RAN Y&E

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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Y&E Working Group Meeting
29 February - 1 March 2024, Bucharest, Romania

Dealing with anti-system/anti-government attitudes and extremism among young people

Key outcomes

In recent years, the landscape of radical or extremist ideologies has become increasingly fluid and dynamic. Simultaneously, the trust of young people in democracy is decreasing, despite the efforts for citizenship education. People with various divergent grievances and ideologies seem to have found each other in a narrative that largely evolves around distrust in governments and institutions. In P/CVE terms, this narrative refers to anti-system and anti-government extremism (ASAGE). It is important to note that ASAGE goes beyond common criticism by youth towards authority, but is a specific narrative undermining principles of democracy and promoting structural distrust towards the Institutions.

On 29 February and 1 March 2024, the RAN Youth & Education working group convened a meeting to discuss how youth practitioners experience this specific narrative in their daily work. Moreover, we have discussed the reasons why young people have developed such distrust in authorities, and what youth professionals should do in order to re-engage these youngsters and have them resist violent means of voicing their opinions. Some of the main outcomes of this meeting were the following:

- Participants stated that it is too easy to blame young people for their disappointment or anger towards the system and government. In many occasions, systems and governments have not worked for young people and have let them down. Therefore, self-criticism and consideration of young people in policies is needed within governments and institutions.

- The participants identified different groups of young people with characteristics that can put them at risk of ASAGE narratives. Based on this categorisation, participants designed strategies or approaches to deal with the breeding ground and other contextual factors that can foster ASAGE attitudes.

- The participants have listed overarching strategies they consider crucial when re-engaging young people with strong anti-system and anti-government sentiments.

In this paper, we will first discuss how practitioners experience and observe ASAGE among the young people they work with. Then, we give an overview of general and circumstance-specific elements that construct the breeding ground for ASAGE. Before the group drafted new strategies and approaches, the evidence-based principles of 'what we know works' were listed. Both the diagnosis of the challenge and the lessons learned allowed the participants to design specific approaches or strategies for four different groups of youngsters at risk of ASAGE.

Highlights of the discussion

For the relatively new phenomenon of ASAGE, the RAN Y&E Working Group used a description as has been discussed among the EU Member States. The new term ASAGE consists of the former term 'anti-government extremism', with an expansion that includes 'anti-system'. In its core, ASAGE encompasses extremist conspiracies claiming that the 'elite', the governments and the system (e.g. scientists, media, courts, multinationals) are working against the interests of ordinary people. The term 'extremism' is used to highlight that ASAGE does not encompass peaceful protests, criticism and opposition against these institutions, but concerns harmful, polarising extremist narratives and violent mobilisation.

In ASAGE-milieus, people who are discontent or angry for various reasons find each other. The grievances are very diverse without a clear ideological framework. Moreover, people buying into the ASAGE narratives might shift topics, and are often in advance opposed to what mainstream media proclaims.

How do practitioners see ASAGE develop among youth?

The participants shared how they see Anti-System / Anti-Government attitudes and extremism develop among the young people they work with. We briefly went over how ASAGE manifests in youngsters and found that in most cases they express this through cynicism regarding public affairs, polarising provocations and isolation.

There is also a problem in the system and the government
The participants started by stressing that the ASAGE attitudes of youngsters are often based on the reality they live in. The areas where they live in and the people around them are facing serious challenges, and governments and the system might be (or are perceived to be) part of such problems. Some developments observed by the participants are the following:

- Young people have already experienced multiple crises in their short lives (financial, migration & asylum, environmental, war, pandemic, housing, cost of living), and can feel that governments haven't done anything for them during these crises and that the current institutions are not capable of managing these problems.

- Young people are constantly being flooded online with horrible unedited and unfiltered news stories, which makes them lose faith in the future and in the governments that are supposed to represent them. Some youngsters become fatalistic and stop caring, while others become worried and feel like they are carrying a heavy load on their shoulders.

- Many young people perceive double standards in government policy and media coverage. For example, on the war in Ukraine compared to Israel-Palestine, Congo or Sudan, or in the treatment of refugees from Ukraine compared to those from other countries.

- Some are so-called NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and might not be part of any system. They often refuse to vote and support the democratic system.

- Due to increasing influence from anti-migration politicians, young people with a migration background feel like they are not welcome and as if they are second class.

- The pandemic was a huge accelerator in distrust towards institutions. Government policies have impacted society as a whole, including young people in some of their crucial developing years. This has laid the foundation for persistent resentment against government policies.

