**Radicalisation Awareness Network** 



Webpage: ec.europa.eu/ran



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RAN C&N Working Group meeting 13-14 June 2023, Berlin, Germany

# Preventive campaigning using biographical experiences from victims, survivors and former extremists

### **Key outcomes**

Two key groups often considered as credible messengers in preventive campaigning in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) are former extremists who have disengaged from radical ideologies (<sup>1</sup>) and victims and survivors of terrorism who have directly experienced the consequences of extremist violence. This meeting focused on the power of testimonials from both victims/survivors as well as formers to change minds (of at risk individuals for example), and offer new perspectives via their participation in preventive campaigning.

On 13 and 14 June 2023, P/CVE practitioners with preventive campaigning experience, victims/survivors of terrorism, exit workers and former extremists gathered in Berlin, Germany, to discuss this topic. There was ample time built into the programme for participants to get to know each other, which was especially important for this sensitive topic. On the first day, participants were split up into three groups to talk within their own `constituency': P/CVE practitioners and campaigners; victims/survivors of terrorism; and formers and exit workers. On the second day, a high-paced interactive group exercise allowed for all participants to deliver input for do's, don'ts and remaining questions regarding four sub-themes: involving *both* victims/survivors and formers, ethical considerations, dealing with media/publicity, and advice for policymakers.

The key outcomes of this meeting are:

- Execute proper **risk assessment**, also assessing the risks involved in bringing formers and victims/survivors together if this is part of the strategy.
- When developing campaigns, work in partnerships to have the **right people on board**. Consider including exit workers, communication strategists, victim organisations, mental health experts and researchers.
- For victims/survivors and formers, self-reflection and consideration of possible risks and (negative) consequences of being part of a campaign is important prior to deciding whether or not to participate.

An important caveat here is that during this meeting there were conflicting opinions about the results of this study and its applicability to the topic at hand by the practitioners in the room.



<sup>(&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>) To put this into context, there is emerging work that challenges the utility of using formers in P/CVE counter-narrative campaigns, specifically about their credibility. See, for example, this recent experimental study: Koehler, D., Clubb, G., Bélanger, J. J., Becker, M. H., & Williams, M. J. (2023). Don't kill the messenger: Perceived credibility of far-right former extremists and police officers in P/CVE communication. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. <u>https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2166000</u>.



- The duty of care does not end with the end of a campaign. In aftercare after a campaign, try to mitigate
  repercussions of being involved in a campaign, be sensitive towards the needs and possibilities of a person
  and think beyond the campaign time.
- A joint campaign **including both formers and victims/survivors** can show a **more complete story** but is not always necessary or advisable.
- **Do not instrumentalise** victims/survivors or formers. Treat people from both groups humanely. Do not force victims/survivors or formers to tell their story in a way that is uncomfortable to them.
- Do not portray victims/survivors and formers as 'superstars' or 'heroes'.
- Remaining questions that need further discussion are:
  - Who decides if a former is **'ready' to be part of a campaign** and if a victim/survivor is ready to share their story without the risk of self-harm? And how is it possible to 'measure' this?
  - Should formers and victims receive **financial compensation** for their role to speak/participate in a campaign?
  - **Can participating** in campaigns (either in the media or in an educational setting) help with the individual and/or the collective **healing process**?

The remainder of this paper will firstly cover the highlights of the discussions that were held during the different parts of the 2-day meeting. Secondly, the do's, don'ts and remaining questions are presented. The paper concludes with suggestions for follow-up topics based on the outcomes of this meeting.

# **Highlights of the discussion**

First and foremost, it is important to mention that the group of participants was a rather diverse group. The group of formers ranged from former members of the right-wing scene to having a background in the IRA. The group of victims/survivors who were present also came from diverse backgrounds and experiences. We should not consider these groups as being 'representative' of all victims/survivors and all formers within the EU. The outcomes reflect what was discussed during the meeting, rather than providing a validated and representative picture.

