

## RAN LOCAL

02/10/2023

### CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN LOCAL Working Group meeting*

*28 and 29 September 2023, Milan (Italy)*

# How can arts, civic pride and culture contribute to boosting local resilience and democracy against extremism, hate crimes and other threats to democracy?

## Key outcomes

Art is a powerful form of communication. It has the unique ability to convey information, provoke dialogue, touch people's emotions, and make political and social statements free from bias and judgement. Ideally, a strong civic culture with shared values lies at the heart of a resilient and peaceful democratic community in which art forms are accepted and used to promote its principles. The objective of this final RAN LOCAL meeting of the year was to explore the extent to which local authorities can leverage art and culture as instruments for preventing and countering various forms of (violent) extremism, as well as boosting local resilience in order to prevent other phenomena threatening a democratic system like hate crimes, political violence and polarisation. In an era marked by the complexities of extremist ideologies and challenges to democratic principles, understanding the role of artistic and cultural approaches, often seen as forms for "soft power" <sup>(1)</sup> in international relations, in the hands of local authorities becomes vital to advocate for values like inclusivity, promotion of diversity and tolerance rather than promoting a concrete anti-extremism approach. The key outcomes were the following:

- As local authorities it is important to understand the possibilities of arts and build and maintain strong relationships with artists and cultural entrepreneurs as they are the key to actual access, outreach and trust in targeted communities. And trust them to allow their artistic freedom to create the authenticity it requires to get targeted communities on board.
- **Preventing extremism without saying "extremism"**. Prevention of extremism is the ultimate goal of involving arts and culture in an approach on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programme. In many cases, however, an artistic or cultural approach does not even mention the words prevention or extremism, nor hate or polarisation, but focuses more on critical thinking, sense of belonging and identity. It is therefore important for local authorities to recognise this and not make their expectations of a project too concrete. Art evokes emotion and emotion leads to engagement. Both can take you anywhere you can imagine. Make way for the artistic approach.

<sup>(1)</sup> Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.

- **Reframe success.** Framing the conversation is helpful when artistic and cultural actors need mandates and resources for their projects. Funding is often linked to a specific civil and/or political need and expectation of what dictates as a success. Producing a theatre play might not sound so appealing for policymakers to spend public money on. Training P/CVE practitioners and involving (former) extremists to tell their story as a reference to concrete preventive measures already sounds more appealing.

## Highlights of the discussion

The participants represented 17 countries and highlighted fascinating local efforts that employ various forms of art and culture to enhance the efforts of local P/CVE approaches. During the first day of the meeting, participants dove into the significance of artistic and cultural activities, focusing on **why** these projects can contribute to the prevention work and building local resilience to prevent radicalisation, polarisation and extremism, and **what** local issues these activities focus on. Throughout day 1, participants heard from artists and cultural entrepreneurs about their work, including their objectives, target audiences and partner collaborations, the city's role and the underlying importance.

The local coordinators and artists agreed that they needed to combine their efforts to reframe the argument as to why an artistic or cultural approach will be effective against extremism. First, to recognise what strength there is in arts and culture as it is often the first aspect that is being attacked or discredited by extremists. ISIL, for example, banned all other religious cultures and their traditions when overtaking their territory and forced the people into bending to their will and culture. The Great Replacement <sup>(2)</sup> followers attack today's society controlled by and made for non-white migrants and strive towards a society ruled by the idea of white supremacy. Incels are keen on destroying the so-called feminisation of society and try to counter every progressive activity related to gender rights. Second, to use the artistic approach combined with great quality of the content produced. In these times of quick well-produced videos on social media creating, enhancing and pushing political and social statements, participants agreed on professionally working together, whilst allowing the artistic freedom to be a central component in the content that they are producing. Participants agreed on taking a collective closer look at how extremist organisations or groups are using arts and culture to attempt and win over the hearts and minds of their followers-to-be. Theatre production in Sweden, for example, was in full swing at the time of this meeting focusing on incels and how that "movement" is moving forward in today's society.

The second day was all about the experience. The programme was organised with the intention to explore **how** an artistic or cultural activity feels and what can be learnt from experiencing it. Each participant engaged in two workshops. One workshop was attended by everyone and carried out by Odd Arts. In this workshop, the participants explored different elements provided by an artistic and cultural approach to enhance local resilience and defend democratic principles, highlighted by quick interactive activities focusing on personal needs, identity, understanding grievances and harms and using compassionate communication (restorative approach).

