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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN in the Western Balkans Regional Small-scale Meeting
24-25 March 2022, Belgrade, Serbia

CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism

Key outcomes

CSOs[1] have been alarmed by the increasing threat of violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) and the possible evolution of the "normalisation" of non-violent right-wing extremism (RWE) and its inseparable trait - ethno-nationalism both in the Western Balkans (WBs) and in the EU. The potential of RWE to exacerbate political conflict and turn into VRWE has been of concern for citizens and practitioners in the WBs for some time already, as its roots can be traced to structural polarisation, group grievances, and an inability to disentangle violent legacies and to address exclusionary clerical (religious) ethno-nationalism[2]. The promotion of effective cooperation between CSOs, understanding their needs and viewpoints on P/CVE is a pivotal first move towards extensively tackling harmful influences of (V)RWE in the WBs. For this reason, RAN organised a regional small-scale meeting in Belgrade with representatives of CSOs working directly or indirectly on P/CVE, with the aim of raising awareness, establishing a network, discussing challenges and sharing approaches. The main insights derived from the meeting are:

- **(V)RWE in the WBs is mainstream and normalised.** (V)RWE has been pervasive and prevailing in politics, economy, culture, and sports, among ordinary people, youth, scholars and practitioners. The boundaries of illegality are not yet clear, so RWE operates in a grey area, rarely prosecuted (e.g. for hate speech, violence against minorities) and not addressed by clear state interventions aimed at preventing and countering such phenomena. The normalisation of (V)RWE makes effective P/CVE efforts in the region strenuous.

- **Lack of top-down incentives.** The lack of clear interventions makes states unable to recognise the problem of (V)RWE as well as its security threat in the region. There is a lack of recognition of VRWE in the policies and actions of WBs governments. However, if carefully approached with the coordination and support of experienced local CSOs, first-line practitioners and governments can help to bridge the gap and tackle VRWE.

- **Local problems require local solutions.** More support for local CSOs and practitioners in P/CVE is needed. The local level must have ownership over P/CVE efforts, indeed in close coordination with the central level.

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[1] Civil society organisations.
([2]) Buljubašić, M. (forthcoming). Violent Right Wing Extremism (VRWE) in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE. Radicalisation Awareness Network.

CONCLUSION PAPER
CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of
ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism
Page **2** of **6**

Practitioners should be identified and enrolled in prevention training; individuals, groups and communities vulnerable to (V)RWE ideology should be carefully detected and targeted with preventive activities.

Highlights of the discussion

The main highlights of the discussion held in Belgrade are set out in overarching themes and briefly described below.

What exactly needs to be prevented and countered?

There is no universal definition of (V)RWE. To be able to prevent and counter various security threats related to RWE that can lead to violence and terrorism, it is crucial to understand what exactly needs to be prevented or countered. The main dimensions of (V)RWE in the WBs need to be conceptually clarified for any P/CVE activity. (V)RWE has become internationalised and mainstreamed in politics. It permeates everyday life and has been rising due to regional and wider geopolitical shifts, insufficient rule of law and flawed democracy, but is also accelerated by technological advances and political, economic and health crises. Foreign influences via mainstream politics and online activities continue to distort already fragile inter-ethnic relations and feed ideological polarisation, grievances and trans-generational collective traumas from past violence. Practitioners mentioned, for example, Russian support for VRWE groups, fake-news media outlets and bitter politics across the region. This normalisation and prominence of (V)RWE and the explicit or implicit support of government institutions to organisations and individuals that obstruct democratic values continue to be a stumbling block in the accession perspective of the Western Balkans

The characteristics of (V)RWE in the region fit the scope of the non-legally binding definition crafted by the EU,([3]) but seem to be wider due to the mainstream and normative landscape of RWE and widespread activities in a grey area. Although VRWE groups tend to be on the fringe, their ideology is part and parcel of dominant, mainstream, RWE narratives and practices. The practitioners debated the potential for violent extremism and the enormous grey area in which RWE operates as a dominant and normal condition in everyday life, and emphasised that there can be no risk management without risk assessment. Thus, to be able to handle VRWE security threats, RWE must be further recognised and understood across the region.

> **Characteristics of (V)RWE in the WBs**
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> Participants shared a consensus that (V)RWE in the WBs is reciprocal and cumulative, characterised by exclusionary clerical ethno-nationalism and racism, homophobia, toxic masculinity, anti-migrant sentiments, authoritarian leadership, a quest for historical roots and attachment to historical myths, twisting human rights issues into security concerns and distortion of the meaning of European and democratic values and fundamental rights.

