

RAN LOCAL

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL

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Pulse Taking: What Are Local Effects of Recent Developments on P/CVE?

Key outcomes

The developments taking place at the national, European and even global level can lead to big social, economic and environmental tensions that play out on the local level. These geopolitical and social developments might influence the breeding ground for polarisation, extremism and political violence. As such, this will impact the work of local and regional coordinators working on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the new developments and their potential impacts on local communities and the processes of radicalisation.

The RAN LOCAL Working Group organised a meeting on 15 and 16 November 2022 for local and regional P/CVE coordinators to take stock of how the current and emerging geopolitical developments and social transformations are impacting the breeding ground for radicalisation and shifting the extremist landscape. Participants also discussed the means and tools to deal with these new developments. The following key outcomes were identified in the meeting:

- Local coordinators see that the changing extremist landscape they are facing is defined by war, energy prices, costs of living, the arrival of refugees, climate crisis, and the rise of anti-EU and nationalistic sentiments.
- Extremism is changing, and so should the local P/CVE strategy: the local P/CVE approach is often grounded in anti-jihadism. After the fall of the so-called caliphate, it was struggling with incorporating right-wing extremism and now also needs to deal with the new, blurry and hybrid forms of anti-government extremism.
- Social polarisation is increasing and trust in the authorities is shrinking, which might feed into hostile and extremist activities.
- Local government should apply a '2-steps-deeper' approach: don't focus on the extremism as we know it, but start from understanding the societal and political tensions and protests that might escalate and radicalise.

This paper presents the main conclusions of 2 days of presentations and lively group discussions. On day 1, participants discussed the new developments and political conflicts that might escalate and radicalise into violent extremism and terrorism. On day 2, local and regional P/CVE coordinators looked into the tools and capacities needed to be prepared and able to keep pace with developments as they emerge.

Highlights of the discussion

Through presentations and panel and group discussions, participants from different Member States shared their experiences and views on the new developments impacting the landscape of radicalisation and extremism. However, before diving into the latest developments and their impacts on the extremist scene, it is important to outline the process through which these developments have taken place.

In the article 'What the Zeitgeist can Tell us About the Future of Terrorism' ⁽¹⁾, by Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard (2022), the argument is made that terrorism can never be considered outside its social, economic and political contexts, and outside the broader Zeitgeist. This is because, according to the authors, the social and economic contexts are the lens through which people perceive the world around them. As such, understanding the Zeitgeist, as a reflection of the major social changes and developments, can contribute to a better understanding of the rise and demise of trends and waves of terrorism. The Zeitgeist can help us understand the dissatisfaction and grievances that might feed into terrorism and extremism.

In line with this, participants debated that the extremist landscape is defined by the political, social and economic conditions that lead to the framing and constructing of political and religious narratives and ideologies. Whether these narratives will evolve into political violence is highly dependent on the interaction between social groups and movements that work towards social changes. Nevertheless, these social, political and economic changes might be brought about by the transnationalisation of social movements and communication where the extension of the social and political processes goes beyond the borders of a country. Moreover, while the extremist landscape has long been characterised by group ideologies and cults, the current landscape is largely defined by lone actors and cross-cutting ideologies.

The most prominent social and economic developments visible at the local level that may impact the polarisation of local communities and may radicalise to violence vary from the war in Ukraine and the accompanying refugee movements to economic stress and the energy crisis. Here are some examples discussed during the meeting:

- Anti-government sentiments are more observable and have taken root in opposition to COVID-19 measures, and they were prolonged because of the Russian aggressive war in Ukraine as some people become discontent with their governments' policies regarding the war. The narrative being circulated is that the governments are not working for the benefits of their people and not regarding their needs. This narrative is reaching a wide variety of people and is being fostered by inflation and the immense increase in costs of living. As a result, people who are not able to pay the rent and make ends meet are fearing poverty, loss of jobs and uncertainty about the future. Will they be going down the social ladder? It is very challenging for (local) governments since they are expected to intervene and find solutions.
- Besides its economic implications, the war in Ukraine provoked a strong anti-immigration sentiment in Europe that might further escalate to violence. Participants discussed how the great willingness to host and support refugees in the first month of the war has shifted into an increasingly and openly hostile approach towards refugees from Ukraine. Questions that are echoing in some cities: Why are we treating Ukrainian refugees differently from those coming from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, in terms of social support and asylum/legal procedure? How would all these refugees integrate, learn the language and live up to EU regulations? Another reason that fostered the hostile approaches towards Ukrainian refugees is the lack of information and communication about the government's policies when they decide to host Ukrainian refugees. This lack of information and explanation has led to some tension in local communities and in some cases refugees were attacked and their cars were destroyed.
- Russian propaganda and the polarisation of the local community. Russian propaganda has targeted communities in neighbouring countries and fed into the narrative of legalising its war in Ukraine and destabilising society. Participants indicated that the Russian-speaking communities in their countries are being targeted by this narrative. This is worrying especially when bearing in mind the involvement of

⁽¹⁾ See: <https://icct.nl/publication/zeitgeist-future-of-terrorism/>

these communities in the war in different regions in Ukraine. According to the local coordinators, a recently conducted survey revealed that one third of Russian speakers in Finland support the war in Ukraine. These people follow the Russian news online and fall into an echo chamber in which the pro-Russian narrative is spread. A comparison was made between individuals being exposed to fake news and conspiracy narratives following the outbreak of COVID-19 and Russian-speaking communities being targeted by Russian propaganda and how that could foster polarisation and violence.

