

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN VoT WG Meeting

22-23 June 2023, Vienna, Austria

Cultural and artistic approaches involving victims/survivors of terrorism, with a commemorative, healing or PVE aim

Key outcomes

On 22-23 June 2023 victims/survivors of terrorism, representatives of victim organisations and other practitioners working with victims/survivors gathered in Vienna (Austria) to discuss how artistic and cultural approaches are used by and/or for victims/survivors for healing, commemoration and/or with a preventing violent extremism (PVE) aim.

Specific projects and initiatives were discussed where artistic and cultural approaches, such as drama, music, singing, creative writing and painting, are used by and/or for victims/survivors of terrorism to express and address their suffering, as well as to commemorate the traumatic experiences they lived through. In addition, experiences of artistic and cultural approaches by and/or for victims/survivors with a preventive purpose were also presented at the meeting.

The following key aspects and elements have been identified and discussed during the meeting:

- Art and culture entail a great potential in relation to victims/survivors of terrorism in terms of healing and commemoration as they overcome the limits of logic and verbalisation and foster emotional connections and resilience.
- Terrorism is about dividing societies: art can facilitate the re-establishment of a connection between victims/survivors and their community.
- Cultural and artistic approaches can reach society more rapidly and broadly by virtue of their nature, accessibility, and enjoyability: artworks represent a privileged tool for victims/survivors of terrorism to elaborate tailored preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) messages and spread them through a larger audience.
- The role of victims/survivors of terrorism is continuously evolving and so is their positioning towards involvement in artistic approaches: while art can be beneficial for some or in certain periods, it might not be for others or in different time frames.

This conclusion paper reports the highlights of the discussion, with a specific focus on the different and intersecting dimensions in which art and culture can play a role in connection to victims/survivors of terrorism, followed by an analysis of the challenges connected to this process. Recommendations are presented in the last section.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting brought together victims/survivors of terrorism as well as practitioners working in the field of art with a connection to victims/survivors of terrorism. In several cases, the participants experienced both roles, having become active in this domain after having lived through a terrorist attack.

The power of art

The contributions by the participants highlighted the different aspects in which art and culture play a role in relation to victims/survivors of terrorism as well as the various dynamics through which that can take place. The elements highlighted below are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in many cases there is an overlapping and a complementarity of effects promoted through and by art and culture.

Healing

Art and culture can serve a therapeutic purpose: music, dance, creative writing, painting and other artistic forms of expression can help overcome the limits of verbalisation and logic and can support the beneficiary to express their own emotions and relieve tensions and anxiety. This becomes even more true in case of traumas, when people might find it difficult to deal with and express their feelings: artistic approaches can help enhance self-consciousness through the language of the senses, represent an efficient way to break silence through the use of different communication tools (not only limited to words), and can itself be an engine of communication supporting a genuine expression of emotions.

After living through the potentially traumatising event of a terrorist attack, different forms of support are available to victims/survivors of terrorism. For some people, counselling and other forms of one-to-one relations can be intimidating. Also, victims/survivors might feel a disconnect from the rest of the society in light of their experience. Certain artistic forms of expression can support solidarity and contrast the feeling of loneliness by performing together.

Some experiences were presented and discussed during the meeting regarding victims/survivors who have enjoyed the use of art and culture for healing purposes:

- Catherine Bertrand is a survivor of the terrorist attack that took place in the Bataclan theatre (Paris) in November 2015. She was working as a photo archivist before the attacks and drawing was her hobby. After the shooting, drawing became a lifesaver activity as well as her professional occupation: "After the attacks, I was unable to speak. I couldn't make correct sentences. I went through the drawing. For me, it's a kind of therapy. I take care of myself by drawing. It's sometimes when I draw that I realise what's going on in my head." In 2018, Catherine Bertrand published a graphic novel titled 'Chronicle of a survivor' ⁽¹⁾. For Catherine, the drafting of the novel became a way to make her invisible suffering more concrete and to reconnect with her loved ones as, through her drawings, friends and family members could understand how she felt. Although at the beginning of the process she had no specific audience in mind but was mainly drawing for herself, the novel resulted in having an educational impact: not only can readers learn more and establish an empathic connection with the author, but such a type of testimony also represents an

⁽¹⁾ [Procès du 13-Novembre: Catherine Bertrand, dessiner pour témoigner \(rfi.fr\)](https://www.rfi.fr/fr/actualites/20181113-novembre-bertrand-dessiner-pour-temoigner)

occasion to start a conversation for people who are experiencing some suffering (even when not necessarily connected to terrorism).

- In Manchester, a group of survivors of the Arena attacks (May 2017) has established a choir to sing together and support each other ⁽²⁾. In 2022, eight members of the choir took part in the UN special Congress For Victims of Terror in New York, singing a song, 'Never Let Go', written by Ellie Taylor, a member of the choir, who was 15 at the time of the attack ⁽³⁾. The process of singing presents many different positive outcomes for victims/survivors of terrorism: singing requires mastering of the voice, control of the breath, and a good level of cooperation and sharing with the other members of the choir.