The other workshop was either one of three options. Workshop 1 was carried out by a prevention officer of the London Borough of Croydon in the United Kingdom. The prevention officer presented his work which focuses on empowering students to establish a profound connection with their local community. This was achieved through: a) the creation of a shared identity within the school, symbolised through artistic expressions that endure as "legacies"; b) strengthening youth leadership by orchestrating events that revolved around personal "tragedies" as

<sup>(2)</sup> The Great Replacement Theory is an ethno-nationalist theory warning that an indigenous European — e.g. white — population is being replaced by non-European immigrants. The Great Replacement concept was popularised by French writer Renaud Camus in his 2012 book *Le Grand Remplacement* ('The Great Replacement'). Camus postulated that black and brown immigrants were reverse-colonising native "white" Europeans. See: <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/great-replacement-theory>

means to celebrate and represent unity; and c) facilitating dialogue and conversations following students-led artistic activities to promote inclusivity and engagement.

Workshop 2 was carried out by YMCA Dobrich from Bulgaria using music and instruments to promote self-expression, empathy and emotional resonance. When discussing efforts to prevent and/or counter violent extremism, hate speech and polarisation, participants experienced — through music — how their nervous system was being engaged and how much more understanding one can have of another's values and opinions that might be in sheer contrast with one's own. Music evokes emotions, and emotions engage releases of dopamine and serotonin which are associated with feelings of pleasure and empathy.

Workshop 3 was led by two psychologists from Germany and Norway using personal storytelling as a method to explore the difficulties of saying no, setting personal boundaries and understand idealism in every human being. Both workshop leaders shared a personal story relating to these aspects, from the more extreme case of being caught up in a cult to signing for an unwanted life insurance policy. In doing so, this workshop first of all advocated a humanising approach in P/CVE. Storytelling causes listeners to relate to the storyteller and, more importantly, reflect on their own behaviour and/or choices in similar situations. "You don't have to be a fool to be fooled" was the core message in this workshop. Secondly, storytelling unfolds the mechanism of a hidden intention from recruiters, which is for the victim to stop thinking for themselves and to create the illusion of dire world events that need saving in the manner they as recruiters intend. Often times this plays into the idealistic world view many human beings have, especially in times of uncertainty and crisis.

### **How can arts and cultural activities contribute to the prevention work and building local resilience to prevent radicalisation, polarisation and extremism?**

Promoting arts, cultural activities and civic pride can significantly enhance local resilience and democracy and in turn prevent violence, extremism, hate crimes and other threats. Here are some examples:

- **Promotion of Diversity and Inclusion:** Arts and cultural activities celebrate diversity, fostering an inclusive environment that embraces different cultures, backgrounds and viewpoints. This brings people from various backgrounds together, promoting understanding and reducing the potential for polarisation and attraction to extremist ideologies.
- **Empowerment and Expression:** Arts provide a platform for constructive self-expression, empowering individuals and communities, reducing the appeal of radicalisation.
- **Building Social Cohesion:** Cultural events and art exhibitions create opportunities for community members to interact, build relationships and strengthen social bonds. Strong social networks deter extremist ideologies by creating a sense of belonging.
- **Fostering Critical Thinking:** Exposure to diverse perspectives through arts encourages critical thinking and open dialogue, making people more likely to question extremist narratives.
- **Educational Initiatives:** Cultural institutions offer educational programmes that teach history, tolerance and democratic values, countering misinformation and promoting informed citizenship.
- **Counter-narratives to Extremism:** Artistic expressions and cultural activities serve as powerful counter-narratives, conveying messages of peace, tolerance and unity.
- **Promotion of Civic Engagement:** Civic pride and engagement in local cultural events foster a sense of responsibility for one's community, increasing resistance to efforts undermining democracy and local identity and values.
- **Positive Role Models:** Arts and culture highlight positive role models, especially for young people, embodying democratic values and inspiring individuals, steering them away from extremist influences.

- **Psychological Resilience:** Arts have therapeutic benefits, helping individuals cope with stress, trauma and emotional challenges, enhancing resilience against extremist recruitment tactics.
- **Public Spaces for Dialogue:** Cultural spaces and events provide neutral ground for discussions on sensitive topics, fostering understanding and empathy.

More importantly, participants noted that while they were participating in these workshops words like “extremism”, “radicalisation”, “hate” and “polarisation” were not explicitly mentioned in all workshops, despite these terms being central to the workshop content. It became clear that the primary strength of artistic and cultural approaches in the context of P/CVE lies in their ability to circumvent explicit discussions of threats and risks. Instead, these approaches emphasise the experiential process, active participation in activities, and a focus on individuals’ emotions and needs.