Second, when speaking about 'victims/survivors' of terrorism in this paper, we mean all people whose lives have been affected by terrorist attacks, those emotionally or physically injured and those who have lost their loved ones, as well as first responders. This is quite a broad definition, leaving room for how people perceive their own status. There are different definitions of what a 'former' is, so this partly depends on the context. The requirements for being seen as a former can differ between EU Member States, and for instance in the context of an intervention. The points stated in this conclusion paper can provide guidance, but they do not aim to be the single true list of requirements for being (perceived as) a former.

During the meeting, the topic was discussed from three perspectives by splitting up into sub-groups: the perspective of strategic communications experts and P/CVE practitioners, the perspective of former extremists and exit workers, and the perspective of victims/survivors of terrorism.

#### **1.** The perspective of strategic communications experts and P/CVE practitioners

In this sub-group, the notion and power of stories were discussed, first through a presentation to set the scene. Storytelling is a powerful tool to influence people and so can also be an important tool in P/CVE. The power of stories is also at the heart of (strategic) communications: "strategic communications have a greater contribution to make ... because ... we live in a world of meaning, stories, emotions, interpretations, fears and hopes, and that these are the stuff of communications" (<sup>2</sup>).



<sup>(&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>) See: <u>https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/r0911stratcomms.pdf.</u>



#### What is *strategic communications*?

From 2015 to 2019, the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN) was a network of EU countries, funded by the European Commission, which collaborated to share analysis, good practice and ideas on the sustainable use of strategic communications in countering violent extremism. The definition of strategic communications developed by ESCN states that strategic communications is "a means to influence attitudes and behaviours, through the use of communications; it seeks to achieve a strategic effect through communication activity. In other words, it is about what needs to be said, to whom, and by what means, to achieve the desired strategic effect". Elements of strategic communications are:

- What needs to be said (message/story)
- To whom it needs to be said (audience)
- How it needs to be said (medium & messenger)
- With what desired effect (goal and call to action)

The need for strategic communications in P/CVE is growing. The presentation showed how there is a growing communicative effect visible in terrorist attacks in the Western world over the last centuries. Below are some non-exhaustive examples to illustrate this point:

- During the attack on Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, the goal was to force negotiations with the Israeli state. The media were used by the terrorists, but it had very limited visibility opportunities and broadcasting was limited to specific geographical areas.
- The 9/11 attacks in 2001 showed a different situation. The terrorists did not seek negotiations and their needs for visibility changed drastically. The attacks were used to show their power, to kill and destroy. By killing a lot of people, the attacks contaminated the US imagination with long-term effect.
- With the attacks on London in 2005, victims enter into a new relationship with terrorist attacks' visibility. The randomness of the victims is even bigger: *anyone* could have been in the Underground at that time. Moreover, the chosen targets are underground, inaccessible to the media. The media had to rely on a unique source of information: photos and videos produced by the victims themselves. In that way, the victims unwillingly become the 'messengers' of the terrorists.
- In Paris in November 2015, 130 people were killed. Terrorists hit citizens in their daily lives (at bars and restaurants, a football stadium and a rock concert). By hitting in the streets, Daesh showed that anyone, anywhere, at any time can become a victim.

The communicative effect of the attacks, spreading fear and hate, has risen over time. More and more people are feeling victimised because of the soft targets that have been attacked ("that could have been me"). Since then, by livestreaming and social media posts, perpetrators but also victims enlarge the reach of the extremists even more (for instance, during the Christchurch attack in 2019). In other words: weaponisation and exploitation of emotions is a part of the extremist playbook. In response, it makes sense for strategic communications to also play into the emotions of the public in order to balance the scale and to shift focus from perpetrators and discord to the victims and empathy.

According to emeritus Professor Barry Richards, emotional governance is needed (<sup>3</sup>). This type of governance pays deliberate and sophisticated attention to the emotional dynamics of the public. Understanding collective emotions can help to limit some of the damaging mobilisations of those emotions and can stimulate their more life-affirming forms. A successful communication strategy will be enhanced by a thorough understanding of the emotional dynamics of the public — i.e. the nature, distribution and strength of the emotions involved. As part of the strategy, there is a need for analysis of the emotions in society and the desired shift to be achieved. It is important to assess the emotions in society to define the emotional goals of the communication efforts. The response to the Christchurch

<sup>(&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>) Richards, B. (2007). *Emotional governance: Politics, media and terror*. Palgrave Macmillan London.





attacks can be viewed as an example of the use of emotional governance (<sup>4</sup>), aiming to shift attention from the perpetrator (by not mentioning him at all) to the victims. In the discussion following the presentation, the role of government in this process was discussed. This should not become a form of emotional manipulation, so vigilance is needed here.

