

CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Practitioners online Study Visit 'Long-term P/CVE strategy of a 'radicalisation hotbed''
28-29 September 2021*

The long-term P/CVE strategy of a 'radicalisation hotbed'

Key outcomes

Violent extremism is a global issue, but the start of a radicalisation process often takes place in a local context. Cities or neighbourhoods that at first sight appear to have similar socio-geographic characteristics do not always turn out to be a similarly 'fertile' breeding ground for radicalising individuals. Some areas that might not appear different from others come to be the so-called 'hotbeds' or 'hubs' of radicalisation. Why and how does this development take place? Which elements at play create these hotbeds? And how does one deal with such a hotbed?

The city of Dortmund in Germany has often been characterised as being a radicalisation hotbed. For over a decade Dortmund has been dealing with a large group of violent right-wing (VRW) extremists, especially in the Dorstfeld neighbourhood. Through intensive cooperation among different organisations, Dortmund has been able to severely diminish the public presence of violent right-wing extremists. The RAN Practitioners online study visit on 28 and 29 September 2021 aimed to learn from the long-term P/CVE strategy Dortmund implemented. Local coordinators and other practitioners involved in a city or neighbourhood with long-term radicalisation issues from various EU Member States came together to discuss Dortmund's history and successful P/CVE approach and together with representatives of relevant stakeholder organisations drew lessons from its successes and from what could have gone better.

This conclusion paper reflects the meeting's discussions and formulates recommendations for (local) authorities and other practitioners faced with a local concentration of violent extremists. Key outcomes from the meeting were:

- Acknowledgment by local authorities that there is an issue with (a large amount of) violent extremists in their city or region, is a key prerequisite for successfully handling the issue.
- Cooperation between the 'triangle' of police, local authorities and civil society is essential and in order for this cooperation to be successful, there needs to be:
 - a. Respect and transparency among the cooperating partners;
 - b. Time and funds to build up a long-term coordinated approach;
 - c. Trust among the partners and among citizens towards the institutions.
- To counter a high concentration of extremists in one area, it might be necessary to implement a non-standard approach. The city of Dortmund, for example, bought buildings in which the VRW extremists wanted to create a 'national centre', and the police started prosecuting members of the VRWE group for any small misdemeanour they could be charged with, in order to disrupt their expansion.

Dortmund – a short history

Dortmund is a metropole in the Ruhr region of Western Germany. Traditionally a large part of its inhabitants worked in the mining and steel industry, so when between the '80s and '00s these industries dwindled, many became unemployed. In the '80s the VRWE scene was linked to hooliganism, with VRW extremists trying to appeal to the football fan scene. A first investigation of the local VRWE scene was set up in 1986, but at the time the city council did not want to put too much attention to this topic. In the early 90's a group of skinheads settled in Oberdorstfeld, a socially disadvantaged suburb of Dortmund. Local and federal authorities did not respond properly to this threat, and the skinheads quickly changed their strategy when their violent approach scared off many individuals that did support the right-wing ideology. They focused less on violence and outward appearances, and instead developed a strategy of spatial dominance, ousting others and claiming dominance in certain areas. Their aim was to 'take over' the city street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

In the early 2000's violence again became a means for the VRW extremists to reach their goal. After neo-Nazis had chased other citizens down the street during right-wing riots, civil society organisations urged the city to take measures. This led to the mayor initiating a round-table meeting, inviting experts in VRWE and P/CVE and representatives of neighbourhoods that were heavily affected. Dortmund introduced measures aimed at education and violence prevention and decided VRWE needed to be and stay high on the agenda. During this time, the VRWE scene reoriented, moving away from the skinhead image—although some skinheads remain to this day—and started calling themselves *Nationaler Widerstand Dortmund* (National Resistance Dortmund). They opened shops, selling clothing, music and literature supporting the right-wing ideology, and founded a 'national centre' where supporters could come together. Although their strategy changed, the willingness to use violence remained the same, leading to, among other things, five fatal victims between 2000 and 2006.

Dortmund's approach

Dortmund's approach is manifold and has become more professional over the years. Although the city's strategy is ever-evolving, the VRWE scene at times seemed to evolve even faster. Below are some of the measures taken over the past years.

