

SPOTLIGHT

APRIL 2022

POLARISATION

10 YEARS OF
RAN



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EDITORIAL

Events and crises, both inside and outside of the EU – such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine – can have a significant polarising effect on communities right across Europe. Such events give opportunities for terrorist and extremist groups to spread polarising narratives and disinformation, designed to exacerbate underlying and existing tensions and grievances, and in doing so, sow division among these communities.

Recent events in Ukraine alone, have given new opportunities for extremists and terrorists to radicalise and recruit. This can be seen in: the discrimination and victimisation of Russian minority communities across the EU and the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy narratives designed to divide public opinion about events in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the growing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the influx of foreign fighters into the country, and the largescale movement of refugees into neighbouring countries and across the EU, will only give more opportunities for extremists and terrorists to create dissension. Both the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic are evidence that events and crises can have an impact, not just on those immediately affected, but on communities and individuals right across the EU.

In this Spotlight, RAN practitioners and experts from outside of the network, share their insights on the polarisation challenge facing EU Member States today, and some of their work in addressing it. This Spotlight includes content on the impact of events such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge posed by violent left wing and violent right wing extremist influencing efforts, and approaches to creating a share identity and building community resilience.

Some of these topics have been addressed by RAN Practitioners through Working Group meetings, eLearning and other activities in 2021, and will be further explored in 2022. This Spotlight publication captures the highlights from some of these activities and points practitioners to where they can read and find out more.

As always, we want to hear from you! If you would like to contribute to future editions of Spotlight, or if you have ideas for an article, interview or feature, please get in touch with the RAN Practitioners communications team at ran@radaradvies.nl

The RAN Practitioners Staff

Contents

03

EDITORIAL
Digital Ecosystem

08

ARTICLE
Polarisation: A short introduction

14

PAPER
The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism

16

PODCAST
Polarisation in Europe today

18

PAPER
COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise

20

ARTICLE
Polarisation dynamics in the VLWAE sphere

26

PODCAST
VRWE and accelerationism

28

PROFILES
RAN Practitioners

30

PAPER
The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation

32

FEATURE
BRaVE project

38

PAPER
Preventing Polarisation by Creating a Shared Identity

40

FEATURE
Strengthening Resilience in MENA

46

INTERVIEW
Ten questions with... Toby Baldari

50

FEATURE
Dare to be Grey

56

HIGHLIGHTS
RAN Practitioners activity on polarisation



False Information

Checked by independent fact-checkers

[See Why](#)

ARTICLE: **Polarisation: A short introduction**



**Annelies
PAUWELS
and
Maarten
van ALSTEIN**

EU MEMBER STATES are increasingly concerned about polarisation tearing their societies apart. The many discussions on the topic within policy-making institutions and in the media reflect these concerns. In these debates, however, polarisation often remains undefined and is viewed through a one-sided negative frame. Polarisation is thus at risk of becoming a catch-all term that lumps together all kinds of disagreements, tensions and conflicts. When we take a look at the growing body of research on polarisation, a more nuanced perspective emerges. For policy-makers and practitioners who want to develop effective strategies to deal with polarisation, it is useful to take on board insights from this literature.

Polarisation – a multifaceted phenomenon

Polarisation comes in different forms. An important distinction can be made between ideological and affective polarisation. Ideological (or issue-based) polarisation refers to the sharpening of opinions, positions or beliefs on a specific issue within a group of like-minded people. The group moves from moderate towards more extreme views on the topic. This can increase the ideological distance with groups that adopt opposing views. Classic examples are differences of opinions between left and right or between progressives and conservatives, but ideological polarisation can also take place with regards to issues such as vaccination against COVID-19 or climate change-related policies.

Affective polarisation, on the other hand, refers to a growing social-emotional distance between groups. Mutual distrust increases and the groups start to show a growing aversion or hostility towards one another. Social identities and in- and out-group dynamics play an important role in affective polarisation. For instance, members of a group that advocates for or against climate action may start sharing broader social identities and world views. The originally ideological polarisation with opposing groups may then grow into us-vs-them thinking, increasing distrust and sometimes even hostility.

A common misconception in public discourse sees polarisation equal to conflict. Because they might require different approaches, for policy-makers and practitioners it is useful to make a distinction between the two – closely-related, but different – phenomena. Polarisation is about increasing distance and alienation, whereas conflict refers to clashes and confrontation.

The ambivalent dynamics of polarisation

Polarisation and group identification are not necessarily negative. They are part of an open, pluralistic society and can enrich the democratic debate. The sharpening of opinions and the binding of groups based on shared social identities can be the means to mobilise political ideas and activism. Thus, polarisation can be important to bring about social change, or

the emancipation of minorities. At the same time, there are serious risks associated with polarisation: an impoverishment of the public debate, the escalation of tensions, or too great a distance between social groups. Affective polarisation can bring about increasing aversion, hate and enmity. This can be toxic and harmful for societal relations and may lead to ruptures and crisis in democracy.

How to engage with polarisation?

How can practitioners and policy-makers navigate their way in the arena of polarisation? When to intervene – and how? An important first step involves identifying whether a particular situation of polarisation involves democratic or toxic and harmful polarisation. This judgment will greatly depend on how and in which context polarisation manifests itself, for instance the individuals or groups involved, the specific setting or place (e.g., social media, the classroom, a neighbourhood...), and the intensity of the polarisation. Decisions on when and how to intervene, we argue, can be usefully informed by a democratic and peace-oriented framework that leaves as much space as possible for the freedom of expression, a plurality of different voices and disagreement, even if this entails conflicts and tensions.

However, when (affective) polarisation becomes toxic and hostile, it will be necessary to monitor certain boundaries. On the one hand, these boundaries are determined by the legal framework. Violence (such as hate crimes or terrorism), the incitement to hatred and various forms of discrimination are proscribed in most Member States. On the other hand, polarisation is also delimited by ‘border areas’ constituted by the values and norms of democracy and non-violence. When verbal violence and increasing intergroup hostility take the upper hand and (ideological) polarisation becomes toxic and harmful, interventions to de-escalate the tensions will be necessary. And when polarisation results in forms of extremism that denounce democracy and tend towards violence, policy-makers and practitioners will also need to take (preventive) action.

The question of how to practically intervene in cases of any harmful polarisation is beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of this text, it suffices to refer to the many models and techniques that were developed in recent years, inspired by approaches such as polarisation management, mediation and conflict transformation. Determining which technique is useful in a given situation will strongly depend on the particularities of the case, the context and the groups involved.

A more extended version of this article will appear shortly on the website of the Flemish Peace Institute (<https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/en/>).

Maarten Van Alstein is a senior researcher at the Flemish Peace Institute. His research focuses on conflict transformation and peace education.