Moreover, these approaches offer added value by shedding light on the fact that many individuals in these contexts require safety, grapple with identity crises and experience numerous grievances. Importantly, they are often eager to identify solutions for these grievances and unmet needs.

This aligns with the conclusions drawn from prior RAN LOCAL meetings focusing on the position of local P/CVE strategies. The findings highlight that an effective local P/CVE strategy should be organised around individuals’ emotional motives. This means that local P/CVE coordinators and practitioners need to grasp the emotional drivers behind individuals’ actions, and build close cooperation with activities focusing on community participation, sports, and other social and artistic initiatives to mutually foster inclusiveness and build common resilience<sup>(3)</sup>. This understanding part involves the ability of local practitioners to immerse themselves in a compassionate approach (without excessive leniency) when interacting with angry citizens, convicted extremists or those who facilitate extremism with harmful intentions. The objective is not to justify their actions but to comprehend the reasons behind them.

## Challenges

Participants concluded the discussion by highlighting the challenges they face when attempting to integrate these artistic projects into the local P/CVE action plan:

- The primary hurdle lies in the fact that the effectiveness of these projects is not easily measurable, making it difficult to secure funding and incorporate such activities.
- Artistic and cultural projects are subject to administrative complexities, as local authorities may resist the inclusion of specific elements, figures or language used in these projects.

## Lessons learned

Participants agreed upon the following lessons that local P/CVE practitioners, coordinators, artists and social-cultural entrepreneurs should adopt when trying to incorporate arts and culture in a P/CVE approach:

- Arts and culture connect policymakers and practitioners with people affected by social issues. It is a low threshold to create understanding for decisions that people make or ideologies that they believe in. Arts and

<sup>(3)</sup> [The future and position of local P/CVE strategies and approaches](#)

culture are not tools for a political agenda. They should be seen as a reflection of a societal need and be a springboard for political engagement and support in order to attend to the need.

- Artistic and cultural approaches have to be free from judgment and administrative involvement. The approach itself allows for encouraging an open and safe space to tell one's story. So it is important to realise that the artistic freedom allows a story to be told with truth and authenticity. Only when a project feels authentic does real engagement occur. Nevertheless, administrative involvement seems unavoidable as there is public money involved which might disrupt this process. This means that it is important to find a good approach so that the administrative involvement does not hinder or spoil the whole project and ideas.
- Arts and culture are about telling personal stories, often those of (perceived) oppressed people or groups. And because it is a personal and sensitive story, the direct involvement of the owners of the story can make the difference. These approaches create a sense of belonging, not being alone and being taken seriously, which in turn empowers individuals.
- The influence of extremists and various (non-)state actors through arts and culture was acknowledged as a potent tool, sometimes more effectively employed than P/CVE efforts. Participants agreed that the use of artistic and cultural approaches should be repositioned as counter or alternative narrative interventions, similar to online counter-narrative strategies.
- Define success in artistic terms, not political terms. It is the process of joining artistic projects that is important, not what you gain from it, and during the process individuals experience the benefits and discover their needs.

## Inspiring practices

- **Odd Arts** is a theatre organisation that aims to provide innovative theatre within education, community and criminal justice settings, that increases opportunities and wellbeing, and reduces risk for those facing the greatest vulnerabilities and barriers. The theatre activities they provide are designed to increase critical thinking and encourage participants to challenge hate and division.
- **YMCA Dobrich** aims to empower young people and communities worldwide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit. Its goal is to be a significant youth empowerment organisation and a partner of choice: empowering, inspiring and mobilising young people to raise and share their voice on the issues that matter to them and to the world.
- **You don't have to be a fool to be fooled** aims to foster pride, critical thinking skills and ability to build healthy boundaries using storytelling and self-disclosure. We often say *yes* when we actually mean *no*. Through personal stories we learn how a humanitarian crisis can be used for recruitment into cults using the 'Bait & Switch' tactic. We also learn to normalise how hard it can be to say *NO* in everyday environments and how we can foster more resilience in our local communities by awareness and storytelling. Storytelling is the antidote to shame and will foster pride in our local communities.

## Follow-up

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A study visit to a theatre or similar artistic initiative where local and regional coordinators can experience the benefits of incorporating arts in P/CVE efforts. This visit will primarily address the challenge of assessing the effectiveness of such projects.

### Further reading

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- National Youth Network (2000), [Arts and Performances for Prevention](#).
- The Arts Council (2016), [Arts and cultural participation among children and young people – Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study](#).
- RAN VoT: Cultural and artistic approaches involving victims/survivors of terrorism, with a commemorative, healing or PVE aim
- RAN Y&E, [Artistic methods in prevention work, Stockholm 22-23 November 2022](#)