The inclusion of victims and survivors is important for conveying their perspectives and raising awareness of their needs. They have a personal experience that can be communicated in a way that is authentic and appropriate for the target group. There is also an important duty of care. However different they are, victims/survivors and formers follow similar processes in processing and healing, albeit from different angles. It is important to find the right moment for someone to share their story, and of course it should also be respected when a victim/survivor or former decides not to share their story at all. If someone is thinking about sharing their experiences, the best/safest moment to do this varies from person to person. To make these kinds of decisions, proper counselling of formers and victims/survivors is essential.

#### 2. Victims/survivors of terrorism: searching for understanding by connecting with formers

In a separate break-out group, participants who are victims or survivors of terrorism discussed among themselves what it would mean for them to work together with a former extremist in a preventive campaign. The discussion moved to focus on the possibility for a victim/survivor to get in contact with the perpetrator of the attack they suffered from or, if this is not possible, with other formers from the same group. The variety of victims/survivors present led to different experiences being shared that gave insight into the possible ways this plays out:

- Forming a lasting connection with the former/perpetrator. One of the victims/survivors presented their personal experience in forming a lasting connection with the perpetrator of a terror attack that killed their father. In their story, understanding the perpetrator, showing empathy and not demonising helped in turning it into something positive. The victim/survivor and perpetrator in question now frequently work together to tell their powerful story.
- Making contact, but no further action. Another victim/survivor indicated to have had a moment of contact with the perpetrator, but this resulted in no further action. One of the factors influencing this was the fact that the perpetrator was not ready to acknowledge and show remorse for their deeds, but was rather still justifying them. The reason for contacting the perpetrator was to have them take responsibility for their action, which in the end they did. But no further conversations followed.
- **Considering making contact, but being denied by third parties.** A third example of a victim/survivor was that a family member of the perpetrator wanted to join group conversations where the victim/survivor was present. As this individual was also identified as being a risk and possibly posing a threat, security services denied this encounter due to safety concerns. The question that followed here was how this impacts a victim/survivor, as the choice was taken away from them.

Then the question was raised as to what it *means* to connect with a former/perpetrator and what effects this could have.

- An important element here is the search for understanding as a reason to connect, as understanding can be a way for a victim/survivor to heal. However, this becomes more difficult if the perpetrator has been killed or is unknown.
- An important caveat that was made here is that **understanding does not equal justification**. Understanding, seeing humanity and not demonising can be a way to heal oneself. This does not mean that the acts are also seen as justified.
- Another point was on **forgiveness**. While it can be helpful to forgive the perpetrator, it is not necessary. If a victim/survivor is not able to forgive the perpetrator, this does not make them a bad person. It could be unhealthy to keep wanting revenge. So, letting go of your own hatred, be it through forgiveness or through understanding, is a way to deal with this.
  - An element that can be of influence here is whether the victim/survivor was personally present at the attack or is a bereaved friend/family of a victim (who passed away).

<sup>(&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>) See for instance: <u>https://www.ecu.edu.au/newsroom/articles/opinion/good-communication-the-best-weapon-in-a-leaders-war-on-terror.</u>





• Finally, a point was made that the **family/friends of a victim/survivor might not agree** with them connecting with the perpetrator. Even if for their own healing process this connection can have a positive impact, it can put a strain on personal ties with friends or family. This should be taken into consideration when making such a choice.

The key takeaway for the goal of this meeting is to acknowledge the above points when considering if it is appropriate to include *both* victims/survivors as well as formers in a preventive campaign and taking the needs of victims/survivors very seriously.