Annelies Pauwels is a researcher at the Flemish Peace Institute, where she focuses on the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

“Affective polarisation, on the other hand, refers to a growing social-emotional distance between groups. Mutual distrust increases and the groups start to show a growing aversion or hostility towards one another. Social identities and in- and out-group dynamics play an important role in affective polarisation.”

Radicalisation Awareness Network



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RAN LOCAL

08/12/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL: Dealing with the changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism
25-26 November 2021, online event

The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism

Key outcomes

The landscape of polarisation, radicalisation, and extremism has gone through many developments in the last few years. Local coordinators have focused and structured their P/CVE strategies on the threats coming from violent Islamist extremism. However, the current landscape of radicalisation contains new trends that might live up to the same level of threat as violent Islamism. This paper is based on the insights from the RAN LOCAL meeting on 25 and 26 November 2021. It presents practitioners' views on the landscape of polarisation, radicalisation, and extremism that is currently visible at the local level, how has this landscape changed? And what is needed to prepare the local P/CVE strategy to deal with it?

The key outcomes of the discussions are mostly aimed at local P/CVE coordinators but can also be of interest for first-line practitioners working in the field of P/CVE and dealing with (parts of) the changing landscape.

Conspiracy narratives and their breeding ground for violence and right-wing extremism were the most prominent developments mentioned as well as, to a lesser extent, left-wing extremism and radical environmentalism. As such, participants and local coordinators shared concerns about maintaining the (online) multiagency cooperation and the political support and funding for their P/CVE activities as well as the need for new knowledge and skills. Yet, participants have recommended the construction of an inclusive, flexible, ideologically neutral local P/CVE strategy in which human rights and democratic values are guaranteed and respected.

Radicalisation Awareness Network



CONCLUSION PAPER
The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism
Page 3 of 6

Regarding the **cooperation between organisations** a mixed image was visible during the meeting. For some participants, working online has led to an increase in contact and cooperation. However, for other participants, it has not improved over the last period of time as topics like organised crime are more in the picture than P/CVE work.

The majority of participants shared their opinion that more (and new) knowledge and / or skills for practitioners are needed to deal with the current developments in P/CVE. However, they stressed that the existing skills and knowledge can still be used and built on. The specific needs that have been mentioned here were:

- Promote media literacy, fact checking and recognising fake news and conspiracy narratives
- Social media analysis
- Adapting frameworks like prediction factors to new circumstances
- Creating more awareness of the new forms of radicalisation

During the meeting, the efforts that the **city of Amsterdam** has made in **broadening the scope of the P/CVE programme** were presented and discussed. The process of adapting the P/CVE programme is still ongoing, so no clear-cut answers were given. Speaking about the experiences and challenges of Amsterdam, proved to be an interesting way to discuss the current changes in the local P/CVE approach.

There are four constituting elements in the P/CVE programme of Amsterdam:

1. Providing a *knowledge and information centre* for the municipality and its partners to gain insight in trends and developments and to analyse them. Risk assessments, analyses of phenomena and monitors are being written, in cooperation with scientific partners like the University of Amsterdam.
2. Organising a *professional network*, including different kinds of professionals that work with people vulnerable to radicalisation. The professionals involved are being offered a training programme. Account managers within the professional organisations are the bridge builders between the municipality and their own organisations. In dialogue with the professionals in the network, the city of Amsterdam creates an image to describe what is going on in the city and to signal possible radicalisation within the city.
3. *General prevention* programme: a programme to prevent vulnerable people from radicalising, using interventions aimed at increasing resilience.
4. *Mitigate risks*: when concrete risks of non-violent or violent radicalisation are visible, a case-based approach is used to try to bring the people involved 'back into society'. These risks can be flagged by professionals, using a specific hotline.

How is the city adapting its P/CVE approach?

Every six months the city writes a threat assessment. Over the last period, this assessment has been diversified. Currently, different types of extremism are incorporated in the assessment (Islamist, right-wing, anti-government sentiments, left-wing, animal rights and environmental extremism and / or activism). Mostly activism can be observed from these ideologies and currently, a diffused and fragmented landscape is visible in Amsterdam.

The city has tried to make their analytical frameworks (for instance the framework to assess an individual's behaviour) more *ideologically neutral*, as it used to be focussed on Islamist extremism. This has been done to be able to determine the risk of violence coming from different types of radicalisation. Incorporating forms of non-violent extremism, is also challenging. The city has tried to define the key elements of the democratic legal order, in order to be able to determine, when the democratic legal order is (possibly) being undermined.

Thirdly, Amsterdam has reached out to their *network of professionals* to create awareness of diverse forms of radicalisation and to offer training. A survey was used to learn from the practitioners about their ideas and experiences. Most professionals and others (press, politicians) in the city only think of Islamist extremism, when speaking about radicalisation. To broaden the scope, the mayor of Amsterdam is frequently speaking about new forms in the city council, for instance. And as right-wing (accelerationist) extremism tends to be visible with rather young people, there has been an improved commitment towards secondary schools.

RAN PRACTITIONERS PODCAST

The latest episode of RAN Practitioners' podcast series, 'RAN in Focus', takes a look at the nature of the current polarisation challenges in Europe today. The programme discusses the impact of recent events, such as the Ukraine crisis, and approaches to dealing with it. The podcast hears from three experts, including Anna Triandafyllidou from the BRaVE project, Bjorn Wansink from Utrecht University, and Anneli Portman, the co-chair of the RAN LOCAL Working Group. You can listen to the podcast in full [here](#).

PODCAST
POLARISATION IN EUROPE TODAY

APRIL 2022
POLARISATION





COVID-19 Narratives that Polarise

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to help teachers and youth workers discuss polarising narratives related to COVID-19 in the class or on the street. The input used comes from the knowledge of practitioner experts present during a two-day meeting (24-25 September) organised by the Youth & Education Working Group from the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) with the theme COVID-19 stories that polarise.

COVID-19 is a "wicked problem" ⁽¹⁾, meaning that the problem has severe negative consequences for many groups and no straightforward "cure all" solution. It is a global disaster and has left many feeling a **sense of uncertainty about their health, financial situation and future**. Uncertainty caused by crisis can lead to heightened distrust of others with different cultural or political backgrounds; it also can make people more conformist and one's moral judgements can become harsher ⁽²⁾. Due the COVID-19 crisis, **policymakers are confronted with conflicting priorities between societal groups and they have to make difficult political choices**. Because of the wickedness of the problem and high societal impact, youngsters can disagree about possible solutions, which can make discussions controversial. The beliefs that youngsters have about COVID-19 are often influenced by sources on the internet, where both reliable information and misinformation are available. In a polarised environment where youngsters are under pressure, they can start to believe misinformation and mistrust can arise about what could be behind the virus. As a result, they might connect events that are not necessarily connected to reality, leading to conspiracy theories. It is important to note that not all criticism on government policy in relation to COVID-19 is conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy thinking refers to the belief that there are secret and hidden organisations that influence our lives without being aware of it ⁽³⁾. Believing in a conspiracy can be problematic as it can lead to polarisation, radicalisation and eventually undermine public health in relation COVID-19 ⁽⁴⁾.

