

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN study visit

11 June 2024, Stockholm, Sweden

The Swedish approach to tackling violent right-wing extremism

Introduction

Violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) poses a significant threat across Europe, manifesting through hate crimes and other forms of violence. To prevent (violent) extremist acts, Sweden implements a multi-faceted approach involving various actors at national, regional, and local levels. On **11 June 2024**, practitioners from all over Europe gathered in Stockholm during a **RAN study visit** to learn from the **Swedish approach to tackling violent right-wing extremism**. The group of participants consisted of practitioners from law enforcement, exit work, youth work, NGOs, and education, among others. During this one-day event, participants visited three organisations playing a vital role in Sweden's approach to preventing and countering VRWE to learn first-hand from their experiences: 1) the Center for Preventing Violent Extremism, 2) the Dialogue Police, and 3) Exit Sweden.

This paper provides an overview of the study visit, aimed at understanding the operational frameworks, challenges, and successes of these organisations in combating VRWE. By examining their initiatives and strategies, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of P/CVE efforts in Sweden.

Key points

- The CVE Centre coordinates the Swedish approach on national, regional, and local levels. It provides tailored support to other stakeholders such as municipalities and schools, as well as gathers and disseminates knowledge and information on violent extremism and P/CVE efforts.
- Whereas the CVE Centre has only focused on ideologically motivated violent acts until recently, their mandate has been expanded to also cover the rise of school-shootings in Sweden.
- The **Dialogue Police** aim to let all groups – even those with extremist ideologies – exercise their right to freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate, while ensuring that they do so within the limits of the law.
- The tactics of the **Dialogue Police** are based on social identity theory and aim to get extremist groups to “self-police”, to prevent individuals from creating disturbances that would negatively influence the whole group.
- Exit Sweden offers disengagement programmes to anyone wishing to leave an extremist group or a criminal organisation. They follow a five-step method that provides a thorough and sound way of disengaging.
- While individuals might ideally decide to completely distance themselves from extremist ideology, Exit Sweden aims to help clients sufficiently disengage to the point where they are able to participate in democratic processes.

The Swedish approach

The CVE Centre

The *Center mot våldsbejakande extremism* (Center for Preventing Violent Extremism) was established in 2018 in response to a series of violent events across Europe that emphasised the need for a dedicated approach to preventing ideologically motivated (violent) acts. The primary aim of the CVE Centre is to foster a coordinated and effective approach to countering violent extremism at local, regional, and national levels. The study visit focused on understanding the CVE Centre's efforts in promoting preventive measures, coordinating with various sectors, and providing support tailored to the needs of local and national stakeholders.

The CVE Centre's primary aim is to prevent (violent and right-wing) extremism through four main tasks:

- **Promoting the development of preventive work:** The CVE Centre works to develop and promote preventive measures at national, regional, and local levels. This involves creating frameworks and guidelines that can be uniformly adopted.
- **Coordinating between national and local levels:** To ensure a cohesive approach, the CVE Centre facilitates coordination between national and local authorities to help avoid fragmented efforts.
- **Providing tailored support:** Recognising that different regions and sectors have unique needs, the CVE Centre offers tailored support to various stakeholders involved in CVE work. There is a strong collaboration with schools, social workers, and the mental health sector.
- **Disseminating knowledge:** The CVE Centre is committed to spreading knowledge and best practices to enhance the effectiveness of P/CVE efforts across the country.

The CVE Centre operates with a team of experts and outreach coordinators who work locally to extend the CVE Centre's reach and impact. However, the lack of a legal definition for violent extremism in Sweden occasionally complicates the CVE Centre's mandate and operations. This ambiguity affects the way extremism is addressed and monitored, and calls for a clearer legal framework.

Training and support for educators

Educators play a crucial role in identifying early signs of radicalisation among students. The CVE Centre has developed support models and dialogue-based tools to assist educators in this task. These tools are designed to help educators engage with students and create a supportive environment where concerns about radicalisation can be openly addressed. Rather than providing training directly, the focus is on providing practical support that empowers educators to act effectively.

