

European Commission - Speech

Remarks by Commissioners Avramopoulos and King at the 3rd RAN High Level Conference

Brussels, 9 November 2016

Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos

Dear Ministers, dear colleagues, dear friends,

We are all gathered here for the same purpose. To work together, and to improve the way we work together, in tackling radicalisation. You are all here because you recognise the extent of this phenomenon in our societies; its complexity, and its depth.

This 3rd High Level Conference of the Radicalisation Awareness Network, with an impressive presence of practitioners, experts, as well as ministers shows how active and engaged we all are, across the EU, in continuing our work to prevent and to counter radicalisation.

I would like to thank the RAN Centre of Excellence for making this event happen, as well as my friend, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of Slovakia, Robert Kalinak, and the other ministers present here today, for their availability and their engagement.

While radicalisation happens at the local level, its security implications and challenges are felt at all levels and across borders. Today provides a unique opportunity to connect the dots between all these different levels and actors, including us here at the EU level.

We all know how complex the issue of radicalisation is and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The issue of polarisation that you have discussed this morning is a challenge that I see as pan-European, global even, and across different policy areas. At a moment of rising nationalism, xenophobia and extremism, our challenge is to create and maintain a cohesive and inclusive society for all, to ensure the security of all our citizens.

This is why reaching out to all communities is so essential, and in particular the religious communities. This was a central element of the G6 meeting of Interior Ministers in Rome that Commissioner King and I attended, and it was also a prominent topic at the first EU-Arab World Summit in Athens last week.

We should never equate entire communities with terrorism. Just as we see that the majority of those who were radicalised and perpetrated terrorist attacks on European soil were in fact our own citizens, similarly those perpetrating terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Asia are Muslims turning against fellow Muslims.

But most importantly, the majority of those radicalised, whether here or abroad, are young. This is why the launch of the RAN Young Platform today is a concrete step forward in involving young people in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism, and empowering them to take an active role.

Several EU countries are doing this already, and it's time to go further and coordinate actions on this across borders. The practical toolkit the RAN is presenting today to Member States for the development of their national strategies comes to answer to this need. This work should start not only in the prevention phase, but also in the very challenging context of when terrorist fighters return: there too, our approach needs to be multifaceted, including soft and hard security tools, something that you will be discussing this afternoon.

The role of the internet here is critical – this is why I launched the first annual Internet Forum last year to engage with internet companies on a voluntary basis to prevent and address extremist content online. I will be hosting the second Forum soon.

There is also a clear role for security and law enforcement, but also other stakeholders, both institutional and non-governmental.

Tackling radicalisation effectively, from A to Z, requires a whole-of-society and holistic approach. It is a priority that should be mainstreamed across all our services and political levels, from education and social inclusion, to prisons, to research, to internet, to monitoring and restricting traveling methods and fighting firearms trafficking and explosives.

Our work on radicalisation starts before and beyond radicalisation. It goes beyond the EU to our immediate neighbourhood. And because of that, radicalisation is not just a local or national issue. It is a European and global issue, requiring a joint approach.

No one is immune: one EU country might not face the challenge of radicalisation today, but it might do in the near future. This makes radicalisation one of the key priorities for the EU today.

But our work to prevent and counter it should not be directed from Brussels. It should be developed and executed by you, the practitioners that see the real challenges on the ground. This is bottom-up approach is the uniqueness of the RAN.

You are part of a network of more than 3,000 practitioners across Europe, and uniquely placed not just to exchange with your peers, but also to influence and steer policy discussions at the national and European levels.

Your mission is not just to talk to each other, but to concretely help each other find practical solutions.

Last year, we committed extra financial resources to the RAN in order to make it easier for practitioners to come together and learn from one another. I hope you will continue to take full advantage of this unique network and all of its tools.

I want to pay particular tribute to the many experts on the ground who are confronted with these challenges on a daily basis. I realise you are working often in uncharted territory. There is no silver bullet to this issue. By experimenting with different approaches and sharing your findings with your European colleagues, you are doing invaluable pioneer work that will make a difference for Europe as a whole.

If we really want to enhance our counter radicalisation efforts on an EU scale, and raise current standards, it is essential that your voices are heard, so that those working in policy and those at a political level can consider how these local best practices can be rolled out on a much larger scale.

Remarks by Commissioner King

It is with some trepidation that I take the floor as you are the experts but it is a privilege for me to be part of your discussions today. I'm sorry that I wasn't around in the morning but I have been able to hear an account of the morning and I found this afternoon very enriching.

I'm very grateful to the ministers, the policy makers and all of you for the contributions you have made. This is a forum where we hear the views of those on the front line, on the ground tackling the reality of radicalisation on a daily basis as well as from some of you who steer and support that work at a policy and at a political level.

It is very timely that you have come together today. It is, as one or two of the speakers have said, almost a year since last November's horrible attacks in Paris. The work that RAN is doing to help counter radicalisation is more important than ever.

You have rapidly become a model for best practise in prevention work through the outreach that you have to thousands of practitioners. And as we have heard, there are a cornucopia of documents and references that you have assembled online and you have this very developed 'network of networks' to underpin the sharing of best practise.

For me, the RAN is about apparently soft measures that deliver really hard, real results. In the fight against radicalisation, I think that it is this grassroots, engaged civil society, long-term approach that is key.