- People have a need for connection, and they connect to other people, not to systems or institutions. Government services have digitalised or disappeared, which makes interactions with these institutions increasingly impersonal, leading to the disappearance of the feeling of connection.

There is thus legitimate basis for people's frustration with governments – real issues are at play.

General factors
Besides the above-mentioned conditions and perceived grievances, participants also mentioned:

- People feel they are at a distance or disconnected from what they perceive as mainstream; people feel unappreciated in public debate and unrepresented in traditional media. People who don't want to be other than 'normal', i.e. cis-gendered, white, male/female/hetero, middle class, etc.

- There are many distinct flows of unfiltered information online which have polarising narratives. This constant flow of polarising and moralising narratives makes people lose empathy towards others, without a sense of critical self-reflection. People no longer act constructively with people who think differently.

- Gentrification. Some places in cities as well as on the countryside are taken over by well off, more progressive people. Some people are afraid to lose tradition and oppose what is new.

- A participant stated that 'A post-truth period is taking place. They say they don't see themselves as part of a system'. Whereas everybody used to watch the same news broadcasts, there is no common frame of reference anymore. Many of these movements create their own identities online, in their own ecosystem.

- People lack critical thinking, self-reflection, and therefore project the root of evil on others.

- Some young people have a nihilistic attitude and think they can't contribute anything to society.

Identifying groups of youngsters who are more at risk - and why?

Participants distinguished several at-risk groups of youth. In the end, the participants focused on:

- Youth in rural and post-industrial areas
- Youth in deprived urban and suburban areas
- Youth who are well off and are driven by hyper-individualism and hyper-masculinity
- Youth left behind by their parents who moved to other parts of Europe for work

Group A: Youth in rural and post-industrial areas

- The economic and social infrastructure, public transport and other key facilities for these communities are diminishing. Areas with little opportunities for work and schooling cause young people to see fewer opportunities for their futures.

- Youngsters here feel that the system is not on their side and that they are not appreciated. For example, the 'academisation' of the labour market. Higher education is needed for more jobs than before and does not systematically lead to employment. This higher education is not the way for everybody and is often less accessible in these towns. This causes the youngsters to lose faith in the system.

- These youngsters, just like their parents, feel there is no place anymore for their 'way of life'. These are people who just want to be 'normal' and nothing else. Participants mentioned the 'fluid' identity versus 'fixed' or 'rooted' identity. The rooted identity is being challenged and people feel they can't be who they are anymore. A participant quoted the British journalist Goodhart describing this as a battle between the 'Nowheres' and the 'Somewheres'. The 'Nowheres' are often higher educated and have a progressive, cosmopolitan and often urban orientation. The 'Somewheres' are for generations rooted in the area they live in. Their ancestors worked in the local factory and worked the ground, for example.

- Practitioners mentioned that people feel like political issues such as LGBTQIA+ are being pushed upon them in these areas. These people might see such topics as irrelevant for them, and as a result there is a widespread 'anti-woke' attitude pushing back.

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Group B: Youth in deprived urban and suburban areas

- The housing, surroundings and the social and economic infrastructure have been neglected, and the inhabitants are not benefiting from society. The state is not delivering and the areas and their citizens are seen as a problem or even an enemy.

- In some extreme cases, police and other authorities have completely withdrawn from the areas, giving youngsters the feeling of being left to fend for themselves.

- Postal code stigmatisation and labour market discrimination are large problems, causing negative self-fulfilling prophecies.

- In various European countries, diaspora communities from former colonies have been concentrated in certain neighbourhoods. The colonial generational trauma that these people have, resulting from historical actions by the country they live in, can cause resentment against this society.

- Some of these areas have parallel societies with alternative black and grey economies, and alternative value systems. The alternative systems offer more than the official society and system.

Group C: Youth who are well off and are driven by hyper-individualism and hyper-masculinity

- Some youngsters don't want to live a boring, regular 9-5 life, and want agency, freedom and epic experiences. They want to be different and more successful than others.

- In this strive for financial success, they don't want to share their money. However, the state obliges them to pay taxes, which makes them adversarial to the government.

- Because they do not want to lose their status and wealth, they don't want change and equality. They glorify 'natural order', individual hardship and being self-made.

- When there are emancipatory efforts from other groups, these youngsters perceive themselves as victims (of progressivism). They are not really a minority, but proclaim they are.

Group D: Youth left behind by their parents who moved to other parts of Europe for work

- This is a phenomenon experienced by participants from Eastern European countries. Their parents moved to other countries for work and left the children with grandparents or a surrogate family.

