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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN FC&S event – Helplines and hotlines
15-16 September 2020
Digital meeting

HELPLINES AND HOTLINES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Summary

People often find it challenging to reach out to a contact point for support when identifying a potentially radicalised individual – especially if this is a family member or a close friend. In this context, helplines/hotlines can be an efficient tool for establishing a first contact and can also play a decisive role in the case development of potentially radicalised individuals. The RAN Families, Communities and Social Care (RAN FC&S) digital meeting held on 15 and 16 September 2020 gathered practitioners working in hotlines and helplines and discussed the following topics: 1) Current **evolving trends** that can have an influence on the work of hotlines/helplines and key related challenges, including changes due to Covid-19 as well as evolving (violent) extremist threats 2) **Possible skills, trainings and training methods** that support helpline/hotline practitioners in assessing calls and messages from diverse environments and in staying abreast of developments in the field of P/CVE 3) Exchanging tips for practitioners for **effective communication, clear rules on confidentiality as well as psychosocial support for practitioners**.

Introduction

Peers, parents, families, communities and frontline practitioners play a key role in identifying signs of radicalisation. It is therefore vital that a point of contact is available to them when they suspect someone may be at risk of radicalising. Helplines/hotlines function as such a point of contact that offers guidance and support. Throughout the EU, many helplines/hotlines have different set-ups: national helplines/hotlines with a referral system to local actors (e.g. in **Germany** and **France**), community-based hotlines (e.g. in the **Netherlands**), and municipal forms of support (e.g. in **Denmark**). Some are focused specifically on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) (such as those mentioned above), but others address wider societal concerns including radicalisation (e.g. in **Bulgaria** and **Malta**). Helplines commonly have different target groups to hotlines: the latter focus on reporting suspicious behaviour, while the former concentrate on providing guidance and support for peers and families or radicalised individuals. However, it is not always possible to distinguish between the two, and many offer services typical of both helplines and hotlines.

Highlights of the discussion

Evolving trends and challenges for hotlines and helplines

Practitioners working in helplines/hotlines need to be aware of the most recent developments on the ground, i.e. in local communities and in extremist scenes. Significant global events (e.g. elections, the Covid-19 pandemic, wars or terror attacks) are also relevant, as these influence the nature of the calls or chat requests. Some of the developments that are influencing the nature and number of calls in present time are presented below.

- Around 2015, when most European helplines/hotlines were established, many calls revolved around Islamist radicalisation and (often young) European citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq to join Daesh. While Islamist extremism remains a threat and calls concerning Islamist extremism are still flagged among hotlines and helplines, many helplines/hotlines also observe a rise in questions around violent right-wing extremism (VRWE).

- Helpline/hotline operators observe that the topics and ideologies they encounter are becoming more diverse and multi-layered. Ideologies and/or extremist organisations are frequently harder to identify (although this has always been challenging). This aspect may be a consequence of the rise of different conspiracy theories.

- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is apparent in several dimensions of helpline/hotline work.

  o In countries under pandemic 'lockdown' measures, some helplines/hotlines report a decrease in the number of calls: owing to less face-to-face interaction, signs of radicalisation are more likely to go unnoticed. By contrast, general helplines addressing wider concerns have seen and still see a significant rise in calls, due to increasing feelings of isolation, as well as depression, domestic violence and online bullying.

  o Due to the 'storm of information' online including conspiracy theories and fake news, hotlines/helplines are experiencing challenges to make the hotlines/helplines known to the public. Young people have been and are still spending more time on the internet as they are at home for longer periods of time. Helplines/hotlines increasingly receive calls from parents or carers concerned about children's online behaviour. For instance, they worry that children may encounter extremist content or conspiracy theories on TikTok, gaming platforms, social media or other online forums.

Boxes 1-3 below describe the outcomes and recommendations of **three break-out sessions**, where practitioners discussed psychosocial support for helpline/hotline staff, confidentiality, and conversation techniques.

Box 1: Psychosocial support for practitioners

- Organise **supervision and team meetings** to discuss cases and benefit from different perspectives.
- If a practitioner feels overwhelmed with a request coming in, an **emergency protocol or 'panic button'** could ensure the call is transferred and support is provided by a professional with more experience. This applies in particular to 'general' hotlines that are not run by P/CVE experts.
- Practitioners must **take care of themselves**: they should protect personal information, keep personal and private life separate, take breaks, and acknowledge when they are overwhelmed.
- Practitioners working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic who receive complex requests **should liaise with colleagues frequently**.

