremists by consulting literature or when talking to them directly. They might try and convince a practitioner, who might or might not sympathize with some of what they say, of their extremist ideology. One, on the other hand, needs to show empathy in order not to inadvertently push away the radicalized person. There need to be viable alternatives when getting a person to disengage. On the other hand, one should not make another person's problems one's own, which would cause psychological stress.”*

### Social worker from the Netherlands <sup>(76)</sup>:

*“It is the case that a majority still has a blind spot: western, (highly) educated professionals see right-wing extremism as something that should not be taken seriously. Nationalistic thoughts are seen as ‘normal’ and not dangerous. Racism and discrimination is still unconsciously approved. In my career as a social worker and teacher, I have literally encountered more right-wing extremist expressions in all walks of life than any other radical thought. But I have never been trained in recognizing it. We actually have insufficient legal knowledge and experience to deal with it. So we deal with it as something that does not pose a threat. So be aware not to get involved too much; do not built up a personal relationship. When it comes close and we do not recognize it as a danger, it is also difficult to speak out and act on it.”*

### Researcher and consultant from Germany <sup>(77)</sup>:

*“It is of utmost importance to always put professionalism first. The best and most important factor is high quality training of case managers to learn how to maintain professional distance, apply correct methods and tools and understand how to stay safe in a very hostile and emotionally draining environment. Too many people in this space are driven by moral values,*

<sup>(74)</sup> Email message to author, 24 August 2020.

<sup>(75)</sup> Email message to author, 8 August 2020.

<sup>(76)</sup> Email message to author, 18 August 2020.

<sup>(77)</sup> Email message to author, 10 October 2020.

*which is important, but without professional training and structures, the work will quickly become a threat to mental and physical health.”*

➔ **Practitioners should ideally be trained in multiple disciplines <sup>(78)</sup>:**

- Basic legal knowledge (e.g. criminal justice system, criminal procedures).
- Knowledge regarding the ideological content and subcultural products of RWE.
- Motivational factors in radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes identified in research.
- Methods helping increase the subject’s sense of recognition, significance and individual identity.

**Practitioners’ experiences:**

Prevent coordinator from Norway <sup>(79)</sup>:

*“Our local solution has been to address non-violent extremism in any form through other municipal actors, such as youth clubs, schools and social service. This is also complicated – but they have a mandate through law and/or guidelines to address for example hatred, hostility towards groups, racism, hate speech and to promote democracy, equality, human rights etc. For example it will be important not to narrow the room for free speech in the class room – but at the same time make sure that teachers feel competent to address extremist sentiments. I fully understand that this is a spectrum – at some point police or intelligence should act also when facing some types of non-violent extremism – but this topic has been addressed too little to ensure that we have a good practice. It is a «classic» discussion within academia researching radicalization and extremism, but hasn’t been addressed enough among practitioners. When working case work with non-violent extremists (as we sometimes do as a municipality) it is important to stress the same principles as in other case work – cooperation, communication skills, honesty and long term commitment.”*

Consultant in counter extremism from Germany <sup>(80)</sup>:

*“Not every case is the same. It is crucial to first get an idea, and then find answers. However, there is the danger of adopting ideological positions of those radicalized. Hence the need to resort to a natural setting and to have a network of family or friends who are not necessarily involved in counter-extremism. Nevertheless, experienced practitioners may be able to better address the issue than family members and friends of those radicalized, because family are submerged by everyday life, and untrained (there may be ulterior, personal or group-related reasons to inform on a person than the fear of radicalization. On the other hand, there may be reluctance to inform on a person for reasons of solidarity.”*

Social worker from the Netherlands <sup>(81)</sup>:

*“Recognize and dare to make negotiable what you think you are dealing with. Do not judge on your own. There is still a taboo among professionals in welfare, police, education and youth care, to make issues discussable in a healthy way at all levels. Most professionals lack knowledge and experience, and by this signals quickly can be problematized instead of normalized. As a result,*

<sup>(78)</sup> Koehler & Fiebig, Knowing what to do, p. 8.

<sup>(79)</sup> Email message to author, 24 August 2020.

<sup>(80)</sup> Email message to author, 8 August 2020.

<sup>(81)</sup> Email message to author, 18 August 2020.

*the subsequent case is often scaled up and then more harm is done. There is a lack of awareness about the consequences.”*

→ **Early-stage interventions could cause a counter-effect, such as <sup>(82)</sup>**

- Extremists might hide their convictions, making it difficult to identify individual criminal behaviour and other people in their networks.
- They might change their platforms of action, for instance online.
- Sympathisers of extremist ideology may be further alienated or stirred up, especially when a person is publicly stigmatised, they can become a “hero”.
- Those affected by preventive measures might feel offended and execute a violent strike.

### 3. Taking precautions

#### 3.1 How can practitioners be protected from violent threats and extremist backlash?

There is a widespread tendency of “securitisation”, meaning including police or intelligence officers as case managers, or establishing interventions with the specific goal of intelligence gathering. This securitisation process might be understandable <sup>(83)</sup> but is nevertheless inherently risky for overall success and credibility.