#### 3. Former extremists: sensitively sharing personal stories

In the third break-out group, former extremists and exit workers came together to discuss ways in which former extremists could be involved in preventive campaigning and the challenges surrounding them. First, during a presentation by one of the participants of this break-out group, general insights into involving formers in preventive campaigning were shared:

- There are different spaces where campaigns can take place, each with their own implications: private, semipublic and public. Especially in the public space, it's important to keep in mind that if you share your story, you will not have full ownership of your story anymore. It will be interpreted and possibly spread by others in a way you might not intend.
- Moreover, there are different ways in which a former can be involved in a campaign: visible, partially visible or invisible (anonymous). It is not always necessary for formers to be visibly involved in a campaign, they can also contribute to the design, target group approach or idea and contribute to the success in the background due to their biographical experience.
- There are also different audiences (which can also depend on the space) for a campaign, for example the general public, schools or professionals. Different audiences can interpret an emotional story in a different way. There needs to be awareness of this.
- For the storytelling part, it is important to have a moral behind the story just someone sharing their experiences is not enough. In addition, the story must touch something bigger than the individual level. What do you want people to take away from the story you tell?
- Regarding the duty of care: the campaign might have an end date, but the lives of the people involved don't. Therefore, it is important to also keep aftercare in mind for those involved in a campaign.

After this, the participants discussed several challenges following the above insights:

- Making sure that formers are properly represented in media and sensationalising is avoided. For example, by only working together with journalists or partners that are known. Trust is an important factor here.
- As a former in preventive campaigning, you are expected to connect with the target group from your former environment. However, the longer you have been out, the more the reality of the new/young (potential) members might have changed. In other words: they might not understand you anymore.
- The voice of the silent majority is often missing from preventive campaigns. Involving formers, or perpetrators, tells one side of the story. But what about the voices of people who were not involved as a victim/survivor or former but still have an opinion that might be more nuanced and potentially less polarising?
- Interviewers often want a short and simple answer, but that is not possible as the radicalisation process is too complex. The story needs to be made simple, but then, danger lies in misinterpretation. The reality is always more complex than what can be included in the storytelling. People take your story as if it is 100% of your life, while it is often only a part of it.
  - In addition, media looking for 'alarming' or 'sensational' reporting can even be counterproductive (for example, reporting about the dangers of exiting an extremist group can discourage people from doing so).
- Finding formers who want to talk (possibly in the public space) is difficult. Even in the early stages, often, prison staff or police insist to join the interview for the sake of security. However, this may not make for a safe space for a former to tell their story.





#### 4. Reflection

After discussing the involvement of victims/survivors and formers in preventive campaigning from different perspectives, the group gathered for reflection. Some of the aspects that were mentioned are:

- Campaigns that portray formers and victims/survivors as 'saints' who magically stop terrorism are potentially harmful. This should be avoided.
- It is important to reflect on *why* a former or victim/survivor should be included in a campaign. Can the narrative conveyed also be told by someone else, with the same effect? If formers and victims/survivors are involved, then the goal of the campaign must be in line with the methods of implementation. Furthermore, the goal and implementation must be oriented towards the specific biographical and personal experiences as well as their specific needs.
- Since 2011, social media plays a bigger role. People who are in the news will have a digital footprint that will last. This can have a long-term influence, where people will keep reminding someone of their past. Is someone ready to live with a stigma for the next 20 to 30 years? Because this could happen if you go public.
- Telling a story is not enough, there should be a good moral to the story in order to be effective. Changing political landscapes influence the perception of formers and survivors, and it is a risk that their stories will be instrumentalised to fit a certain political narrative.
- When speaking about campaigning, there are different ways to interact and different types of campaigns. Public campaigns, using (online) media outlets, semi-public campaigns using more targeted media outlets, and 'private' campaigns using face-to-face communication, for instance in an educational setting. The more publicly a story will be shared, the more it will be open for interpretation and framing by others. Therefore, the consequences of sharing the story and the safety of the 'original owner' of the story should be considered even more when participating in a public campaign. By sharing their story, a person should be aware that they don't have 100% control over their story once it has been shared.
- Someone will in a way always be the owner of their own story, but it becomes a 'co-ownership' once the story has gone public. Once shared, you lose full control of your story. Others might use or even abuse it. It is important to be aware of this before participating in a campaign or being otherwise visible as a former or victim/survivor. Before someone shares their story, they will need to have some distance from what has happened or what someone has done. Only then can one assess the possible consequences of participating in a campaign. Using coaching or counselling by mental health experts could be beneficial when making this decision.
- It is important to establish the perspective when someone is participating in a campaign and to critically reflect on that: some people are opportunistic and could have unethical motivations to participate in a campaign.
- As the aim of preventive campaigning most times is to prevent people from joining (violent) extremist groups, we need to monitor the impact of these campaigns in order to learn from our experiences (reaching the audience, engagement of the audience).
- Another important aspect of sharing one's story is that you are not only sharing your own story, you are also setting an example for the group you are representing (for instance, 'skinheads' for a right-wing former). So, participating in campaigns is about 'me' and about 'us'.
- When working on these topics from a profit organisation, these risks are even bigger, therefore the need to look at the ethical side is even more important.
- The language and wording are charged with emotion. This makes it very complex. As there are multiple victims/survivors per terrorist attack, with different views, one should understand that you cannot please everyone when working in this field.