- The core of the problem centred around several streets in the Dorstfeld neighbourhood. The VRW extremists' strategy included making sure their followers lived close to each other, which led to about 150 VRW extremists living in several apartment buildings in a small area. Therefore, a hyper-local approach was necessary. Together with civil society organisations and the police, the city united in the fight against VRWE, focusing on the very streets where they resided.
- When the VRW extremists aimed to buy the building in which their national centre was located, the city stepped in and bought the building instead. With the support of police, the VRW tenants were evicted, and the building is now an educational centre.
- In 2011 an action plan was published and adopted by the city. It included a scientific study on which circumstances had (possibly) led to the high concentration of VRW extremists and a series of objectives was also included. Additionally, in this action plan the importance of involving citizens was acknowledged.
- A culture of education and remembrance was introduced, which started when a memorial museum was founded in the former Steinwache prison in 1992, where between 1933 and 1945 many opponents of the Nazi regime had been imprisoned, tortured and executed. Also, memorials were set up and individual victims were and are still today commemorated. In addition, a victim support office was founded, called BackUp.
- After *Nationaler Widerstand Dortmund* was banned because of links to terrorist activities, the VRW extremists founded the political party *Die Rechte* (The Right) and participated in a series of elections. This posed a huge challenge for the city of Dortmund, as it became harder to counter them. In response, the *Koordinierungsstelle für Vielfalt, Toleranz und Demokratie* (Coordination Centre for Diversity, Tolerance and Democracy) was founded.

Democracy), which was set up in 2008, had to supplement its strategy. Due to strategic changes the *Koordinierungsstelle für Vielfalt, Toleranz und Demokratie* budget was increased continuously.

- When in 2014 about 30-40 members of *Die Rechte* wanted to storm the city hall, politicians and civilians united to create a blockade, preventing them from entering.
- As a political party, *Die Rechte* aimed to disrupt the local administration by making a lot of requests to which the city was legally obliged to respond. Continuing the city's strategy as formulated in the 2011 action plan, the requests were spread among the administrations' departments, to share the burden.
- The VRW extremists organised martial arts events, with which they could earn money and which had the risk of normalising violence. In response, the city spread a brochure, imploring not to rent or sell buildings to the extremists, leading to a significantly lower number of events and demonstrations taking place.
- Recently there has been a larger focus on preventative measures. Due to lack of funds the city of Dortmund still mostly focuses on the individuals already involved in the far right, but they acknowledge the necessity of sound preventative measures and have initiated further cooperation with youth organisations and other CSOs.

Successes

Due to Dortmund's decade-long and thorough approach, **the VRWE situation in Dortmund has significantly improved**. Some examples of what has been achieved over the years:

- Since 2015 the **number of politically motivated acts of violence has decreased by 80%**, from 49 cases in 2015 to only 10 in 2019.
- One former leader left for Chemnitz and called Western Germany a 'lost cause'. **VRW presence has indeed dwindled**, but those that are still there are well connected amongst each other and also to VRW extremists in other countries, such as Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Greece.
- Over five years, **83 members of the VRWE movement have received prison sentences** for a total of 43 years (see also the 'Relevant practices' below).
- More and more citizens of Dortmund **openly oppose the VRWE movement**, which is –among others– expressed in public commemorations of those who fell victim to VRWE violence.
- While at the peak about 150 VRW extremists lived close together in several apartment buildings, today **only about 30** of them are left.
- There have been **no fatal victims of VRWE violence** since 2006.

Highlights of the discussion

- During the study visit and earlier RAN meetings on hotbeds of radicalisation, several aspects of a hotbed were identified and discussed:
 - Leaders of extremist groups in a hotbed share **'narratives of injustice, victimhood and a threat by an out-group'**¹. They offer the opportunity to be part of an elite group defending the (sub-) community and its core values and are willing to use violence to do so.
 - A hotbed appears to arise mostly in **sub-communities that look inward**, that are not interested in connecting with outside groups or (sub-) communities, and who aim to solve their own problems.
 - Whereas hotbeds centred around VRWE groups for a large part have **characteristics similar to Islamist extremist hotbeds**, there is one important difference. As VRW extremists often do not

¹ A. Ritzmann and R. Scheele, [The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation](#), RAN Conclusion paper (2020), p. 3

experience discrimination based on their ethnicity or religion, they decide to self-segregate and/or can even be the dominant (sub-) culture in a certain area.

- The location of a hotbed can be driven by practical reasons as well; their **situation in low-income neighbourhoods** might be caused by the fact that housing and real estate is more affordable, making it easier and less costly to obtain hold over a certain neighbourhood. This was clearly the case in Dortmund, especially in the Dorstfeld neighbourhood.
- The emergence of hotbeds of radicalisation and the factors that are at the source of it, still needs to be further researched. However, the first exploration of the topic has identified **two key factors** that seem to be relevant, when present at the same time:
 - "charismatic 'entrepreneurs of extremism' and
 - indifference and/or incompetence by local actors (government/civil society), who miss out the opportunity to intervene effectively early on"².
- Why Dortmund specifically became a hotbed is not entirely clear. In addition to the low rents in Dorstfeld, Dortmund is also a traffic hub, easy to reach by many modes of transport. In addition, there was already a small VRWE scene to build on. **All these factors combined** appear to have contributed to the arising of a hotbed.
- **Successes in the Dortmund approach** are largely due to cooperation between CSOs, police, local authorities and involved citizens. All parties respect each other and accept that their approaches differ. Moreover, in an effort to professionalise and optimise the approach, atypical and creative strategies were implemented. Lastly, the city played an important role in connecting and uniting relevant institutions.
- **Consistent and generous long-term financing of P/CVE programmes is essential.** (Local) authorities and police need to support organisations that counter the VRWE threat, both financially and practically. Without acknowledging there is a local issue, it can never be tackled.
- **Cooperation between the 'triangle' of police, local authorities and civil society** is essential and for this cooperation to be successful, there needs to be:
 - Respect and transparency among the cooperating partners;
 - Time and funds to build up a coordinated approach;
 - Trust among the partners and among citizens towards the institutions.

