

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL

6 & 10 March 2023, online

#614 RAN LOCAL online meeting: How to prevent and mitigate anti-government extremism at the local level? Restoring normality, rebuilding trust and networks at the local level.

Key outcomes

In various European countries, there appears to be a growing trend where citizens exercise their right to express dissatisfaction or distrust in authorities (e.g. protesting). In some instances, these sentiments transform into hostility due to perceived failures on the part of the authorities and an already existing distrust (warranted or not). Furthermore, there are several cases where individuals, groups or movements become so fed up or feel marginalised by the authorities that they resort to spreading false and divisive narratives aimed at discrediting the legitimacy of governments and demonising their officials as well as their (perceived) partner organisations, like those in law enforcement, the legislative and judicial bodies, as well as education and science. This environment serves as an increasingly fertile breeding ground for extremist groups to manipulate and extremist acts to occur that can be violent in nature.

The main topic of discussion in the online working group meeting held on 6 and 10 March 2023 was the phenomenon of anti-government extremism, also referred to as anti-authority or anti-establishment extremism. The meeting brought together local and regional coordinators from 11 Member States to exchange perspectives on this type of extremism and how it manifests in their respective cities or regions. They also discussed various approaches for preventing and countering this phenomenon, with a particular focus on restoring normalcy and rebuilding trust between governments and citizens in an attempt to mitigate further escalation (violent or non-violent) as well as engaging with natural allies that can help achieve these goals. The following key outcomes emerged from the meeting:

- The phenomenon of anti-government/authorities extremism remains hard to grasp, particularly from the perspective of a P/CVE approach, which is still inherently security-driven and ideology-focused. Restoring trust in authorities requires **accepting failures in government/authority approaches and long-term investments in social cohesion, civic engagement and local democracy programmes**. Long-term collaboration between P/CVE departments and other departments involved in these programmes is necessary (a whole-of-society/holistic approach).

- **It is crucial for all departments involved in the holistic approach to recognise the radicalising effects of anti-democratic narratives**, especially those circulating within anti-government movements that promote traditionalist and misogynistic views. The same level of awareness should be placed on the significance of political actors using similar anti-democratic narratives.
- **The need for online prevention remains.** While there are still legal challenges to address, we can and should explore creative solutions, as already discussed within RAN. For instance, see RAN C&N (2022) [Digital Frontrunners: Key challenges and recommendations for online P/CVE work](#).
- European movements are inspired by those in the US. As such, **money flows** (international) might be a topic to take a closer look into.
- The fact that the **extreme-right is attempting to manipulate legitimate protests and anti-government sentiments** should remain a priority in a P/CVE approach on this issue.
- The question of **'how to include the excluded'** remains a crucial question when discussing anti-government extremism. Civic engagement programmes, for example, tend to attract individuals who are already willing to engage to some extent. However, for those who feel excluded or isolated, any initiative to promote engagement with their group can be perceived as 'part of the system' and is therefore bound to fail.

Highlights of the discussion

What is anti-government extremism and how does it manifest itself?

Over the course of two mid-day sessions, the RAN LOCAL working group explored the complex phenomenon of anti-government extremism. Acknowledging the legitimacy of citizens' negative sentiments towards their government or authorities on issues such as the housing crisis, energy crisis, pensions etc., the participants focussed on non-security approaches and identify ways to restore trust in the relationship between authorities and citizens.

Rebuilding trust is easier said than done, especially since anti-government sentiments are not new from a historical perspective. While such sentiments are legitimate from a democratic point of view, they are also easy to exploit from a malign (extremist) perspective. The participants recognised that, even though they are not part of the democracy network but rather the radicalisation awareness network, it is important to pay close attention to all sides of the issue.

The participants also recognised a tricky part, which requires them to recognise that a group of citizens is fundamentally fed up and has isolated itself from anything related to government/establishment/system. Herein also lies a potential of exposure to extremist narratives and the potential for radicalisation to (violent) extremist behaviour. Incidents that have occurred throughout European Member States, include citizens intimidating politicians, announcing sovereignty from the state and establishing sovereign passports in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. What's more, there have been incidents of anti-government protests turning violent, death threats sent to local and national politicians in the Netherlands, and planned overthrows of the government by Reichsbürger in Germany.

These incidents also show the importance of addressing the issue of anti-democratic extremist movements. This includes identifying political actors who use similar messaging to appeal to anti-government sentiments. The potential for financial funding within international networks was also discussed. So was the importance of identifying political actors using the same anti-democratic messages as those from anti-government extremist movements. Participants also identified this as a growing issue of concern when dealing with anti-government extremism.

Who is fed up, why, and how can we reach out to them?

Due to the slippery nature of anti-government extremism today, participants discussed that the need for more online data on potentially violent activities and individuals coming out of anti-government movements therefore remains, indeed, but that a similar need for more direct involvement by citizens in government processes and decisions, as well as a need for authorities to engage more directly with those who feel left out.

As a result of the discussion, ways of identifying and reaching out to groups that are feeling 'fed up' were explored. It was noted that these groups are not always part of the typical vulnerable populations in society, and that even individuals in more privileged groups may experience feelings of loss of privilege. Nevertheless, engaging with both cases may be difficult due to their inherent mistrust. It was also highlighted that identifying these groups can be challenging. Many discussions as well as indicators for people's behaviour and/or sentiment are found online. However, it is not illegal to express concern or dissatisfaction with your government or a particular authority, as it is unconstitutional to collect personal data on those who do. With this in mind, local coordinators expressed the need to work together with colleagues from the social cohesion, civic engagement and/or local democracy departments who naturally and inherently are in contact with all sorts of citizens, not for monitoring but for prevention.