In this paper we will discuss how teachers and youth workers can respond to polarising narratives and conspiracy theories around COVID-19. We consider schools as labs for democracy in which students can learn to disagree and learn to deal and act with different opinions harmoniously ⁽⁵⁾. During discussions, students can learn how to express disagreement with each other, within the boundaries of respect and moral decency towards each other. Teachers

⁽¹⁾ Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155-169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730>

⁽²⁾ Van Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Chiockoa, A., Cikara, M. ... Willer, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 460-471. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z>

⁽³⁾ van Prooijen, J.-W. (2018). *The psychology of conspiracy theories*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

⁽⁴⁾ See also: ISD: COVID-19 disinformation briefing No.2. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/>

⁽⁵⁾ Nordbruch, G., & Sieckelinc, S. (2018). *Transforming schools into labs for democracy. A companion to preventing violent radicalisation through education*, Policy Paper. RAN Centre of Excellence.

Imagine you are a teacher in a secondary school and, during a lesson, Michael (fictitious student name) says:

"I do not trust the government and I believe they are trying to control us. I have seen many on the internet (for example celebrity/influencer X) who state that the government is not transparent about how deadly the virus is. Also, when looking at the numbers... the effectiveness of the state restrictions does not outweigh the burden for us as young people. I'm still young; I'm totally done with all these restricting rules and will no longer follow up on them. I'll go party with my friends."

This example served as one of the case studies at the RAN Y&E meeting, and we used the reaction quadrant to discuss the pros and cons of different types of reactions that teachers and youth workers can give. All the participants, working in 12 European countries, agreed that this case study was realistic for their situation.

Cool-down

During the meeting we first discussed the option that a teacher could remove Michael from the classroom. Another option is to avoid the conversation with Michael at that moment but leave him in the classroom. According to the quadrant, both options would be depicted as cool-down, because it would likely harm the relationship with Michael and the content would not be discussed. On the other hand a teacher or youth worker does not always have the knowledge to directly respond to a pupil. By avoiding the discussion the teacher has more time to think about their response and to search for trustful information, which can help to to deliberately design a lesson about the topic

Possible benefits:

- The teacher gains time to think and can prepare a lesson.
- The emotions of Michael and the teacher can be (too) intense and they have time to cool down.
- A clear norm is communicated to Michael.

Possible negatives:

- The relationship with Michael is likely harmed as there is no possibility to express his ideas and emotions.
- The content is not discussed.

Counter-narrative

Another approach we discussed was that a teacher could start convincing Michael that he is wrong by immediately presenting a counter-narrative. This narrative should be based on rational criteria in order to undermine the arguments of Michael. Most participants of the RAN Y&E meeting agreed that this confrontational reaction ignores the perspective of Michael and will likely make the relationship worse, for there was strong doubt if Michael would even be open to listening to the teacher. Even more, from the statement of Michael, it remains unclear as to what extent he really believes in a COVID-19 conspiracy theory or if he is worried and critical about the government. Therefore, first, further exploration of Michaels' beliefs might be wise.

ARTICLE: Reciprocal radicalisation and polarisation dynamics in the VLWAE sphere



Francesco
FARINELLI

THE CHANGING landscape of violent extremism requires specific and tailored responses from EU Member States to address the threat of this phenomenon in all its forms, including the polarisation dynamics in society triggered by violent events. Furthermore, the existence of transnational online extremist communities greatly increases the potential for emulation. This demonstrates how ideological drivers of radicalisation are frequently mixed with individuals combining elements from various extremist ecologies to create their divisive narratives and their ideological ecosystem.

“Although these violent clashes may be sparked by a small number of violent protesters, these occurrences may encourage nonviolent activists’ acceptance of the use of violence. Furthermore, whatever the dynamics of the violent incidents are, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists may utilise these fights to build divisive narratives, resulting in a more polarised environment. According to some sources, these incidents have a significant effect on the individual radicalisation processes, even for people who have never been affiliated with VLWAE groups.”

The internet’s role in facilitating transnational communities, the growth of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE), and battlefronts near Western Europe, such as Syria and Ukraine, all boosted the formation of international relationships within the context of Violent Left-Wing and Anarchist Extremism (VLWAE). International linkages are prominent, especially among violent anarchist and “independent” cells. Furthermore, despite conflicting empirical evidence regarding ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ (the fact that extremist groups and individuals can feed off one another in a cycle of rising rhetoric or acts of violence), it is nonetheless a key feature in the polarisation and radicalisation dynamics that would deserve greater attention from all the actors engaged in P/CVE.

Where we see the most significant effect that VLWAE can have on social polarisation is through the reciprocal radicalisation cycle that exists between VLWAE and VRWE. VLWAE groups have used anti-establishment sentiments, paired with “us versus them” portrayals of society, to help drive polarising narratives that highlight differences between themselves, the established political order, and right-wing extremist groups. Unsurprisingly, a key driver of far-left radicalisation mentioned in the existing literature, is violent clashes with police or with VRWE organisations.

Although these violent clashes may be sparked by a small number of violent protesters, these occurrences may encourage nonviolent activists’ acceptance of the use of violence. Furthermore, whatever the dynamics of the violent incidents are, violent left-wing and anarchist extremists may utilise these fights to build divisive narratives, resulting in a more polarised environment. According to some sources, these incidents have a significant effect on the individual radicalisation processes, even for people who have never been affiliated with VLWAE groups. Indeed, these clashes have been proven to be significant turning points and radicalisation moments, during which people who may have been passively supportive of an extremist worldview may become violent, sometimes exacerbating systemic cycles of violence.

Current polarising narratives and actions of contemporary VLWAE organisations have been influenced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic crisis. One common theme that is reoccurring in narratives used by VLWAE groups is the justification of the use of violence due to an unjust social and economic order. Typically, these narratives involve some form of outrage against a socioeconomic issue, the judicial system, environmentalism, neo-imperialism, or other forms of extremism. These types of issues are often accelerated by the exploitation of pre-existing anti-establishment sentiments, with the aim of increasing social and political tensions, intensifying polarisation, and hastening systemic change or collapse.

During the pandemic, VLWAE was discovered to be actively participating in protest movements in some EU countries, alongside a diverse group of militants and activists, including members of VRWE organisations, anti-vaxxers, anti-lockdown protesters, conspiracy narrative believers, and others. Left-wing and anarchist extremists, according to Europol, addressed a wide range of topics in 2020, including scepticism about technological and scientific achievements, COVID-19 containment measures, and environmental issues.