A quest for top-down intervention

During the meeting, the practitioners repeatedly noted that all WBs countries fail to recognise VRWE as a security threat. As RWE is mainstream and normalised, tolerated and not clearly addressed by state authorities, the possibilities of designing and implementing resonating policies on prevention and countering VRWE are complicated. The practitioners raised concerns about the lack of mirroring of communal needs in top-down policies, but also about the difficulties of translating policies (if ever existing) into practice. According to the participants' arguments, policies designed to "deal with the past" and policies against terrorism do not resonate with the realities of VRWE. Lack of support for top-down P/CVE can be a challenge, especially when normalisation is the main approach to such

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([3]) "Violent right-wing extremism consists of acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimise or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values and of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance." The Project-Based Collaborations are projects led by EU countries, with the support of the European Commission, to foster exchange and cooperation on priority topics on prevention of radicalisation. Further information can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/project-based-collaborations_en.

RAN Practitioners
Radicalisation Awareness Network

CONCLUSION PAPER
CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of
ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism
Page **3** of **6**

phenomenon. Moreover, professions that could potentially tackle the first signs of radicalisation (e.g. teachers, social workers) can have problematic relations with central authorities. A genuine mobilisation of individuals in public institutions to advocate for P/CVE would be an enormous success. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the locally P/CVE-experienced CSO Atlantic Initiative uses its capacities to provide mentorship to the government in designing concrete VRWE prevention policies.

A quest for bottom-up interventions

More support for local CSOs is needed for preventing and countering RWE. Many participants stressed that CSOs can build much needed horizontal partnerships with other CSOs, public institutions and stakeholders in local communities. According to the practitioners, this help to bridge the lack of trust between public institutions, the public and CSOs. In Albania, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation offers a practice that can overcome obstacles. To understand the needs and risks, this institute cooperates with local governments, CSOs and communities through the local public safety councils. These councils provide agency for the public. They can meet elected politicians, police, prosecutors and first-line practitioners and voice their needs related to P/CVE.

In addition, participants debated the importance of strategic communication for P/CVE. To be effective, activities against (V)RWE could be branded and marketed. An exemplary case is the Propulsion visibility plan for the promotion of media and information literacy via social media channels. Propulsion developed and advertised educational materials, such as infographics and short animation videos and brochures, to build trust in the media and develop media and information literacy competencies. By enhancing online literacy through a creative social impact communication approach, misinformation and disinformation can be tackled, and thus VRWE.

In the same way, concerns were raised about the strict rules in P/CVE practices. Practitioners argued that activities countering VRWE must not be entrapped by strict rules of implementation, because dealing with ever changing phenomena needs adaptiveness to address changing needs. It is worth noting that during the meeting, some actors expressed their dissatisfaction with previously implemented imported P/CVE solutions for Islamist extremism, or their eventual application for VRWE, because they do not fit the scope and dynamics of VRWE and frequently lack local resonance.([4]) Although the issue of identifying and attracting relevant stakeholders in vulnerable communities was raised by the practitioners, there was a consensus on the importance of attracting vulnerable youth in any P/CVE effort, because many, most probably, share sympathies for mainstream, normalised, RWE ideologies. The troubling issues for youth are societal trans-generational trauma from violent past events, a lack of institutional willingness to reconcile with legacies and ethnically discriminatory and exclusionary practices of clerical ethno-nationalism in everyday life, especially in education. As one participant stated "dealing with the past" initiatives seem to be insufficient for P/CVE. All practitioners agreed that there are no effective practical approaches to tackling VRWE from the bottom-up.([5]) Overcoming these obstacles could be a milestone for P/CVE in the WBs.

Guarding the guardians, protecting practitioners

At the workshop, the practitioners expressed serious concerns about the presence of RWE ideology including among practitioners themselves, in both top-down and bottom-up P/CVE. Personal biases and the presence of RWE ideology in practitioners can be perceived as normal, due to the mainstream state of RWE in the region, but also because of their links to dominant political parties and the need for a secure job, especially in public institutions known for job security. The challenge for P/CVE is how to overcome first-line practitioners' biases and stereotypes, in order to

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([4]) Knowledge of good practices for P/CVE has been accumulated in the last decade in the EU and the US. During the meeting, important lessons were shared from the National Support Centre on Extremism (nl. Landelijk Steunpunt Extremisme) in the Netherlands. The Centre employs, among others, family support and disengagement activities to prevent the emergence or continuity of VRWE, even in its early stages. The CSOs and practitioners could contextualise a plethora of available, but for the WB acceptable, practices and apply them in suitable contexts. Practitioners pointed, however, to specific history, culture, politics and local needs in the WB, that should not be ignored. They stressed that any sound activity for the prevention and/or countering (V)RWE must be localised and adapted to fit the needs of the country, community and individuals, especially those at risk. The ownership of P/CVE must not be taken from local communities.