Developments and challenges

The evolution of right-wing narratives and manifestations of ideologically motivated (violent) acts require constant adaptation in P/CVE strategies. Below follows an overview of current developments that have been influencing the CVE Centre's work, as well as the challenges encountered.

School attacks

Just like in many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on youth, exacerbating feelings of isolation and vulnerability. This has led to an increase in school attacks in Sweden, some of which are ideologically motivated. High-profile incidents in the United States often inspire such attacks.

Although there is no common definition yet, school attacks often have common denominators:

- A school attack is often performed by a (former) student at the targeted school.
- Usually, victims are chosen randomly or because they represent the school in a specific way, for example they are the school nurse or the principal.
- The school as an institution is the target, as it represents the cause of the perpetrators' grievances, either as a symbol of the government or "deep state", or as a representation of a certain societal development⁽¹⁾.

The Swedish government has recognised this growing issue and has tasked the CVE Centre with combating school shootings in addition to their already existing mandate. As school shootings are not necessarily ideologically motivated, this decision has broadened the CVE Centre's scope. The CVE Centre's efforts in monitoring and preventing such attacks are crucial, but there is also a need for understanding the symbolic nature of these acts of violence against educational institutions. Based on this understanding, the CVE Centre can further support schools in spotting worrying signs in potential perpetrators and appropriately addressing the issue. The CVE Centre provides a helpline for practitioners who have questions about violent extremism or school attacks, or who may have spotted worrying signs in an individual that they may want to discuss. Whereas in the past calls mostly came from law enforcement and social workers, there is a significant increase in educators using the helpline to ask about violent extremist tendencies or warning signs of school shootings.

Legal and political challenges

Following the concept used by intelligence agencies, the CVE Centre views extremist groups as being part of a "milieu", a loosely connected network of extremist groups and, in some cases, political parties. In a milieu there is a low level of coordination, and ideologies are similar, but every group has its own strategy. This makes it easier to understand the extremist landscape, but it is imperative that we do not readily treat people's loose affiliations to such a network as problematic or view the actions of one group in the network as the collective responsibility of the milieu.

The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) is one of Sweden's main violent right-wing extremist groups. Whereas Finland has banned the NRM years ago, there are no laws in Sweden allowing a similar ban there. Moreover, in 2015 the NRM established a political party in Sweden. Persecution is only possible if the NRM resorts to violence or crosses other legal boundaries. These legal constraints hinder the possibility of shutting down extremist groups like the NRM.

Information sharing

One of the significant challenges discussed during the study visit is information sharing between different sectors, particularly between the police and mental health professionals. Legal constraints and concerns about privacy often hinder effective communication. For instance, while the police may have critical information about potential threats, mental health professionals are bound by confidentiality agreements that limit their ability to share information.

As for the CVE Centre, partners exchange a lot of information between them, but this mostly concerns general trends as opposed to individual cases. Due to the CVE Centre's in-house expertise and central position in the Swedish approach, it has a great deal of knowledge on trends. The bulk of information comes from exchanges with municipalities and practitioners on the ground. Practitioners provide the CVE Centre with more tangible examples by sharing (anonymised) cases.

Evaluation

Evaluating the success of P/CVE initiatives can be challenging, particularly in quantifying the prevention of attacks. The CVE Centre employs both internal and external evaluation methods to assess the impact of its efforts. The

⁽¹⁾ *Support model to strengthen schools' work to prevent violent extremism and school attacks - Literature review and conversation guide*, Center mot våldsbejakande extremism, 2024, p. 20

mobile support teams regularly follow up after a local visit to assess the impact of their work. In addition, external researchers have evaluated the CVE Centre's approach in 2022 and will follow up on this evaluation soon.

The Dialogue Police

Right-Wing Extremism poses significant challenges to law enforcement agencies worldwide, particularly in democratic societies that value fundamental rights, like freedom of speech, assembly, and association. The Swedish Dialogue Police's approach has emerged as a notable strategy in addressing these challenges, combining theories of social identity and principles of communication, facilitation, and differentiation. It is based on the social identity theory and the enlarged social identity model. These theories emphasise an understanding of the group dynamics within protest movements, while also recognising that groups consist of multiple sub-groups with varying levels of influence and different objectives.