- These children can have low self-esteem due to the perception of being unwanted. This can lead to distrust, self-victimisation or self-legitimation of violence against the system.

- Without a core family or a consistent social-pedagogical environment to grow up in, it is harder for these children to establish a set of core values.

Approaches/strategies/recommendations

The group conclusion was that the distance from society and the system in some groups is so big, that a new citizenship project or other tweaks to the pedagogical system as we know it, will not be enough. In small groups, the participants drafted strategies or approaches. But before they split up, they discussed what they know 'works'.

But first: what do we know 'works'?

Participants listed the following evidence-based principles for approaches that 'work':

- **Engagement and outreach strategies:** Actively reach out to youngsters through different networks. If possible, act as a linking pin to connect organisations with youngsters. Invest in building relationships and provide support based on the youngsters' needs.

- **It is about empowerment and inclusion:** Give individual youngsters a voice and validate their feelings. Do not aim to change the leading norms and rules but provide them with opportunities for success within their own communities.

- **Restorative practices and community involvement:** Facilitate social action and restorative practices to create a sense of belonging and responsibility for youth within the community.

- **Promoting participation and responsibility in their direct surroundings:** Encourage active participation of youngsters within their community and society. Provide them with platforms to express themselves and take their efforts seriously. Fostering a sense of responsibility and ownership in problem-solving.

- **Do not put blame on the youngsters without looking critically at systems:** have a critical look at these existing systems before putting too much blame on youngsters.

Four groups, four strategies

Youth in rural and post-industrial areas

- **Need for representation and acknowledgement of their identity**: Youngsters growing up in rural or post-industrial regions seem to lack pride of their area, as they perceive to have fewer opportunities than youth growing up in larger cities. Practitioners need to focus on creating and showing opportunities, so the youngsters have something to be proud of. This will build on their feelings of representation and acknowledgement.

- As previous structures for **social fabric** have diminished, opportunities to rebuild feelings of community and belonging across the population must be facilitated and include older as well as new inhabitants.

- **Work on social action:** Facilitate the process of young people putting things on the agenda with a bottom-up approach. Give them ownership of their own projects, which can even relate to creating new employment opportunities. Let them choose their own projects but give them key values to ensure inclusivity.

Youth in deprived urban and suburban areas

- **Set boundaries/Mix repression and prevention:** Bring justice and politics to the local level by giving responsibility to the community but include hard boundaries. For example, trust the local community by giving a budget to act on initiatives for building social fabric and resilience, but act when this budget is used on other goals. Inform youngsters about social rules and practices, but also go into why the rules are there. To create support, it is important to dive into the why, instead of just imposing rules and boundaries.

- **Increase the role of formal education:** Schools are the perfect place for students with extreme ideas to talk about them within the democratic framework. Teach them how to do this, for example, by giving them debate training. Also, invest in education on media literacy as this is such a large part of the youngsters' lives. Also involve parents and others in the close network.

- **Divert from using "us vs them" thinking:** To work with these youngsters, it is important to create an equal connection between them and the practitioner. To ensure this, it is important to self-reflect on your own biases.

- **Cooperation between formal and informal education:** Cooperation creates one larger system for youngsters to operate in, creating more opportunities on different areas of their lives.

Youth who are well off and are driven by hyper-individualism and hyper-masculinity

- **Show them that democracy is better with their input than without it:** This group often shows dissatisfaction with the way they are treated, feeling they can do better than the opportunities they are getting now. Give them opportunities to change the system from within by actively engaging them.

- **Focus on reaching out online as well as offline:** Many of these youngsters can be found online, on fora or gaming platforms.

Youth left behind by their parents who moved to other parts of Europe for work

- **The school of life approach:** This approach is based on a Romanian programme which builds on the principle that youngsters learn most from "living life" itself but need proper guidance. 'Left-behind' minors are linked to someone who, more or less, experienced the same things, creating a system of generational support, going further than just support on one facet of life. Through this, the message that society does not abandon you is conveyed to the youngster.

Follow up

More effort is needed to look into how this specific narrative relates to online dynamics, because social media plays a big role in the proliferation of the ASAGE narrative.

Further reading

- RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2021): Polarising narratives in the classroom.
- RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2023): Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth.
- The EUROGUIDE Project created an extensive handbook and an online training for teachers about dealing with religious and socio-political arguments in schools. It provides concrete examples of different ideologies, topics and possible ways to act. The handbook is available in Dutch, French, Hungarian, Italian and Swedish.

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