Commemoration

After a terrorist attack, commemoration is an important aspect both at the individual level as well as at the societal one. Artistic exhibitions and memorials can contribute to the promotion of democratic and ethical values, awareness-raising efforts for the defence of freedom and human rights, and against terrorism ⁽⁴⁾.

During the meeting the following experiences were presented, with a strong focus on commemoration, while also serving other purposes such as healing and education intents:

- The [Memorial Centre for Victims of Terrorism](#) (*Centro Memorial de las Víctimas del Terrorismo*) in Spain, established in 2021, aims at preserving and promoting the "democratic and ethical values represented by victims of terrorism" and "constructing the collective memory of victimization", as a public conscience in defence of human rights ⁽⁵⁾. The centre is built on four pillars: truth, memory, dignity and justice. It pays tribute to the people who have been affected by terrorism while also educating on the consequences of extremism. The main exhibitions have a predominant focus on the national history and, in particular, on the terrorist group ETA. However, other ideologies and forms of terrorism are also addressed in the memorial, including Islamist extremism, right-wing violent extremism and left-wing violent extremism.
- In 1989, a plane heading from the Republic of Congo to Paris exploded as a result of a bomb that detonated during the flight. The plane crashed in the Ténéré region of the Sahara and left no survivors behind. Relatives of the victims, led by Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc, who lost his father in the attack, fought for a compensation by the Libyan government. The compensation was distributed to the victims and, in part, used to build the [UT772 DC10 Memorial](#), commemorating the attack on UTA Flight 772. For the victims it was key to have a memorial site established exactly where the plane crashed. Even if the place is hard to reach and visit, it can be seen from map web services. The memorial was built with 170 broken mirrors representing the 170 people who lost their life in the attack and a wing of the aeroplane. A well, originally built to provide water to workers involved in the construction of the memorial, is still available on the site and offers water – which oftentimes equals life in the desert – where a tragedy happened.
- On 22 March 2016, 32 people lost their lives in the Maelbeek and Zaventem attacks in Brussels. The City Council coordinated an international contest to collect ideas for a memorial. As a result of this process, the Memorial 22/3 was created in the Sonian Forest, consisting of a circle of 32 birches commemorating the

⁽²⁾ [Manchester Survivors Choir \(@SurvivorsChoir\) / Twitter](#)

⁽³⁾ [Manchester Arena Survivors Choir perform at United Nations conference in New York | ITV News Granada](#)

⁽⁴⁾ [Memorials for victims of terrorism and their possible value for P/CVE – Different approaches within the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁽⁵⁾ Varona, G. (2018). [Basque Country competing memories at the local, regional and state levels: Promoting public artistic events versus public institutional policies](#). In M. Hoondert, P. Mutsaers & W. Arfman (Eds), *Cultural practices of victimhood* (pp. 120-141). Routledge.

victims of the attacks. The context and surrounding environment contribute to making the memorial a place where victims/survivors as well as others can find some moments of calm and contemplation ⁽⁶⁾.

Disturbing and generating discussion

Art has the potential to be shocking and provoking. This is part of its nature as artworks can stir and change public opinion, challenge the status quo and question dynamics of power. These effects can also be seen in relation to forms and episodes of political violence:

- In June 2004, the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs walked following the 'Green Line' that runs through the municipality of Jerusalem and marking the armistice border, at the end of the war between Israel and Jordan in 1948, with a leaking can of green paint. He traced a green line of 24 km ⁽⁷⁾. The experience was also reported in a video documentary to trigger people's reactions and reflections. The artist used a poetic act in a politically complex and charged situation to raise awareness and encourage discussion.

Art has the inherent capacity to break with normality and bring to the fore issues that are not always pleasant to deal with, including the harmful effects of radicalisation and terrorism. However, addressing P/CVE topics through art and culture in a provocative manner is not always straightforward and might entail some severe consequences, such as secondary victimisation or exposure to gory images. In this regard, the role and the relevance of censorship was discussed during the meeting: while recognising the difficulties related to imposing limits on artistic expressions, participants agreed on the importance of prohibiting messages of hate.

Preventing and countering violent extremism

Terrorism is about dividing societies and victims/survivors of terrorism oftentimes find themselves detached from their communities after the traumatic experiences they have lived through. Art and culture can help victims/survivors reconnect to their society and the society be connected again to victims/survivors.

In addition, victims'/survivors' testimonies can contribute to awareness raising and prevention of violent extremism: by sharing their memories, stories and voices, victims/survivors can play a very important role in promoting social cohesion and resilience in their communities. However, some victims/survivors might feel uncomfortable in revealing their suffering in public spaces and artistic approaches can represent a privileged tool to share experiences and tailored P/CVE messages.

Cultural and artistic approaches also have the potential to reach society more rapidly and broadly by virtue of their nature, accessibility and enjoyability. Testimonies by victims/survivors are mainly followed by families, friends and the closer network of social contacts. On the contrary, art and culture can attract the attention of end-beneficiaries for the nature of the installation/exhibition/output, with no prior knowledge on the multiple meanings behind it. In this framework of "incidental learning", messages and experiences by victims/survivors can make it to a larger audience and foster preventive efforts by contributing to resilience, promoting empathy, understanding and solidarity within communities.