- **Social identity theory:** This theory suggests that individuals identify with groups, and these groups influence their behaviour. In the context of (V)RWE protests, understanding the group's identity is crucial for effective engagement.
- **Enlarged social identity model (ESIM):** ESIM builds on social identity theory by incorporating the interaction between groups and their environment. It suggests that the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement actions and the broader social context influences the behaviour of protestors.

Principles and tactics of the Dialogue Police

The Dialogue Police's principles are designed to foster trust and cooperation between the police and protestors, aiming to prevent violence and facilitate peaceful demonstrations. The key principles are:

- **Knowledge:** gaining comprehensive knowledge about the police organisation, the protest situation, and the demonstrating party;
- **Communication:** establishing open lines of communication with protest leaders to understand their objectives and convey police intentions clearly;
- **Facilitation:** helping protestors exercise their right to demonstrate by agreeing on courses of action and methods that minimise risk and disruption;
- **Differentiation:** addressing individuals who break the law rather than punishing the entire group, thereby promoting self-policing within the group.

The Dialogue Police employ various methods and tactics to manage protests effectively:

- **Advance knowledge:** understanding the protestors' plans and setting clear expectations to avoid surprises;
- **Group dynamics:** recognising the distinct roles within protest groups (leaders, sub-leaders, soldiers) and how the group's behaviour is influenced by external factors;
- **Targeted intervention:** isolating individuals who incite violence while maintaining communication with the broader group to ensure compliance with the agreed rules.

Developments and challenges

- The Nordic Resistance Movement's visibility in street protests has significantly diminished. The group's members dispersed into smaller, harder-to-track clusters, complicating law enforcement efforts. These "active clubs" often engage in violent training sessions, posing a potential threat. The Dialogue Police have noted that these clubs are less hierarchical and more prone to internal conflict, making them unpredictable and challenging to manage through the Dialogue Police's approach.
- Many (violent) right-wing groups have gone underground, making the monitoring of their activities difficult. The Dialogue Police rely on open-source intelligence and social media monitoring to track these groups.
- The current leadership of the NRM is less focused on self-defence and more focused on using active violence. Moreover, the new leadership seems to be less inclined to have a dialogue with government agencies.

Lessons learnt

The Dialogue Police's approach offers key lessons for law enforcement agencies dealing with extremist protests:

- **Proactive engagement:** Early and proactive engagement with protest leaders can prevent escalation and foster mutual understanding.
- **Flexibility and adaptation:** Law enforcement must be adaptable, responding to the evolving tactics and structures of extremist groups.
- **Community relations:** Building trust with communities affected by protests is crucial. This includes transparent communication and efforts to understand community concerns.

Exit Sweden

Established in 1998, Exit Sweden draws inspiration from the Norwegian exit model but distinguishes itself through a unique integration of formers, social workers, and psychologists. This blend facilitates a comprehensive approach to addressing right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist extremism. It also tackles other forms of violent radical behaviour, such as organised crime, motor gangs and, recently, school shootings. It is the only programme of its kind in Sweden, so anyone who wishes to leave such a group is welcome to join it. Below follows the five-step method employed by Exit Sweden, the challenges they encounter, and the factors contributing to their success.

Exit's five-step method

Step 1: Analysis

The analysis phase is crucial, as it involves gathering detailed information about the client, including threat assessments, and mental health evaluations. Exit Sweden emphasises the importance of understanding the client's behaviour both in and out of prison settings. It also acknowledges that the way a person behaves in a controlled environment with other potentially dangerous people does not necessarily predict behaviour in normal circumstances. 80-85% of their clients exhibit signs of mental health issues as a minimum, which necessitates close collaboration with mental health professionals. Any oversights during this phase may lead to significant setbacks later on during the disengagement process.