Conspiracy myths, a powerful polarising tool able to transcend the boundaries of various extremism, have also been boosted and disseminated by VLWAE, especially through narratives linking technophobia and the COVID-19 pandemic. A switch from online conspiracy narratives to violence perpetrated in the real world was also documented: 10 of the 24 VLWAE attacks documented by Europol in 2020 included attacks on 3G/4G/5G infrastructures (e.g., repeater bridges, or cell towers) or other telecommunications network components.

In spite of this complexity and broad composition, VLWAE trends and characteristics have received a low level of scrutiny or investigation from researchers across the EU. This has led to significant knowledge gaps regarding precise numbers of membership of these groups, how these groups use the internet and social media, what are the driving motivators behind

radicalisation processes, methods for how to identify different groups, how these groups overlap or interact, the international reach of these organisations, and the interlinkages and shared characteristics that exist between VLWAE and other forms of violent extremism.

To gain a better understanding of polarisation in society, more comprehensive studies are required on the above-mentioned topics so that knowledge regarding motivating factors, dissemination techniques, as well as more precise facts and figures of this phenomenon can be established.

Dr. Francesco Farinelli is a Programme Director at the European Foundation for Democracy and a member of the EU Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Expert Pool. His expertise and publications include the study of fake news, propaganda and conspiracy ideologies in media narratives and their impact on society.

An example of a project which deals with the topic of reciprocal radicalisation can be found later on in this Spotlight – the BRaVE project.

RAN PRACTITIONERS PODCAST

A recent episode of RAN Practitioners' podcast series, 'RAN in Focus', explores the rise of accelerationism in the Violent Right-Wing Extremist (VRWE) movement and its polarising 'race war' narrative. The podcast welcomes two experts – Will Baldet from the Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right, and Annelies Pauwels, from the Flemish Peace Institute – to help us to understand what it is, where it has come from, why it is different from more traditional strands of VRWE and why it poses such a threat today. You can listen to the podcast in full [here](#).

PODCAST
ACCELERATIONISM IN THE VRWE MOVEMENT

APRIL 2022
POLARISATION



PROFILES: **Annelies PAUWELS** **Will BALDET**



Annelies PAUWELS

Annelies Pauwels is a researcher at the Flemish Peace Institute in Brussels, where she focuses on violent extremism and terrorism. Prior to that, she conducted research on conflict and crime prevention for several international organisations, including the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). Her previous research projects have focused, among others, on jihadist and right-wing terrorism, radicalisation in prison settings, and the EU's terrorism prevention initiatives and cooperation.



Will BALDET

Will Baldet is a Policy & Practitioner Fellow at the Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and is a Senior Advisor to the UK Government on Prevent. He has designed counter-radicalisation workshops on violent right wing extremism (VRWE) for delivery in schools, colleges and communities and sits on the UK's national working group for developing and implementing Local Government solutions to VRWE. Will has also been a consultant for the Office for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has supported Governments in the development of their P/CVE programmes and was the UK representative for the 2015 UN General Assembly Youth Summit in New York.

A paper, published by RAN Practitioners in November 2020, entitled 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation', looks at why some neighbourhoods turn into hotbeds while others, facing comparable challenges and factors, do not. The paper looks at both Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist hotbeds, including their intra-community dynamics, and provides a set of recommendations for the prevention of the causes behind them. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

Radicalisation Awareness Network



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23/12/2020

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN small-scale expert session 'The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation'
Online, 25 November 2020

The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation

Key outcomes

While violent extremism is a global phenomenon, extremists start their radicalisation process in their local context. Radicalisation to violent extremism, however, is not happening everywhere. Even between cities, neighbourhoods or communities that are comparable in regards to political, social or socioeconomic circumstances or grievances, there are often very different radicalisation-related developments. In other words, some neighbourhoods struggle with a significantly higher number of radicalised individuals than others, making them "hotbeds of radicalisation". Why do some neighbourhoods turn into hotbeds while others, facing comparable challenges and factors, do not?

During the meeting, Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist hotbeds were analysed and discussed. While the topic is still under-researched, two **key factors** have been identified that seem to be particularly relevant **when present at the same time: 1) charismatic "entrepreneurs of extremism", and 2) indifference and/or incompetence by local actors (government/civil society) who miss out on the opportunity to intervene early on.** Recommendations on the prevention or countering of hotbeds of radicalisation were discussed and collected.

Radicalisation Awareness Network
RAN

CONCLUSION PAPER
The Role of Hotbeds of Radicalisation
Page 4 of 6

While the topic is still under-researched and needs more input from practitioners and researchers, two key factors have been identified that seem to be particularly relevant when present at the same time:

- 1) charismatic "entrepreneurs of extremism", and
- 2) indifference and/or incompetence by local actors (government/civil society), who miss out on the opportunity to intervene effectively early on.

Many other factors like grievances, ideologies and psychological needs of individuals were discussed but only seemed necessary yet not sufficient factors for the development of hotbeds of radicalisation. When charismatic entrepreneurs of extremism and an indifferent or incompetent social and political environment are added to the situation, they seem to have a **tipping-point function** that could lead a sub-community or neighbourhood into becoming a hotbed.

The online dimension of hotbeds of radicalisation

The online dimension of hotbeds of radicalisation can be understood as twofold. One dimension is based on the **online activities of physical extremist groups**, promoting their narratives and ideology and aiming at recruiting members and supporters. Here, social media and video sharing platforms have played, and sometimes still play, a key role in serving as areas of operation for these groups. Pressure by civil society and policymakers has led to increased efforts by the tech companies to deplatform illegal content. Upcoming EU legislation like the Terrorist Content Online Directive and the Digital Services Act aim at mandating drastically increased effectiveness and transparency standards of social media and video sharing companies when policing their platforms for illegal content, since voluntary efforts have proven to be insufficient (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.).

The second dimension is that of an (almost) exclusively online hotbed of radicalisation, where individuals co-create a space for fellow extremists who do not necessarily want to connect physically with each other or an extremist group but **feel connected** as an "unorganised collective" that shares specific extremist and anti-democratic narratives. Here, mostly unmoderated subgroups of image boards (e.g. 4chan, 8chan, Meguca) and online gaming-related platforms (e.g. Steam, Twitch) can serve as hotbeds that, in some cases, have inspired violent extremist/terrorist acts.

The similarities to the physical hotbeds appear obvious and the same functionality seems to apply. For online hotbeds to exist, they need: 1) (virtual) entrepreneurs of extremism, and 2) indifference and/or incompetence by the platform-owning companies and the responsible government bodies who miss out on the opportunity to intervene effectively early on.

BRaVE

Building Resilience against Violent
Extremism and Polarisation

VIOLENT EXTREMISM and polarisation pose serious challenges for many countries. In Europe, we are witnessing a reciprocal polarisation characterised by two types of violent extremism: right-wing and jihadist. A variety of strategies are employed to address such seemingly twin polarisation processes and prevent these kinds of extremists from engaging in violent acts.