##### **Beware of the tendency of securitisation**

1. First, it has been shown that the level of cooperation with security agencies — in regard to specific information provided — has the **direct effect of potentially violent repercussions against the defector**. Being seen as “traitors” increases the risk of retaliation from the former group against the programme participants or their family, which could create further risks of radicalisation and recruitment to terrorist groups in the community.
2. Second, if the potential participants feel expected to provide intelligence to their former enemies, this might create strong psychological barriers against defection and even backfire, when perceived by the individuals and their groups as just another method of warfare against their own. In this way, **strongly securitised de-radicalisation programmes have the risk of increasing radicalisation processes**.
3. Third, these mechanisms might substantially raise the difficulty level for long-term successful reintegration if the programme graduate aims to re-enter normal life. Family or community members, former friends, colleagues and other **“relevant others” might see the cooperation with the authorities as weakness, betrayal, or even a cause for suspicion** (e.g., seeing the person as a potential spy from the government).

- Protective factors to deal with RWE, such as personality, education, a stable setting of family and friends, and a supportive work environment, make it more bearable for first-line practitioners to deal with extreme ideologies.
- The private life of a practitioner should not be addressed too broadly, however, when talking to radicalised persons. In any case, there is a difference between empathy and overly sympathising.

<sup>(82)</sup> Email message to author, 8 August 2020.

<sup>(83)</sup> Koehler, Radical groups, p. 45.

- Practitioners should only contact radicalised persons in a setting that is professional. Social workers or counsellors, for instance, will ideally meet their clients at a neutral place, such as an office.
- Practitioners should do their best to avoid showing any sign of enmity with the radicalised persons. Make clear the practitioner provides help instead of applying arbitrary measures.
- There should be little adverse reaction, except for irrational reactions which might occur at times. Should this be the case, one should end engagement.

## Good practice: dealing with violent threats <sup>(84)</sup>

While small, there is a risk of violent attacks against practitioners. The risks differ with regard to the respective role of those involved in the cases. However, there are some guidelines to prepare.

In 2017, when the Swedish National coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism (active 2015-2018) asked the local coordinators against violent extremism in 290 Swedish municipalities (usually working within social services or local security) if they had been exposed to threats of any kind because of violent extremism, only 1 % (out of 234 persons who answered) said that they had been exposed. However, the person who answered the inquiry may not be a person who is working on a daily basis with individuals and therefore may not have the same exposure as a social – or youth worker, working with individuals. On the other hand, being an extremist is rarely a cause for threatening social workers. Instead, it may be municipal officials dealing with licencing in the municipality that may be of risk, since they may restrict access to premises owned if they deem it unsuitable for persons who may belong to an extremist organisation or hold extremist views.

### *Protecting factors*

The main protecting factor is **awareness** and support from the leadership in the organisation. Awareness is intricately linked to the knowledge of right-wing extremist ideology and how extremists operate. Providing information to practitioners on the elements of right-wing extremist ideology is one way to increase awareness and guide them to where they can turn for more information.

Awareness is also linked to well **informed staff** on where to turn and what to do if they are exposed to threats or attacks. Making sure that the practitioners know how to secure a screenshot (if the threat is coming by an email or other digital tool), where to call if the co-worker believes they are being stalked, etc. There is a fine line between raising awareness and causing worry amongst the personnel and this cause for caution. “Hands-on” guidance is often the most valuable tool.

The basic values of the organisation need to be formulated so there is a **solid platform** for the public official/practitioner to lean on, to avoid being accused of arbitrary decision making. Right-wing extremists in many cases uses the internet for agenda-setting and criticizing decisions, often naming public officials explicitly on different websites and in forums online. This is of course uncomfortable for most persons, and such backlash through online exposure should be addressed in its own right as a form of attack/violence. This again emphasises the need for well-known and well-functioning structures to ensure the safety of the staff.

**One specified point of contact** for dealing with threats against employees is favourable. This function can play a vital role in assessing the situation, taking precautions and making sure, together with the relevant head of department and human resources that the well-being of the employee is taken care of.

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<sup>(84)</sup> This part is written with the help of Anna Hedin Ekström, PhD student at Gävle University where she focuses on issues regarding unlawful influence, work environment, violent extremism and security. In the Harvard-led project “countering extremism on a local level”, she supports organisations in evaluation.

**Clear basic rules** are also important in explaining to the staff what is and what is not acceptable. Many frontline personnel are used to being harassed -sometimes threatened - and sometimes regard it as a “part of their job” and therefore do not report it to their employer. This also sometimes means that they do not report it to the police, partly because they believe that the case will be written off, but also out of fear of being further exposed. In the short term, this may lead to brilliant practitioners leaving their job and in the long term it poses a severe threat to democratic institutions.