- Following the collapse of the so-called caliphate, Islamist extremism activities seem to be inactive in terms of attacks for a long period of time. However, it's been indicated that despite the fall of ISIS, the networks that were established in Europe still exist and individuals have been expressing their affiliation more openly in these networks. It is important to note that Islamist extremism in the EU has always been influenced by external events happening outside the EU. When a western country gets involved in conflicts in areas that are important for Muslim communities in Europe, like Iraq and Syria, it influences indirectly the Islamist extremism activities and polarisation inside Europe. For example, anti-Semitic incidents happen more often when something happens in Israel and Palestine. Last year, in Germany, there was a physical attack on a representative of the liberal Jewish community during a demonstration, as well as shouts of anti-Semitism.
- Even though animal and environmental activists value life and do not seem to be willing to commit violence, participants indicated that far-right and fascist extremists have been using environmental concerns to justify violence. The so-called ecofeminism is "a fascist politic or a fascist worldview that is invoking environmental concern or environmental rhetoric to justify the hateful and extreme elements of their ideology". As such, the perpetrator of the Buffalo attack in New York wrote a 180-page manifestation where he linked mass migration with the degradation of the natural environment as a justification for murder ⁽²⁾. Another example is the involvement of the right-wing extremist group Reichsbürger*innen in the environmental movements in Germany.



Recommendations

- The local P/CVE strategy should keep pace with the changing extremist landscape and be broadened from a security-driven approach targeting Islamist extremism to a more general approach dealing also with social tensions and conflicts that could lead to polarisation and that could feed into extremism. The need for such an approach became evident especially after the fall of ISIS when it was not clear anymore what falls under P/CVE or when P/CVE coordinators should intervene. As the nature of the political tensions that boost radicalisation and shape the extremist landscape change, **the local P/CVE strategy should follow and shift towards a more social cohesion, general (crime) prevention approach to be able to cope with the new developments.**
- This general (crime) prevention approach should **outline the roles and responsibilities of the local stakeholders involved in P/CVE** and define what is an act of violence that requires the mobilisation of social workers and the implementation of a P/CVE intervention. This also means that, due to the complexity of the new groups and in-groups, involving new partners (youth), further trainings for police and social workers, and tools for reaching these target groups might be needed.
- A '2-steps-deeper' approach: do not focus only on the extremist ideologies or the underlying radicalisation process. Instead, take another step back and **understand the people's needs and grievances that drive political and societal tensions that might radicalise to extremism and terrorism.** For example, do not focus on an attack or the underlying environmental radicalisation, but start from how we could deal in local societies with political conflict.

⁽²⁾ See: <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-eco-fascism-the-greenwashing-of-the-far-right-terrorism-climate-change-buffalo-shooter/a-61867605>

- To overcome differences between subcultures and polarised groups in the local context, **create a local democratic culture and civic pride that could help solve political problems in a peaceful way.**
- The cross-cutting ideological movements and protests make it difficult for local P/CVE practitioners to identify people's grievances and vulnerabilities. It is important to **build the capacity to identify and communicate with angry citizens** and groups to understand their grievances and what they need.
- It is also important to **distinguish between democratic protesters, who are desirable in democracy, and radical elements hijacking protests.** Therefore, there is a need to build the capacity to be able to identify and distinguish as well as reach out to these group members who agitate and push the protest into violence.
- The new developments could be recognised earlier at the local level than the national. There is a need for connective information sharing and a **diagnosis capacity for new and emerging political conflicts between the local and the national levels**, especially for new, blurry and hybrid protest movements.
- **Rebuilding trust in the (local) government by creating possibilities for people to ask questions** and have the feeling of being heard and seen. This holds especially when it comes to controversial topics, such as the energy crisis and the hosting of refugees. The policies regarding these topics have an effect on people's lives, but the reasoning behind such policies is not always clear to the public.

Follow-up

- The outcomes of this meeting will feed into the 2023 RAN LOCAL meeting 'The future and position of local P/CVE strategy and approaches'. Is P/CVE about terrorism and security or also about local democracy and social cohesion? In the changing Zeitgeist and evolving extremist landscape, is it time to reposition the local P/CVE strategy? Who has ownership of the local P/CVE agenda?

Further reading

- RAN LOCAL (2021). [The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism](#)
- RAN C&N (2021). [Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU](#)
- RAN cross-cutting event (2022). [Conspiracy narratives and anti-government sentiments in relation to \(V\)RWE and other forms of extremism](#)
- RAN LOCAL (2022). [Preventing possible violence based on anti-government extremism on the local level](#)