FEATURE

Zsuzsa VIDRA
Michael ZELLER
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The Horizon 2020 project BraVE – Building Resilience against Violent Extremism (<http://brave-h2020.eu/>) (2019–2021) reviewed nearly 700 policies, programmes and institutions dealing with violent extremism, polarisation and resilience in 10 European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom). Each of these entities (which are available in our database and interactive map: <http://brave-h2020.eu/map> were implemented between 2014 and 2019 in one or more of the ten countries studied. Drawing on existing evaluations - including secondary studies, reports, and interviews - we produced a qualitative meta-synthesis which allowed us to identify promising and problematic anti-jihadist and anti-far-right practices.

Our review showed that different methods are used to make communities more resilient to polarisation, preventing violent extremism. The ten countries we investigated offer many examples of promising practices in the field. The main features of such practices can be summarised as:

- focusing on all dimensions of social exclusion when attempting to target polarisation and extremism through social integration
- promoting cooperation among governmental bodies and different policy fields
- establishing partnerships between all stakeholders
- giving priority to personalised approaches
- promoting democratic values while avoiding assimilationist tones
- recognising that fighting far-right extremism is best targeted through education focusing on democratic values, human rights, and critical thinking

At the same time all countries studied face similar problematic practices when it comes to countering polarisation and preventing violent extremism policies. These include:

- the “securitisation trap” (securitisation refers to the oversimplification and framing of all social and political challenges as a security problem) that stigmatises the

- communities involved, especially Muslims
- a tendency to pay disproportionate attention to jihadist extremism over far-right extremism
- lack of state intervention in policies dealing with far-right extremists
- lack of impact assessment and evaluation of policies and programmes

Tackling violent extremism and polarisation requires a double-thrusted policy approach: while one thrust targets current manifestations of violent extremism, the other is aimed at reducing the potential for cases to emerge in the future. We refer to these two policy thrusts as treatment and prevention respectively.

Treatment interventions address people who are already involved in violent extremism or are active in violent extremist milieus. Programmes aimed at turning such people away from violent extremism must take into account factors believed to drive such behaviour. Confirming previous research, our study found the following factors to be key:

- A conducive environment (‘push’ factors), such as community segregation, relative deprivation or racism, and discrimination
- ‘Pull’ factors such as opportunities to actively redress perceived political injustice, the prospect of a positive reward
- Discourse involving exclusionary identities, mainstream disengagement, and psychological stress
- Mobilising networks presenting charismatic recruiters, online radicalisation activities, and an antagonistic environment

Prevention policies address individuals and groups with latent potential for involvement in violent extremism and associated milieus. Such policies and programmes aim to build resilient communities and imbue individuals with skills that make them resilient. These policies promote cohesion and healthy engagement at two levels:

- community level (macro and meso):
 - community cohesion and support, collective identity, social inclusion;
 - positive political engagement.
- individual level (micro):
 - complex/positive social identity, sense of belonging, pro-social messaging;
 - encouraging online resilience/education.

A fuller analysis of both promising and problematic practices, looking separately at the policies and programmes tackling jihadist and those addressing right-wing violent extremism is offered at the BraVE Policy Brief:

<http://brave-h2020.eu/repository/PB-BRAVE-final-version.pdf>


Anna Triandafyllidou is the Scientific Coordinator of the EU-funded Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) project, and has recently taken up a position as Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration at Ryerson University.

Find more examples of projects which address polarisation in the RAN Practitioners Collection of Inspiring Practices [here](#).







A paper, published by RAN Practitioners in November 2020, entitled 'Preventing Polarisation by Creating a Shared Identity', provides practitioners with guidance on how the building of a shared identity can be integrated into a local campaign (by practitioners, communities, authorities) or city strategy (by local authorities) and contribute to building resilience and the prevention of polarisation. You can read the paper in full [here](#).

Radicalisation Awareness Network



Webpage: ec.europa.eu/ran

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14/12/2020

CONCLUSION PAPER
*RAN event – RAN FC&S in collaboration with RAN LOCAL, RAN C&N, RAN Y&E
 10 and 13 November 2020 - Digital meeting*

Preventing Polarisation and Building Resilience by Creating a Shared Identity Dos and Don'ts

Key outcomes


In a fast-moving, increasingly complex and polarised world, it can be difficult to find common grounds amongst cities' residents and different communities on a local level. In order to develop a stronger identification and sense of belonging with a city or community for all individuals, it can help to create a 'collective' or 'shared' identity. This paper focuses on the outcomes of the joint RAN FC&S meeting (with RAN LOCAL, RAN C&N and RAN Y&E) on this topic. During this meeting, participants discussed how the building of a shared identity can be integrated into a local campaign (by practitioners, communities, authorities, etc.) or city strategy (by local authorities) and contribute to building resilience and the prevention of polarisation.

All outcomes of this meeting are captured in a **list of dos and don'ts** for people who want to create city strategy and/or incorporate a campaign that contributes to a shared identity. These are the key points to take into account:

- Possible **elements of a shared identity**, such as the celebration of common local traditions, shared values, inclusive local events, shared urban spaces or a shared history.
- It is necessary to find **the right balance between a bottom-up and a top-down approach**.
- Identity is constantly evolving, which makes a campaign or strategy a **long-term process**.
- Pay attention to **language and rhetoric** in your campaign, i.e. think of the importance of inclusive communication, tailoring your language to your target audience, and the use of *storytelling* with real stories and testimonials.
- A **representation of a diversity of groups and people** (ethnic, gender, age and community groups) in your city and in your team is important to make your strategy work.

This paper is meant for all individuals who want to create or strengthen a shared identity with their strategy or campaign, such as local coordinators, community representatives, communication experts and teachers. For more inspiration, a list of existing examples is available on the last page of this paper.