([5]) Practitioners added an important note at the end of the workshop on networking in the WBs. They said that the RAN network is sufficient and there is no need to create an additional network. Previously, several networks were started but failed to achieve any important success due to various issues, such as lack of capacity to run the network and sustainability issues. Thus, the current RAN for the WB is ideal for networking, raising awareness and developing empirically grounded ideas and implementing activities among CSOs and practitioners.

CONCLUSION PAPER
CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of
ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism
Page **4** of **6**

raise their awareness concerning RWE ideology and prevent (further) labelling or support for right-wing extremists in daily practice. As practitioners are an extremely important piece of the P/CVE puzzle, it is important to consider approaches to transforming extreme beliefs and protecting practitioners against the influence of RWE.

Recommendations

1) More empirical research:

- to shed light on country-specific characteristics and dynamics of (V)RWE, and to comprehend commonalities and differences across the region;

- to recognize and understand how (V)RWE operates in grey areas;

- to disentangle the borderlines and interplay between mainstream and underground (V)RWE;

2) Top-down interventions:

- policies should be tailored by and for the WB countries;

- to gain support from public institutions in the design and implementation of P/CVE policies;

- to raise awareness on the harmfulness of (V)RWE in public institutions, in line with EU policy on preventing and countering VRWE;

- local experienced CSOs to mentor the design and implementation process directly or indirectly (via e.g. topics of gender, economy, crime);

- to incorporate prevention and countering of RWE in different policies (e.g. against terrorism, education, culture).

3) Bottom-up interventions:

- to design and implement local solutions tailored to local problems;

- to consider the need for adaptive management of a changing environment, and design and implement a strategic communication approach and P/CVE campaigns;

- to frame P/CVE interventions through reciprocal and/or cumulative radicalisation lenses;

- for P/CVE action, to identify implicit appealing themes (e.g. economy, ecology, international position, rule of law, social justice) further to explicit use of the violent extremism perspective;

- to understand the needs of (vulnerable) communities, groups and/or individuals, enhance community cohesion and interaction by arranging information-sharing mechanisms in communities between governments, practitioners and CSOs: exemplary cases are Albanian local public safety councils;

- to focus on vulnerable youth by adapting to their generational discursive and performative norms;

- to avoid discourse/practice that causes emotional distress and use gender, the economy and human rights as discursive entry points;

- calls to action are needed in counter activities;

- to consider the implications of historical (intergenerational transmission/transgenerational collective) trauma and adapt or reinvent "dealing with the past" activities to prevent and/or counter (V)RWE;

- to address misinformation/disinformation, focus on critical thinking and media literacy, see the ideal approach from Raskrinkavanje (eng. Disclosure) initiative, a media fact-checking practice that spans the region;

- to advocate the removal of exclusionary ethno-nationalism, discriminatory practices and historical revisionism from society, especially in political discourse and educational system: examples are activities against historical revisionism of the Humanitarian Law Center in Serbia, Kosovar ethnically inclusive practices in school in the municipality Obiliq/Obilić, and pupils resistance practices to ethnic segregation in schools in the Bosnian city Jajce;

- to identify credible counter voices, use memes and online influencers (e.g. via online influencers academy) for greater outreach, exploit the benefits of the GAMMMA+ model;

- to evaluate P/CVE activities improving their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION PAPER
CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of
ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism
Page **5** of **6**

4) Practitioners:

- to use established networks that deal with religiously motivated extremism, such as local multi-sector mobile teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are currently being established for Islamist extremists' rehabilitation and reintegration purposes, or <u>Kosovars' institutional approach for prevention of Islamist extremism (e.g. involving politicians, public servants, intelligence, police, municipal community safety councils, CSOs and local experts/practitioners);</u>

- to conduct workshops for practitioners and peer-level training the trainer;

- to mitigate personal bias, stereotypes and elements of RWE ideology among practitioners;

- to use discourse that would be appealing to practitioners with right-wing ideology.

Relevant practices

1. In Serbia, <u>CSOs that tackle radicalisation and extremism</u> organised a round table to initiate discussions on problems, raise awareness among the public and look for suitable solutions to the lack of response to the emerging threat of VRWE.

2. To tackle the root causes of violent extremism and to build community resilience, <u>the Institute for Democracy and Mediation</u> from Albania is working on prevention activities through Local security councils. The councils act as referral mechanism that consists of local politicians, police, prosecutors and citizens. By increasing cooperation between non-state and state actors, an awareness about (violent) extremism issues can be raised.