Box 2: Confidentiality and documentation

- Create a **documentation protocol** and support practitioners in decisions over what needs to be documented and what does not.
- Support practitioners with **standardised questions** for different types of callers (e.g. families, radicalised individuals or concerned practitioners) and standard documentation methods. For example, the following could be documented: What kind of extremism is being discussed? Who is calling? Was the caller answered directly or did the practitioner need to call them back? How serious is the call (on a scale of 1 to 5)? Where was the case referred to? Did the caller want to remain anonymous?
- Have a **security protocol** in place for immediate action. This should include guidance in how to assess the urgency of a call and who to alert when there is **imminent danger.** It should provide a list of behaviours that indicate (self-)harmful behaviour and who to alert in what case (supervisor, law enforcement, local actors etc.).

Box 3: Communication

1) First, focus on **facts**. If dialogue has stalled, focusing on the emotions of the caller is a way to move it forward.
1) Learn about the **local/national extremist background** and activity, so as to be able to accurately frame and analyse the situation in context and react appropriately to callers.
2) Use **communication techniques** such as paraphrasing, summarising and asking open questions.
3) **Differentiate** between what callers think they know and what they actually know to prevent misconstrued meaning.
4) Be aware of your **choice of language** and take care not to alarm parents or carers and avoid stigmatising groups. Adapt your tone and language accordingly when dealing with young people.
5) Offer callers the **option to call back** if they do not feel comfortable sharing a great deal of information at a given time.

Skills and training

As telephone calls and online requests offer limited insight into the caller's character and condition, helpline/hotline operators need to be much more attentive and mindful when talking to a caller for the first time. Because operators cannot analyse body language over the phone and online, it is usually harder to assess requests/situations. In this context, it is useful to identify key skills for practitioners working in helplines/hotlines, as well as the recommended training and suggestions for working methods. Figure 2 below sets out the main findings from the meeting.

Participants noted that it can be especially useful to involve security actors such as law enforcement and intelligence services for training on current (local) extremist phenomena.
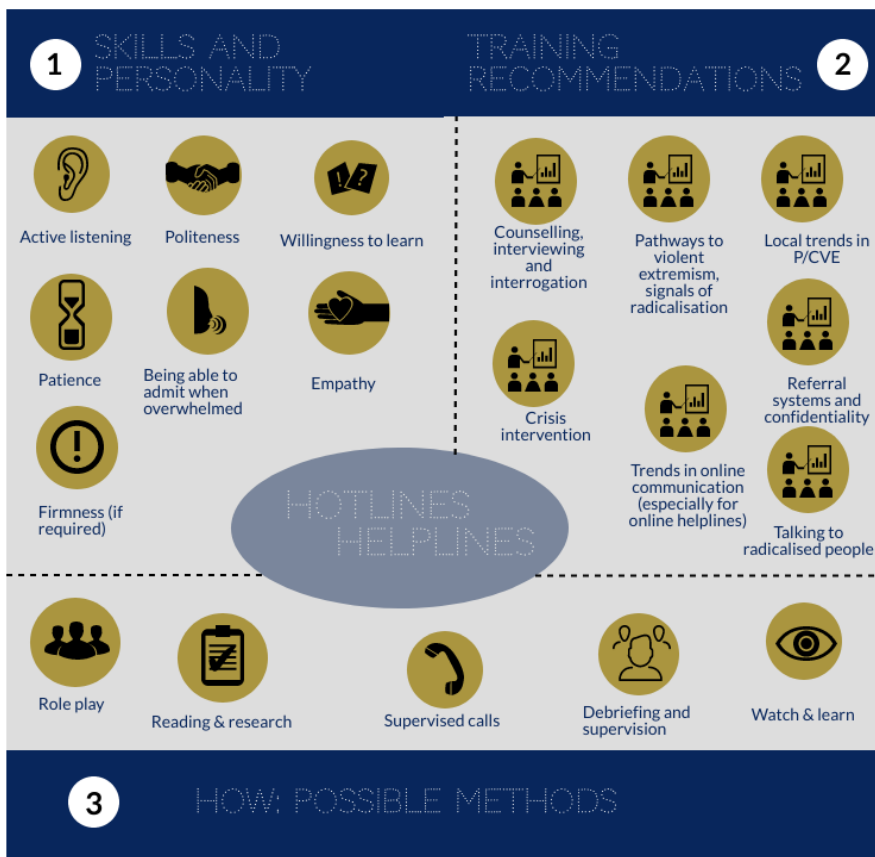

Figure 1: Main findings of the meeting regarding skills and training (infographic created by RAN).