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network
(RAN)



Radicalisation Awareness Network



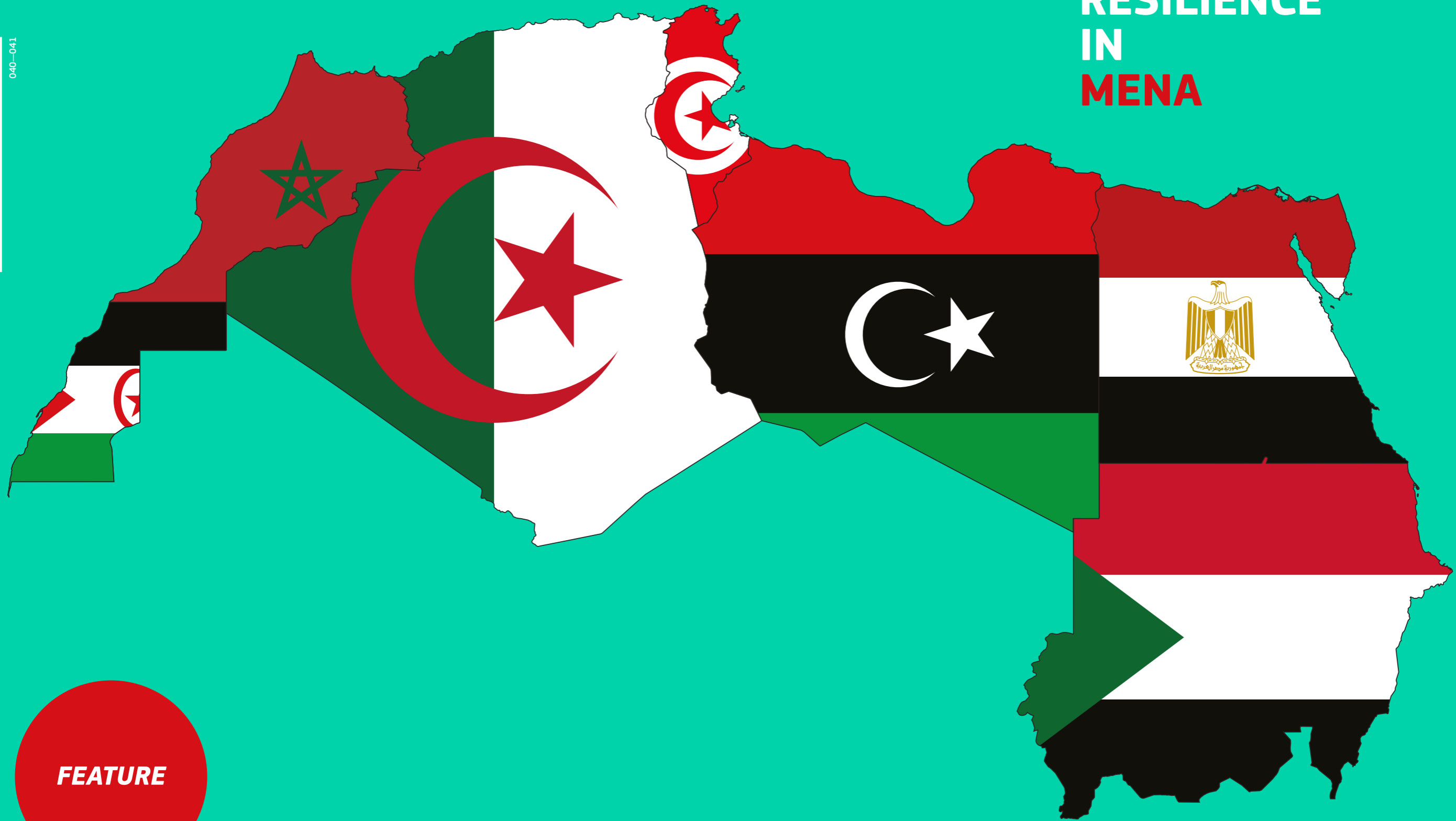
CONCLUSION PAPER
 Preventing polarisation and building resilience by creating a shared identity
 Page 3 of 4

<p>Understand that the identity-building process is never finished and is constantly evolving. The campaign needs to be able to include and react to new or local developments.</p> <p>Try to reach out to the silent majority to have support in the longer term.</p>	 <p>A long-term process</p>	<p>Avoid short-term campaigns. Often the failure of these initiatives is that they are used as a "plaster" and often have no sustainable, long-lasting impact (unless it is incorporated in a long-term strategy).</p>
<p>Do make sure that the language is inclusive, tailored to the community and adapted to the local context.</p> <p>Be prepared for anti-shared identity rhetorics.</p> <p>Narratives and stories should reflect citizens' everyday lives.</p> <p>Employ testimonials and role models.</p> <p>Use visuals and videos and make sure all citizens feel represented.</p>	 <p>Campaign, rhetoric and language</p>	<p>Don't ignore or focus too much on differences: if you forget to normalise diversity, not all people will feel represented.</p> <p>Don't focus too much on the simplicity of stories: allow for complexity, nuances and multi-faced identities.</p>
<p>Ensure a varied representation of different religious and ethnic groups, gender and culture respective to your city.</p> <p>Try to ensure that the diversity of the community is mirrored in the team that carries out the campaign.</p>	 <p>Diversity</p>	<p>Don't focus only on the biggest community or on specific minorities only. For example when you focus on a religious identity, other groups without this identity do not identify with your narrative.</p>
 <p>Quote "Commonalities are characteristic for residents in the same community or city: We all use the city, we use the urban spaces, and for everyone, specific anecdotes, stories and emotions are linked to these places. Use them."*</p>		

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network
(RAN)



STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE IN MENA



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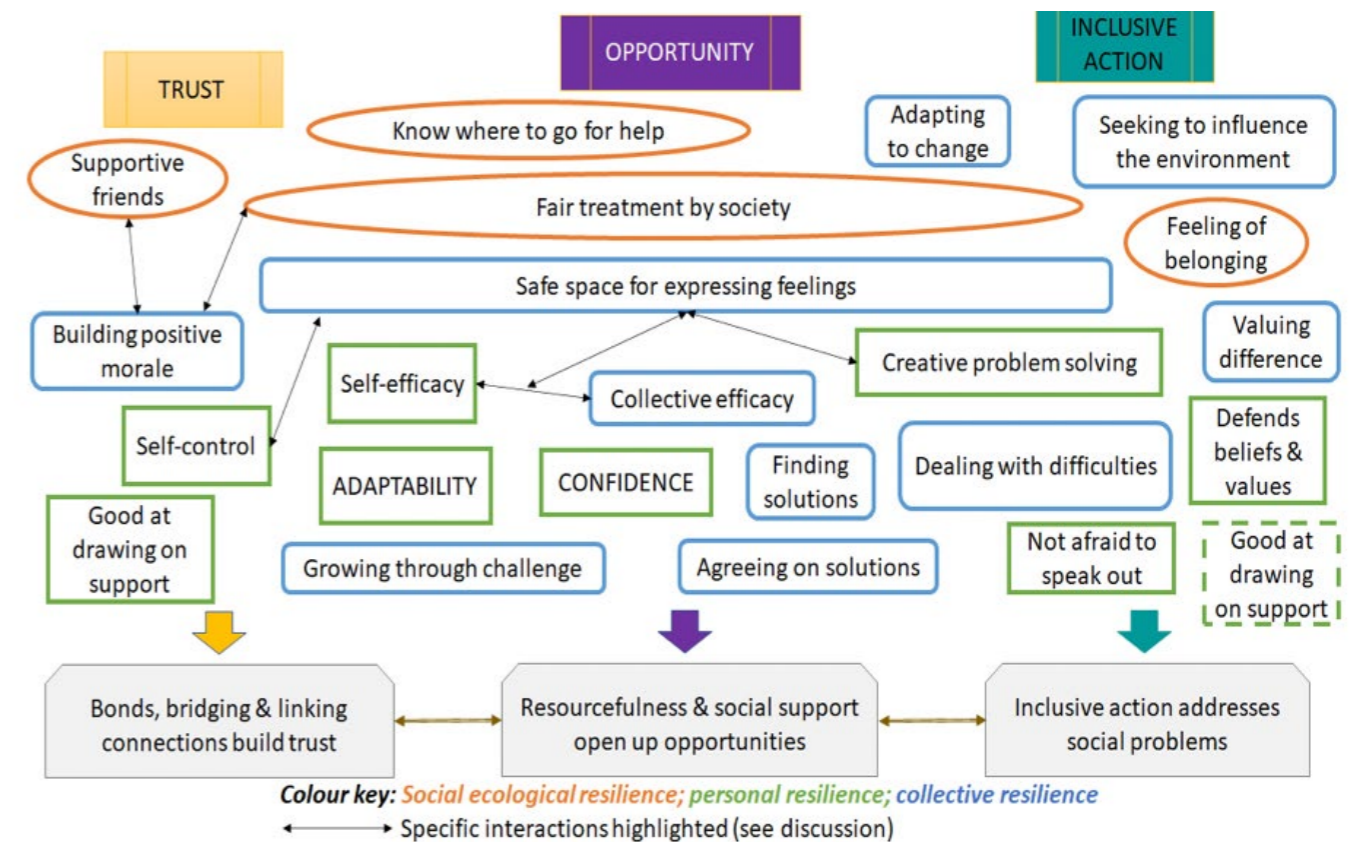
FEATURE