3. <u>The Atlantic Initiative from Bosnia and Herzegovina</u> organises multi-sector workshops in communities with first-line practitioners (judiciary, police, social workers, psychologists, CSOs, local politicians and security officials) on recognizing early detection indicators and handling at-risk individuals and their families. In addition, social workers and psychologists that work in centres for social work and centres for mental health are enrolled in peer-level train-the-trainer programmes that aim to teach practitioners various interventions to prevent VRWE.

4. To counter the malicious influence of online extremism, the Youth resource centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina employs the initiative <u>Citizens against terrorism (CAT)</u>. The Initiative mainly attracts youth through memes on Facebook and Instagram that ridicule right-wing ideology, but also via podcasts, a digital campaign academy for youth and a CAT patrol (i.e. community interaction with prominent individuals/groups and role modelling for youth, available via YouTube).

5. <u>Resonant Voices Initiative (the Propulsion, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and Groundscout)</u> utilizes original investigative journalist stories on radicalisation, hate speech, propaganda, disinformation, foreign influence and autocratic governments to raise awareness across the Western Balkans, the diaspora and beyond.

6. In Kosovo, <u>Aktiv</u> implemented the television political talk show Sporazoom (eng. Agreement) intending to disentangle important political questions, initiate debates and give agency to the public by providing an opportunity to directly ask questions to local politicians. The political talk show implicitly informed the public in Kosovo and abroad about extremism issues and raised awareness of problems that could be caused by potential violent incidents.

7. <u>The DamaD centre</u> in Novi Pazar, Serbia, provided and supported the establishment of referral mechanisms (e.g. police, prosecutors, schools, sports clubs, religious institutions, media, CSOs) for P/CVE in their local community.

European Commission

CONCLUSION PAPER
CSOs engaging in the prevention and countering of
ethno-nationalism and violent right-wing extremism
Page **6** of **6**

Follow up

Considering these recommendations, further meetings should be organised to discuss possible prevention and/or countering approaches and how to overcome specific challenges, share knowledge and practice, and network between practitioners in the WBs. In addition, future workshops should incorporate much needed training on strategic communications approaches in P/CVE for CSOs and practitioners.

Further reading

1. RAN in the Western Balkans Paper <u>Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans</u> (2022)

2. Since 2017, RAN has been advocating for the application of the GAMMMA+ model for practitioners. It is a practical tool for designing, planning and implementing any alternative and/or counter-narrative campaign. In 2019, RAN's Communication and Narratives Working Group updated the model, see <u>here.</u>

3. In the last several years, enormous knowledge has been produced on (V)RWE in Serbia. The edited book by Valery Perry <u>Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of a Historical Challenge</u> provides, among others, intriguing research insights into the online dynamics of VRWE in Serbia. Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy published a valuable report <u>on the state of extremism</u> in Serbia. Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević published the text <u>Migrants are leaving, but hatred remains – the anti-migrant extreme right in Serbia</u>. They look at the specific issue of anti-migrant activities and their intersections with VRWE. The Serbian Helsinki Committee has published, among other things, two publications on RWE in Serbia, both edited by Izabela Kisić <u>right extremism in Serbia</u> and <u>the rise of the right: case Serbia – extremism, terrorism and foreign fighters</u>. Maša Vukčević Marković Aleksandra Nicović and Marko Živanović have quantitatively investigated factors of susceptibility to radicalisation among youth, see <u>here</u>.

4. The Atlantic Initiative provides diverse, but valuable insights for P/CVE, for example on the <u>ethno-nationalist extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina</u>, <u>gender and extremism</u>, and <u>transgenerational collective trauma and extremism</u>. The United States of America Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations', Management Systems International and Atlantic Initiative has published <u>valuable research for P/CVE in Bosnia and Herzegovina</u>.

5. For <u>online extremism in North Macedonia</u>, Simeon Dukić's paper provides interesting insights on activities of VRWE, effects of history, polarization, grievances and online specific dynamics. The paper provides concrete recommendations for P/CVE in North Macedonia.

6. Publication of <u>key causes of the rise of ethno-nationalism</u> and the rise of <u>extremism on the right</u> pictures the slow but destructive rise of RWE in Montenegro. The publications enable information on the root causes of VRWE and have the potential to be used for the design of P/CVE activities.

7. <u>The RAN Handbook on the P/CVE training programme</u> is an important guide for trainers and policymakers in the field of violent extremism. The training programme offers practical guidance with challenges and solutions that are applicable in various situations.