Step 2: Credible messengers

Credible messengers – that are often, but not always, formers – play a key role in the disengagement process. They possess deep knowledge about extremist groups, making them valuable during the trust-building phase. Selecting a suitable and credible messenger is essential, as the wrong choice may hinder progress. Formers are particularly effective, because they share common ground with the clients, facilitating quicker trust-building. Nonetheless, relying solely on this common ground can be risky, as it might perpetuate the very ideologies Exit aims to dismantle. Moreover, if the client is a minor, it is not recommended to work with a former from the same extremist group or ideology, especially if the former was high up in the hierarchy of the extremist group. In that case, the young client might initially radicalise further to match the status that the former still has in their eyes.

Step 3: Alliance

Building a strong alliance with the client is fundamental. This involves experiencing and solving practical problems together, which fosters trust. Transparency about the goal of creating an alliance is crucial. Any manipulation towards the client can severely damage the relationship. The process requires adaptability, as the approach must be tailored to each client's unique circumstances. Overcoming conflicts during this phase can further solidify the alliance, but conflicts should not be forcibly created just to create or strengthen the alliance. It is crucial for an exit worker to have the capacity to reflect on who they are and how they respond to certain situations, as they need to be adaptable while building rapport with various clients.

Step 4: Normalising deradicalised behaviour

The goal here is to reintegrate clients into society by helping them navigate everyday social situations. This step involves changing association patterns and helping clients distinguish between normal and abnormal behaviours. Clients often feel more at ease in potentially dangerous situations than in socially awkward ones, so careful guidance is necessary to help them adjust. Whereas making the client feel comfortable is essential at first, later in the process it is important to gradually help them step out of their comfort zone to foster change.

Step 5: Influence

Persuading the clients to change their behaviour and beliefs is the last step and caution must be exercised. The timing of this step is critical, as it is most effective after a strong bond has been formed. Nevertheless, external factors, such as significant life events, may necessitate a provisional return to alliance-building before continuing with the influence process.

Challenges and lessons learnt

- Substance abuse is less prevalent among VRWE clients than often expected, though it is more common among left-wing extremists and career criminals. Certain medications can hinder the disengagement process, as they significantly interfere with people's awareness or cognitive abilities, so clients on such medications might not engage.
- Former extremists often exhibit rigid, black-and-white thinking. While this can be a challenge, Exit Sweden sometimes leverages this mindset to disengage individuals from violence, recognising it as a transitional phase.
- Encouraging clients to engage in physical activities, like going to the gym, serves multiple purposes. While it enhances physical strength, more importantly, it demonstrates the clients' capacity to influence their behaviour and appearance, fostering a sense of self-control and agency. Moreover, it is something the exit worker and their client have in common and they can bond over.
- Exit Sweden sometimes works indirectly through clients' social networks, especially when direct contact is not feasible due to client hostility or other obstacles. Empowering existing practitioners within the client's network to support the disengagement process can be more effective than introducing a new relationship.
- At the same time, family dynamics can significantly impact the deradicalisation process. While hostile family environments pose challenges, the programme adapts by ensuring that the client's participation remains discreet when necessary.
- Exit Sweden's success is partly due to the ideological diversity of its staff, which includes a mix of formers and non-formers with strong educational backgrounds. This balance fosters a comprehensive understanding of (de)radicalisation processes.
- It is critical that continuous training and supervision are provided. Exit Sweden emphasises external supervision to help provide fresh perspectives and challenge existing methods. This external input is valuable for refining processes and ensuring the effectiveness of interventions.
- Assessing the extent of deradicalisation and preventing recidivism are both complex tasks. Experienced exit workers are instrumental in identifying subtle signs of lingering radical ideologies. While it would be ideal to achieve complete deradicalisation, Exit Sweden's objective is to help clients sufficiently disengage to the point where they are able to participate in democratic processes. Recidivism tends to mostly occur when clients lack a support network and resort to old groups for security.

Further reading

- The US Department of State has recently recognised the Nordic Resistance Movement as a terrorist organisation. The announcement can be found [here](#).
- The CVE Centre has developed a [Support model to strengthen schools' work to prevent violent extremism and school attacks – Literature review and conversation guide](#).