**Miranda
WILLIAMSON**

Over the past five years, British Council has developed and run Strengthening Resilience (SR) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a €13m EU-funded programme. The programme has worked with young people, civil society, government actors and local media initiatives to increase the resilience of young people and their communities to a range of harms in some of the most marginalised areas in Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan. Treating resilience as complex and dynamic, and with collective action at its core, the intervention design was inclusive and focused on ‘opening up’ possibilities and perspectives for diverse groups of young people – in the face of trends - including polarisation - which seek to narrow perspectives. The aim was to facilitate the accessing and shaping of resilience resources systematically across the following levels:

- **INDIVIDUAL:** A person’s capacity to recover, keep going and grow through adversity; a dynamic process of accessing and shaping personal and social resources, to survive and thrive.
- **COLLECTIVE:** A group’s recovery, sustainability and growth in the face of adversity, through individual and collective efforts; a dynamic process of activating and shaping social ties and other resources, to survive and thrive.
- **COMMUNITY:** Context relevant outcomes related to specific aspects of community resilience, focusing particularly on social connections (bonding, bridging and linking) as resilience resources.
- **COMMUNICATIVE:** The capacity of individuals and groups to thrive through self-expression and the cultivation of positive relationships among media, citizens and society, in the face of harmful media trends that have a narrowing effect, including the escalation of partisanship, polarisation and distrust.

The below graphic provides a visual synthesis of the resilience themes and main changes across the four countries measured at the end of the second phase. It shows the ways in which these capacities and resources mutually reinforce each other across the different levels of resilience.



The strengthened individual and collective resources and capacities referenced in the above diagram are of obvious and direct relevance to the issue of increasing polarisation – not least, ‘valuing difference’, ‘feeling of belonging’, ‘fair treatment by society’, ‘adaptability’, (which includes non-black and white thinking) etc. Likewise at the community level, ‘bridging’ connections across different social groups/identities, which build trust, is fundamental to strategies of depolarisation and which was core to the programme’s intent and effect. Similarly, through the youth-led communications activity, four ‘communicative resilience’ resources were strengthened – Agency and Influence, Persistence, Transforming, Connection and Caring – all of which have been shown to counter the tendency of social media norms to increased polarisation online.

Throughout its lifespan, the programme...

- directly built the resilience of over 2,000 young people in communities with a high incidence of violent extremist recruitment, through its social development and citizenship programming.
- delivered over 200 Collective Action Projects designed and implemented by young people, civil society and local authorities responding directly to priority issues within these communities, with tens of thousands of indirect beneficiaries.
- built the capacity of over 50 CSOs and trained them in effective communication approaches to engage youth audiences, resulting in more than 60 community campaigns.
- delivered 5 national communication campaigns and hundreds of ‘episodes’, ‘podcasts’, and other youth focused media arts initiatives, building the capacity of youth-led social media broadcasters, and reaching more than 50 million views online.

- was the main partner to the Lebanese Government’s PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) Unit in the preparation and effective delivery of 9 sectoral workshops, designed to consult on the development of the government’s PVE National Action Plan. The process included approx. 750 representatives of government, CSOs, private sector, academia, etc.
- engaged 43 NGOs, 18 think tanks, 62 policy makers, 18 academics and 10 donors to share approaches.

Find more examples of media literacy projects in the RAN Practitioners Collection of Inspiring Practices [here](#).

Interview: Ten Questions with... Toby Baldari



**Toby
BALDARI**

SPOTLIGHT asked Toby Baldari, a practitioner who tackles polarisation at the local level ten questions about his work for the Local Integrated Safety Cell in Belgium.

1. What are the polarisation challenges in your community?

My region, Limburg, is made up of smaller cities and villages. Polarisation in this region is therefore not the same as in a big city like Brussels or Antwerp. Most of the challenges are not as visible because people don't have the tendency to express themselves explicitly towards others. The main factor that causes polarisation is diversity in the community. Many people are not accustomed to living with minorities and other nationalities and cultures. As more foreigners find their way to the region, their presence causes an increase in polarisation.

2. How have events such as the COVID-19 pandemic changed this?

The rules enforced by government to tackle COVID caused a lot of polarisation. For example, the negative image of young people hanging around in the streets caused anxiety and anger, especially between elderly people and students. COVID caused aggravations and frustrations to come to the surface and intensified negative feelings towards one another.

3. Tell us about the Local Integrated Safety Cell?

This Cell was initially created in 2014, when a large number of young people left Belgium for Syria to fight for ISIS. At this time, cases of radicalisation were much more present. But we learned that polarisation is also a reason for radicalisation processes to occur. But even more the presence of online polarisation (e.g. the alt-right/extreme right) has increased drastically. In the Cell we detect these tendencies and cover cases that are problematic or can possibly become problematic.

4. Who is involved?

There are many organisations involved, including the police, local government, social workers, schools, social housing organisations, information officers and youth workers. We try to motivate this network to work together and share as much information as we possibly can so that together we can prevent radical ideas turning into radical actions.