Relevant practices

❖ **Building alliances**: The helpline of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has organised a network of local P/CVE actors across Germany, to whom they refer their callers (see Figure 2)[1].

❖ **Denmark** has introduced its hotlines and helplines as part of the Info-Houses situated in each of the 12 police regions. Callers can receive counselling, and thanks to the strong Info-Houses network, cases can be referred to local intervention points, if needed. Also, they can 'match' young callers with questions to young local mentors who can meet up with them in real life.

❖ **Support for practitioners.** The **UK**'s Department for Education's Counter Extremism Division (which has remit over education settings in England) operates a Counter Extremism Helpline. They have developed a set of 'Golden Rules' for helpline operators. This hands-on training

Figure 2: Local Partners of the BAMF Advice Centre

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[1] For more information on this referral system, please see Milena Uhlmann's *Evaluation of the Advice Centre on Radicalisation – Final Report*, 2017 (https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Forschung/Forschungsberichte/fb31-evaluation-beratungsstelle-radikalisierung.pdf;jsessionid=361BC6A1AD6C629B9AE701F1BDA1B521.internet572?__blob=publicationFile&v=17)

and guidance supports practitioners with clear checklists and advice on how to handle different types of calls.

❖ **Community engagement**. The Australian helpline Step Together shows the importance of raising awareness regarding hotlines/helplines through actively advertising the availability of the helpline/hotline. The team regularly meets with governmental as well as non-governmental stakeholders and has appointed an Advisory Committee comprising 10 community workers, seeking to remain informed on developments in communities (such as polarisation, social unrest, elections, etc.) to be prepared for possible calls and to enhance exchange.

❖ Member States throughout the EU that have also established P/CVE helplines/hotlines are e.g. **Germany** and **France** as well as e.g. **Bulgaria** and **Malta** that have more general helplines that also deal with radicalisation concerns.

❖ Families with concerns about radicalisation can find information from The Family Information Portal (in English) by Project PERICLES without having to call, e-mail or chat with someone directly.

Key recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners running a hotline/helpline
- Develop a toolkit or manual with your team of practitioners. Include contact details for referrals and standardised questions to identify different types of callers and different forms of extremism.
- Create connections with local young mentors who can follow up with callers in real life, if necessary.
- Explore how to offer support specifically for concerned parents questioning how to deal with conspiracy theories and violent extremist content on TikTok for instance, gaming platforms or other online forums.
- Engaging in online chat feels more comfortable for some callers with a radicalisation concern seeking to contact you as some might avoid telephone calls, but confidentiality rules must be taken into account.
- Publicise the helpline/hotline through community engagement, especially when there is risk of isolated groups or individuals: link up with key religious groups, local mental health organisations, family support organisations, schools and young people. In addition, make sure to clarify and differentiate between calling a hotline and a helpline. To reach these target groups, it can be helpful to hire a company with a professional background in advertisement to create effective online advertisement instead of promoting it yourself.

Recommendations for (local and/or national) authorities
- If possible, promote training for practitioners working in helplines/hotlines (see suggestions under chapter 'training and skills')
- Support helplines/hotlines in setting standards of documentation and confidentiality. This should include clear guidance on what needs to be written down, e.g. identify clear facts (location, gender, age, background situation), identify urgency of the call, note whether the call was referred or needs follow-up, and many more.
- Foster helpline/hotline evaluation, and set goals in collaboration with staff.

Follow up

Participants highlighted that the exchange with other hotlines/helplines is extremely helpful but that many do not have an overview over what hotlines/helplines exist in Europe. To support exchange between hotlines and helplines, an **inventory of hotlines/helplines in P/CVE** throughout the EU could be beneficial. This inventory should give an overview of all available hotlines and helplines and make a differentiation between community-based, local and national helplines and hotlines as well as between specific P/CVE hotlines and helplines and more general lines that also deal with concerns of radicalisation. The objective is to create awareness of the different types of help- and hotlines and to facilitate exchange between the different hotlines and helplines in Europe.

Further reading

- RAN YF&C and RAN H&SC. (2017). *Working with families and safeguarding children from radicalisation*.
- RAN YF&C. (2016). *Family support: what works?*
- RAN. (2016). *Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles*.
- A.J. Gielen. (2015). *Supporting families of foreign fighters. A realistic approach for measuring the effectiveness*.

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