We are engaged - as many of you have been saying - in a battle for hearts and minds, particularly of young and vulnerable people. And for me, that is something where local actors are better placed than state authorities, not least because of disaffection with the system, disaffection with the establishment is a common theme for those who are at risk of becoming radicalised.

I think the launch of RAN Young this afternoon is particularly important given extremist recruiters' focus on young people. We need to reach the people that the recruiters are targeting and offer them a better vision. This is not easy. I was struck by something that Professor Rik Coolsaert from Ghent University said recently about extremist recruits:

"It is outside politics or religion. It is about certain individuals who come together for the thrill of being part of something bigger. It is a youth subculture...and peer groups play a big role."

In many ways there is a correlation between radicalisation and "gang culture" with religion or ideology being secondary to the need of isolated or vulnerable people finding a sense of belonging coupled with a sense of purpose. We need therefore to find ways to replace the feelings of exclusion or powerlessness with inclusion and empowerment.

Let's also be clear that this isn't just about Jihadists and extremist Islamic views – the far right, nationalists and separatists use the same techniques of selling a dream to manipulate those who feel disadvantaged and marginalised in our societies. So, although without any doubt, and we have heard lots of testimony of this today, the most immediate priority is the threat posed by Islamic extremism, our response and our prevention actions need to go wider if we are to avoid falling into the trap of focussing only on today's problem at the expense of tomorrow's.

This is going to be a tough set of things to do but the key elements are clear: respecting identity, boosting self-worth, creating an alternative sense of belonging through grassroots projects, and providing opportunities through education and employment for social mobility. And the Commission can help with funding and employment and education projects like the Youth Guarantee and through Erasmus plus.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege to visit Bart Somers in Mechelen and I witnessed the success brought about by long-term investment in local, bottom-up prevention policies. Mechelen is a city with not dissimilar demographics to Mollenbeek but where 15 years' of investment, led by grassroots initiatives, combining a tough approach on law enforcement (as one of our Ministerial colleagues reminded us) with clever work on prevention and de-radicalisation has given the young people there a greater sense of self-worth and community. And the fact is there is not one single foreign fighter who has gone from Mechelen speaks for itself.

I'm not naïve enough to think that the Mechelen model can simply be applied everywhere else across the EU: it just isn't like that. For me, that is why the RAN is so important because although each case is going to be different, there are going to be some common elements and there are going to be some lessons that can be learnt. The RAN Centre of Excellence is a repository of best practice – a collection of things that have worked or are working from which to tailor or mix and match something that might work in a particular set of circumstances. It is dynamic not static with new things being added all of the time. I think the fact that you have this new practical handbook/toolkit on local approaches is part of that; it is the latest user-friendly instrument to provide some inspiration for local preventive activities.

None of this is to say that States don't also have an important role to play. Several Member States have already set up their own initiatives and we have heard from the National Coordinator for Security and Counter Terrorism of the Netherlands some of the insights into the Dutch preventive strategy. Today's launch of a network of 'prevent' coordinators and contact points and the creation of a repository on 'prevent' strategies will provide an extra resource for policy makers as well as local practitioners.

These are challenges that are not just limited to EU Member States. These challenges are being felt by our neighbours around the EU as well. We have heard from the representatives of Croatia and Slovenia today about their efforts to help our neighbours and I think we need to look at how we can use the RAN, taking account of your experiences and your best practices to reach out to help enhance the CVE [countering violent extremism] capabilities of the countries in our neighbourhood.

Industry also needs to play its part in helping to ensure the rapid removal of online terrorist propaganda which is a key tool for the recruiters. In its first year, Europol's internet referral unit has flagged over 11,000 messages across 31 online platforms in 8 languages and 9 out of 10 of those flagged messages are removed. It is quite useful that it is 9 out of 10 and not 10 out of 10 because we are not actually stopping free speech, we are taking down propaganda. The Commission, Europol and internet providers are going to be meeting again next month, as my colleague Commissioner Avramopoulos reminded us, for the second EU internet Forum and I hope that some of you can get involved in that or at least encourage your colleagues to come along to that meeting which is an important complement to the work that we are doing here.

Much of the focus today has – rightly - been on preventing radicalisation. However, there is a particular challenge that you have recognised in your discussions posed by returning foreign fighters who are already radicalised. And we are going to need different interventions, such as targeted de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes in prison and reintegration initiatives. To ensure that nobody falls through the cracks, we are going to have to share information and best practise and I was particularly struck by some of the lessons that our French colleagues were sharing with us.

There is obviously a particular issue around child returnees and children of radicalised parents. We need to build on your feedback because we obviously cannot use exactly the same approach for children as we would for adults.

I am encouraged that there is some research and exploration of the options underway within Member States and I hope that the RAN can play a role in bringing some of that together, bringing practitioners together to have an exchange of experience so we can work out some of the best methods of doing this; building also on comparative experience such as supporting children who have been exposed to cults. Our failure to fully address the problem of the next generation now will only build up trouble for the future.

In conclusion, countering radicalisation is one of our key challenges. Social media networks have the influence previously confined to governments and state authorities and to respond to these new challenges, we need to be inventive and more networked which is exactly how I see the RAN fitting in - so thank you very much for all of your efforts.

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