5. And what does the Cell do?

We gather periodically to discuss cases and we organise trainings and webinars to educate the network of organisations on radicalisation processes and polarisation dynamics. For the moment, we are focusing on the online aspect of both polarisation and radicalisation. We also encourage local governments to embed prevention work in their vision and organisation.

6. How does it tackle polarisation?

The most important aspect of the Cell is the network. This network will be trained and informed and expanded. At the same time we are augmenting the awareness of polarisation and radicalisation within the network. This way we can easily detect polarisation in society and at the same time address the issues first-hand.

7. What do you do in your role as coordinator?

I organise the meetings, connect with the partners of the Cell locally and invest in different projects. This means that I have to be present in four cities in order to connect with the different partners and potential partners to work on polarisation issues. Furthermore, I organise the webinars, educational sessions and manage the specific cases.

8. What is the most challenging part of your job?

To find a balance between doing the work myself and investing in integrating the prevention work against polarisation in the local government and community. But there is also a huge gap in trust and legal confidentiality between social workers, police and government.

9. You also run a project called Press to Pause. How effective has this been in changing young mindsets?

This project is a pilot and we are a pioneer in this domain. We are still connecting with young people and learning their ways of navigating the online world. The focus for the moment is to build the level of trust within the community to create a safe space so that we can work effectively.

The dream is to be able to detect sentiments that indicate young people are in a process of polarisation of radicalisation and prevent them from drifting into extremism. We want to do this by focusing on connection and positive identity development.

10. Any final thoughts?

Political polarisation is used in so many ways (even as blunt propaganda) but the consequence is that this triggers social polarisation. This is not the way our society should be in my opinion. If we could be more focused on the positive effects of polarisation and intentionally use these mechanisms to connect more than to divide, society would be a better place to be part of. But that might be a bit idealistic.

DARE TO BE GREY

NL

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FEATURE

Jordy
NIJENHUIS

prij aak



Dare to be Grey is many things; an organisation, a campaign, a platform, a movement. Regardless of what we call ourselves, there's one key element that binds all of these identities together: our mission to elevate the Grey Middle Ground to a higher stage. We do this both online and offline, through researching and sharing inspiring stories on our platform, and by facilitating debates, events, training and workshops.

With polarisation, disinformation, and hate on the rise, black-and-white worldviews can lead to a downward spiral of division and alienation, causing us-versus-them narratives. At Dare to be Grey, we work towards the prevention of this in society.

Our mission is twofold:

1. Creating awareness about the dynamics and pitfalls of polarisation, disinformation, and hate.

2. Providing positive alternatives where they are needed.

These two elements reinforce each other: the more we know about the underlying dynamics, the stronger our alternative narrative is. At Dare to be Grey we are always looking to do justice to both elements in all our activities.

Dare to be Grey was founded in 2016 by a group of students, who wanted to see more nuance in the heated debates concerning the European refugee crisis. The original campaign was met with critical acclaim and a collective sigh of relief amongst the initial audiences. Within a couple of months, Dare to be Grey was mentioned by several Dutch news outlets, won Facebook global digital challenge, and was proclaimed the Dutch 'Embassy of Tolerance 2016'. Over the recent years Dare to be Grey has been involved in different EC funded projects, including the Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP).

In the recently completed CSEP project, online dissemination of the 'Grey Narrative' to counter disruptive, hateful narratives that promote polarisation was central. The purpose of this campaign was to decrease polarisation on social media by targeting topic dependent audiences in polarised online filter bubbles and to strengthen the 'silent middle', so they do not feel pressure to pick

a side in a polarised debate. A working definition for 'Grey Mindset' was developed, in order to be able to measure whether it is being strengthened by the campaign. 'Grey' thinking was defined as a mindset that has the following core values:

- 1. Diversity**
- 2. Debate**
- 3. Empathy**
- 4. Nuance**
- 5. Doubt**

This means that there must be room for diversity of identities, that debate must be conducted openly and constructively, that it is important to always show empathy within the debate, that there is no black-and-white but nuanced discussion about issues and that there is room for doubt, because doubt makes it possible to think about all sides of an issue.

Independent evaluators measured the following results after a one-and-a-half-year campaign, aiming for behavioural change. A 7,500,000+ social media reach with an engagement rate of 15 per cent (industry standard 6 per cent) and 30 per cent click-through rate on the website. Questionnaires and interviews with people who encountered the campaign show that 44 per cent percent of the responding visitors of the Dare to be Grey Facebook group indicate that their thinking and doing has become Greyer after being exposed to the content of the campaign. And that 42 per cent of the visitors of the Dare to be Grey Facebook page indicated that their thinking and doing has become Greyer after being exposed to the content of the campaign. They also asked the participants if they approach 'offline' discussions more often in a grey manner since coming into contact with the campaign. Here, almost 40 per cent of the members of the Grey Facebook group agree with the statement. On the general page, 20 per cent agree.

Dare to be Grey is currently working on a similar campaign as part of the European Observatory of Online Hate (www.eeoh.eu), using data from over 20 social media platforms in all official languages of the European Union.

Jordy Nijenhuis is a P/CVE campaigner, consultant and trainer. Jordy co-founded Dare to be Grey, is involved in a variety of campaigns, and has trained media professionals in (social media) campaigning, storytelling and countering radicalisation, hate speech and disinformation.

Find more examples of projects which address polarisation in the RAN Practitioners Collection of Inspiring Practices [here](#).

Highlights: RAN Activity on Polarisation

Polarisation as a topic will be addressed within a number of RAN Practitioners activities in 2022, including Working Group meetings and webinars. The insights and outcomes gathered from these meetings will be published on the RAN Practitioners website. Stay tuned for updates in the RAN Practitioners Update and on RAN Practitioners social media channels.

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN website [here](#).



RAN WG Communications and Narratives.

RAN Working Group meeting. 'Emerging trends and developments in the online landscape of radicalisation and polarisation'



RAN WG Police

Working Group meeting
'Anti-government extremism'



RAN Working Group meeting

RAN WG Youth and Education. 'Mind the gap: How to bridge the gap between the online and offline world'.



Webinar

'VRWE trends and developments'



Webinar

'Latest trends and relevant info for local P/CVE coordinators'



Elearning Module

An eLearning module on polarisation in the classroom (in French)

For more information about RAN Practitioners activities please visit the Calendar on the RAN Practitioners website [here](#).

LIBRARY: DISCOVER MORE

IF you would like to discover more about the topic of youth engagement you can get in touch with the RAN Staff, take a look at the [RAN Collection of Inspiring Practices](#) or read through some of the latest [RAN papers](#). We have included some of these papers in a carefully selected collection of interesting and relevant articles below.

RAN Practitioners (2021)
'Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors'

RAN Practitioners (2021)
'RAN Activities on Families, Communities and Social Care'



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