Challenges

One of the P/CVE coordinators mentioned a collaborative research with non-security related departments within the municipality to understand why citizens were fed up with their government. Amongst other findings, they discovered a growing anti-government sentiment amongst refugees who did not come from Ukraine. This sentiment was due to the perceived different treatment and policies towards them compared to refugees from Ukraine. This finding has the potential to be exploited by extremist groups, and it highlights a challenging vulnerability that was also discussed by the participants, which is the question of including the excluded.

Groups or individuals who inherently do not engage in anything related to the government or establishment are difficult to identify and access. They simply do not engage in any type of programme or research, and they may lack the infrastructure or point of contact to communicate with or mediate with. In discussing this issue, participants emphasised the need to combine the different budgetary silos of government to create more collaboration between departments to find ways to reach the (perceived) excluded groups. However, more discussion and exchanges of collaborative efforts are necessary to effectively address this issue.

Finally, it is unfortunate that more crises may be necessary to gain further knowledge and data on the phenomenon of anti-government extremism and its underlying sentiments. Another crisis, with similar implications for social and political life, like the pandemic, will most likely ignite anti-government sentiments again and hopefully provide P/CVE practitioners and coordinators with more opportunities to prevent and counter it.

Recommendations

The purpose of this meeting is to present practitioners and coordinators with two lists. The first is a list of 10 things to avoid doing when dealing with anti-government extremism and anti-authorities sentiments. The second is a list of 10 things to do to help mitigate anti-government extremism and anti-authorities sentiments. During the discussion it became apparent that dealing with anti-government extremism and its underlying sentiments is not straightforward. The highlights of the discussion include the following points.

- Recognise that anti-government/establishment extremism is not defined by a single ideology, unlike jihadism and right-wing extremism. This means it is not helpful to focus on perceived similarities. Instead,

it is important to acknowledge that there may be legitimate reasons to have anti-government sentiments. Governments do make mistakes.

- When citizens are dissatisfied with their authorities, it is important to recognise that this issue is fundamentally related to their sense of democracy, feelings of inclusion and involvement, or lack thereof. In other words, they feel excluded. It is important not to judge the legitimacy of their concerns or reasons. Instead, it is crucial to listen, empathise and make them feel heard. Local and regional P/CVE coordinators should collaborate with and/or include existing programmes that promote these approaches.
- Local coordinators should be aware of anti-democratic narratives within anti-government movements, such as traditionalist, misogynistic, and recognise the radicalising effect that political actors can have with regards to these narratives. Politicians who use the same narratives can have a significant reach and can legitimise and normalise extremist views, thereby creating the very breeding ground that coordinators should be working to prevent.
- Local coordinators should be aware of the international dynamics at play between European movements, such as money flows, narratives, modus operandi, and those in the US. It is important to recognise that the extreme-right is attempting to influence legitimate protests and anti-government sentiments.
- In efforts to identify groups and individuals who may harbour anti-government sentiments may be willing to commit or incite violence, local coordinators should adopt a whole-of-society approach to data-gathering. This approach should include gathering information on where these groups are located, what their grievances are, and why they are not happy with the authorities.
- Look beyond the well-known vulnerable groups. Everyone has their own grievances with the authorities, regardless of their socio-economic status. The potential for extremism is also fostered in more privileged groups who may feel like their privileges are at risk or have been taken away.
- When incorporating anti-government extremism into the existing P/CVE approach or strategy, recognise the history of predominately security-driven P/CVE and the fact that P/CVE actors are part of a system opposed by anti-government movements. To optimise engagement, it is important for coordinators to establish cooperation with colleagues from the social cohesion, local democracy and/or civic engagement to optimize engagement. It is important to recognise that a program that is part of a system will take considerable time and patience to be seen as legitimate and engage-worthy by those who feel excluded.
- Local and regional approaches to addressing anti-government extremism should definitely include an attempt to foster trust and dialogue by creating safe spaces for dialogue and engagement. Coordinators can establish listening campaigns by local and regional leaders, as well as efforts to promote social cohesion, tolerance and diversity.

Inspiring practices

1. **Providing understanding to citizens who feel fed up with the authorities:** A local mayor tried to deliver answers to people on the streets. By taking the time to listen to their concerns and provide answers, the mayor was able to foster a sense of being heard and understood among the citizens, who did not vote and felt angry.
2. **Collaboration between P/CVE and non-security departments:** A participating city launched a resilience project with the local democracy and social cohesion units. The project interviewed 3-4 social professionals to identify groups that do not feel connected to authorities and why. The project used existing participation projects to find key players to interview. One outcome was identifying anti-government sentiments in refugee groups not from Ukraine who feel differently treated by authorities.

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'. How do we change our approach and what would that look like?

Further reading

- RAN LOCAL (2021) [The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism](#)
- RAN LOCAL (2022) [Pulse Taking: What Are Local Effects of Recent Developments on P/CVE?](#)
- RAN cross-cutting event Conclusion Paper on [The Online Dimension of Extremism and Improving Online P/CVE Efforts, Berlin 27 September 2022](#)
- RAN C&N (2022) [Digital Frontrunners: Key challenges and recommendations for online P/CVE work](#)