Recommendations

- Especially in the case of a very local hotbed, **individuals wanting to support P/CVE efforts** are often deterred to do so by fear of retaliation from the side of the extremists who live in the same neighbourhood. CSOs can support these individuals in finding a less visible role to play.
- To get a good view of a problematic neighbourhood, it is essential to first **understand how the neighbourhood works**, which challenges are present and what the level of social engagement is. This assessment goes further than purely demographic numbers, as a neighbourhood is shaped by the actors who live there. Valuable research can be done through social space analysis.
- To achieve a wholesome approach, **ample attention must be paid to the victims.** Whether an individual is a 'victim' should be viewed in a broad sense—this should not be limited to victims of violence, but should also include victims of intimidation, or the wider community that feels victimised by the VRWE threat. This support needs to be extended as early on as possible.

² A. Ritzmann and R. Scheele, [The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation](#), RAN Conclusion paper (2020), p. 4

- Part of **countering the extremist threat** is raising awareness about the role citizens, CSOs, housing corporations and entrepreneurs can play. This can be done through education, public debates and physically occupying the same space that the extremists aim to take over.
- Diminishing the influence of an extremist group means that some of its members will leave the group. Organise **sufficient support for formers** to help them reintegrate into the community.
- To prevent polarisation, **do not exclude the extremist group** but include them in public debates, where they can share their frustrations and ideas – within the boundaries of democratic principles. For safety reasons, Dortmund did exclude some of the local leaders (their 'charismatic entrepreneurs of extremism'), as they often used public gatherings to incite agitation. But group members who respect the principles of a democratic debate, have always been welcome.

Relevant practices

1. The **Dortmund police** has been an essential partner in the city's P/CVE approach. Tackling VRWE is a strategic focus for all 3 500 police officers and over the years the police switched from a responsive to a more pro-active approach. A zero-tolerance policy was implemented in relation to anything that was against the law, however on a small scale. Every possible measure was used to disturb the VRW scene, such as banning the use of certain words during demonstrations. All minor offenses of individuals linked to the VRWE group were gathered to make a profile and build a case against them. Thus, over the course of five years they managed to imprison 83 offenders for a total of 43 years.
2. **U-Turn** is an organisation that operates in the areas of prevention and intervention, supporting individuals that are vulnerable to getting involved in the VRWE scene, or who already are. Practitioners that are credible interlocutors for vulnerable individuals help U-Turn reach out and indicate which group or person could use help. Interventions can range from two weeks to several years, depending on how deeply affected an individual is by the ideology. Early intervention is essential as in some cases one can 'go down the rabbit hole' in just one month.
3. **BackUp** is an Information & Counselling Centre for victims of extreme right-wing, racist and antisemitic violence. They monitor violent acts of this nature and support victims, their relatives and the community surrounding the victim. BackUp (1) implores to recognise hate crimes and racism as pan-societal phenomena; (2) aims to prevent secondary victimisation and the reversal of perpetrator and victim; (3) emphasises that recognising attacks as racist and/or right-wing violence is key.
4. The **Quartiersdemokraten** (District Democrats) are a hyper-local professional network for the prevention of VRWE and promotion of democracy, focused on the area of Dorstfeld. They give advice to individuals and organisations and organise workshops in schools. Quartiersdemokraten conducted a social space analysis to gain insight into how the neighbourhood of Dorstfeld works. Quartiersdemokraten (1) helps citizens who are afraid of repercussions by the VRW extremists' play a less visible role in the fight against VRWE; (2) connects pro-democratic organisations; (3) reclaims physical spaces that were occupied by the VRW extremists by organising roundtables; (4) educates and raises awareness on the threat of VRWE; (5) supports those affected and empowers those who are committed.

Follow up

- Study visits to other highly affected areas (for instance by Islamist extremism or anti-government sentiments) could be well suited as a follow-up to this highly interesting study visit to Dortmund.
- It would be valuable to further explore the aspects that contribute to the arising of a hotbed of radicalisation.

Further reading

For more information on this topic, please read the following RAN papers:

- [RAN small-scale expert session 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation', 25 November 2020](#)
- [Factbook – Far-right extremism, December 2019](#)
- [RAN LOCAL Violent Right-wing Extremism in the Local Strategy, online event 28-29 September 2020](#)
- [RAN Webinar "Right-Wing Extremism: Local Lessons and Transnational Dimensions", 19 March 2021](#)