- The [22 July Centre](#) is a learning centre working with the mediation of memory and knowledge about the terror attacks in Oslo and Utøya (22 July 2011). The centre hosts a permanent exhibition on 'The Public Conversation about 22 July', presenting the course of events occurring on 22 July 2011 as well as the different narratives present in Norwegian discourse today about the terror attack, its causes, and past, present and future consequences. The centre's educational programme involves school pupils and teachers

⁽⁶⁾ More information on the Memorial 22/3 can be found at <https://www.publicspace.org/works/-/project/k194-memorial-22-3>

⁽⁷⁾ For more information, see [Francis Alÿs: \(francisalys.com\)](http://francisalys.com)

and encourages active participation in the discussions of the attack's significance both at present and in the future.

Challenges

The use of art and culture in relation to victims/survivors of terrorism is not always linear. The following challenges and pitfalls were discussed during the meeting:

- Victims/survivors of terrorism deal with their traumatic experiences in many different ways and it should not be taken for granted that art and culture necessarily offer a beneficial effect for all people and in all moments.
- Coping with trauma, such as surviving a terrorist attack, can generate different emotions, including some that are not generally socially desirable, such as anger, contempt or desire for revenge. Art can help get those emotions expressed, avoiding them to be suffocated and all the negative consequences that come with it. However, it is then important to make sure that all necessary and professional support is in place to handle the consequences of communicating the trauma, even if that is done indirectly through artworks and cultural deliverables. Emotional resilience is key, but it cannot be reached through a simple process and, generally, it is hard to be achieved alone.
- It is problematic to assign a specific role to victims/survivors of terrorism. This is valid for all contexts, including with specific regard to the creation of artistic products: the feelings, the role and the perspectives of victims/survivors can change and evolve over time. In addition, any form of involvement should be done on a voluntary basis.
- In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, the entire community might feel hit by the events and might want to actively engage with and volunteer in support operations. It is important to think about the possible contributions that people not directly affected by the tragedy can play and coordinate their involvement.

Recommendations

For practitioners:

- When relying on artistic approaches in connection to victims/survivors of terrorism, the process of healing and the purpose of P/CVE are two separate pathways that only sometimes cross each other and overlap. Consequently, it is necessary to clarify from the very beginning the objective of the cultural initiative.
- Although art and culture clearly entail positive impacts for victims/survivors of terrorism, not all people might benefit from it and not necessarily in all moments. Respect for each individual healing process must be ensured in all contexts and approaches.
- The healing process initiated through artwork or inspired by cultural inputs might require professional and specialised support to manage the emotional reactions that it may trigger.

For practitioners and policymakers:

- Commemoration is important for victims/survivors of terrorism (and for the society at large): it is important to involve victims/survivors in the definition and in the elaboration of the memorial to ensure it meets the needs of the first beneficiaries. In some cases, for example, it is important that the commemoration site is located where the attack occurred. For some victims/survivors, the commemoration site might entail certain characteristics such as being able to change and evolve as the role of victims/survivors itself is subject to continuous transformation.
- Projects offering victims/survivors access to artistic practices and experiences could be promoted, enhanced or embedded into existing initiatives.

For researchers:

- Art and culture represent an extremely powerful tool in relation to victims/survivors of terrorism from multiple and complementary perspectives. In particular, artistic approaches have a great potential to bridge the gap between victims/survivors and the broader society and, in doing so, in contributing to preventive efforts. However, little research has been conducted on this specific aspect and further data collection and analysis would contribute to an enhanced understanding (also including on the pitfalls of this approach).

Relevant practices

1. The [22 July Centre](#) was established after the terror attacks in Oslo and Utøya (22 July 2011). The centre presents and analyses the different narratives about the terror attack, its causes, and past, present and future consequences. The centre has also developed an educational programme to raise awareness on the significance of the terrorist attack within the school context.
2. The [Memorial Centre for Victims of Terrorism](#) (*Centro Memorial de las Víctimas del Terrorismo*) in Spain contributes to memorialisation and commemoration as well as to PVE through the promotion of democratic and ethical values, including truth, memory, dignity and justice. The memorial pays tribute to the people affected by terrorism while also educating on the consequences of extremism, including ETA terrorism, Islamist extremism, right-wing violent extremism and left-wing violent extremism.

Follow-up

The role of victims/survivors of terrorism in the design of memorials and commemorative sites has emerged as an important element to be further discussed in order to ensure ownership by the first beneficiaries of the memorials. This could include analysing the mechanisms and strategies for collaboration between victims/survivors of terrorism and local/national authorities.

Further reading

- RAN Y&E WG meeting (2022), [How to include art\(istic\) values in your PVE approach?](#)
- RAN VoT WG meeting (2021), [Incorporating memorial needs of victims and survivors in P/CVE efforts](#)
- RAN (2021), [Memorials for victims of terrorism and their possible value for P/CVE – Different approaches within the EU](#)