### Recommendations

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) conducted research into aggression and violence towards local political office holders and an evaluation of the instruments to combat this. The result was a number of recommendations that, despite their different nature and purpose, may also apply to the first-line practitioner. A selection <sup>(85)</sup>:

1. Reduce the role of the practitioner where appropriate by de-personifying decision-making; communicate decisions that have to be made as a team or by the manager.
2. The effectiveness of the approach, and the internal sense of perception of security, is also promoted to accelerate and continue immediately in the event of a detected threat. Good, direct lines of communication with the police and public prosecutor are an important precondition for this.
3. Not only in the case of a concrete threat, but also in the event of a potential threat and concrete major feelings of insecurity on the part of the practitioner, the police must be involved.
4. Organising and setting up a learning system for aggression and violence for municipalities where the best practices are included and actively shared can support the structuring of attention and increase their own effectiveness where appropriate.

### Further reading

1. van de Weert, A. & Eijkman, Q.A. (2021). Reconsidering Early Detection in Countering Radicalization by Local Frontline Professionals. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(2), 397-408, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1880237
2. Koehler, D., & Fiebig, V. (2019). Knowing what to do. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13(3), 44-62.
3. Braddock, Kurt. 2019. "Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (November). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2019.1693370>

<sup>(85)</sup> Sinning et al., Sterke Schouders.

## Annex

As stated in the RAN [Factbook – Far-right extremism](#) (December 2019), over the past three decades, the far-right extremist (FRE) scene has undergone many shifts and changes: it has moved from offline to online; it has embraced the gaming culture; and there has been an increase in cross-border activities and transnational networks, to name just a few examples. The factbook presents the scope of the FRE scene, from “classical” militant neo-Nazi groups to local protest groups that oppose perceived “Islamisation” to online like-minded people who consider themselves members of the alt-right fringe movement. The focus is on **violent extremist groups** or groups that **promote or condone violence**.

“The right-wing scene is described as extremely heterogeneous both from a structural and ideological perspective. Established organisations are mainly known to exist within the neo-Nazi spectrum. One of the most prominent groups is Blood & Honour (B&H), which originated in the **UK** in 1987. Its objective is to train ‘political soldiers’, in order to wage a ‘race war’ and save the ‘white race’. The organisation has chapters in different European countries, including **Belgium** and **Portugal**. It was banned in **Germany** in 2000. **Belgium** reported that in 2019 B&H, which had suffered from internal dissent and division in the past, engaged mainly in networking activities, such as music concerts, rather than activism and the spread of ideology.

**Portugal** reported that their national chapter of the neo-Nazi Hammerskin Nation continued its activities. Despite a diminished capacity to mobilise followers and members, the group organised another edition of the ‘European Officers Meeting’ (EOM) in Sintra in January. In addition, in March, the group held a meeting in Lisbon bringing together different generations of skinheads including militant veterans of the defunct Movimento de Ação Nacional (MAN, ‘National Action Movement’) and former members of musical rock bands Ódio (‘Hate’) and Guarda de Ferro (‘Iron Guard’), which had ceased their activities several years earlier.

In **Finland** and **Sweden**, the Nordiska motståndsrörelsen (NMR, ‘Nordic Resistance Movement’) was the dominant neo-Nazi organisation in 2019. In **Finland**, the NMR faced difficulties due to a pending proscription process and its members established a new right-wing extremist group. NMR is primarily involved in propaganda but also has paramilitary features, and endeavours to organise, equip and train their members for a supposed future armed struggle. In **Sweden**, the NMR has participated in elections, but thus far has not won any mandate. In 2019 the NMR organised large rallies in several locations across **Sweden**, which on occasion led to violent confrontations with the police and ideological opponents. In 2019 prominent dissidents of NMR established Nordisk Styrka (NS, ‘Nordic Strength’) in **Sweden**. They were allegedly dissatisfied, inter alia, with NMR’s parliamentary focus. Right-Wing Resistance (RWR) is a small right-wing extremist organisation with international links. It is reported to exist in **Belgium** and **Sweden**.

In **France**, the right-wing extremist movement remained disorganised. Structured right-wing extremist movements, such as the neo-fascist Troisième Voie (‘Third Path’) and the monarchist Action Française (‘French Action’), have lost influence following self-dissolutions in 2014, in an attempt to avoid formal bans following the death of a left-wing activist during an attack.

In **Greece**, following the arrests in 2018 of individuals involved in the organisations Combat 18 Hellas and Anentachtou Maiandriou Ethnikistes (AME, ‘Non-Aligned Meander Nationalists’), right-wing extremist activity was observed to be very low in 2019. It manifested itself mainly through graffiti. Members participated in nationalist organisations’ gatherings regarding issues such as the refugee crisis. In addition, in 2019 violent incidents against persons causing injuries and property damage occurred. The main targets were the police; politicians and political party offices; immigrants or refugees; and the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu.”



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**About the author:**

**Annemarie van de Weert** is a researcher and lecturer in Terrorism studies, Criminology, and Public Management of Safety & Security. Together with Professor Quirine Eijkman, she mapped out the process of early detection of youth extremism by first-line professionals. More information on her work can be found [here](#).

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