## Do's and Don'ts

On the second day of the meeting, the participants exchanged their ideas and views while collecting do's and don'ts on the topic of the involvement of victims/survivors and formers in preventive campaigns. They brainstormed around four themes: 1) ethical considerations, 2) working with both victims/survivors and formers, 3) dealing with media/publicity, and 4) policy advice for proper involvement of victims/survivors and formers. Besides do's and don'ts, some questions were also raised that deserve further discussion and/or exploration.











Be aware that you can never control the media 100%. Media might respond to the campaign or reactions could be shared on social media. However, you can control certain aspects, or try to mitigate negative outcomes:

- plan, prepare, safeguard, assess the risk of negative or harmful publicity before even starting the campaign;
- inform the victims/survivors and/or formers about long-term implications of media attention;
- use media attention to promote the key points of your message;
- when asked for an interview, consider doing live interviews to avoid editing;
- establish a limited number of media shows for the formers or victims/survivors to appear in.

#### For campaigns including both victims/survivors and formers

Consider how the joint campaign can be **meaningful for the involved victims/survivors and formers**, for example through an element of restorative justice.

**Reward the same importance to stories of victims/survivors and formers.** A time balance should be established between victims/survivors and formers for speaking or being visible in a campaign. Another consideration could be to give the involved victims/survivors a (safe) role in selecting the formers to work with in a joint campaign.

#### For policy level

**Policymakers** in this field could consider **developing a media charter of good practices** to protect victims/survivors against media assaults (<sup>5</sup>):

- good practice manual for journalists (restorative journalism),
- inform about constructive journalism oriented for solutions,
- establish a protocol with the media,
- set the legal framework: what is/isn't allowed?

From the perspective of governments, it is crucial to **assess the risks of involving formers in campaigning**, as a reputational risk is attached. It could for instance have a backlash on the government if someone who participated in a campaign relapsed and would commit crimes again.

To improve **sustainability**, consider the **development of a training** on how to deal with victims/survivors and formers in preventive campaigns.





Don't instrumentalise victims/survivors or formers. Treat people from both groups humanely. Do not
 force victims/survivors or formers to tell their story in a way that is uncomfortable to them.

**Don't emphasise retribution**, but instead promote restorative justice. Reconciliation with parties involved should not be an explicit goal.

Don't focus on the present, but on the future and on moving forward.

(<sup>5</sup>) Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). *Reporting about violent extremism and P/CVE challenges for journalists – Recommendations from practitioners*. Publications Office of the European Union. <u>https://home-</u>

affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/reporting-about-violent-extremism-and-pcvechallenges-journalists-recommendations-practitioners\_en.







**Don't portray victims/survivors and formers as 'superstars' or 'heroes'.** For instance, a survivor who played a role in capturing a perpetrator should not be seen only as 'the person who stopped an attacker' and the actions of a former should not be glorified in any way.

**Don't use polarising or triggering language**: don't be too political, avoid polarisation between groups, but instead be sensitive in the language you use.



**Formers** participating in a campaign should be sensitive, and make sure to **not glorify their past**, especially on topics such as violence, power and self-esteem.



**Don't expose** the group/family/network of a victim/survivor or former **to negative media attention** to avoid victimisation.



- **?** Who decides if a former is **'ready' to be part of a campaign** and if a victim/survivor is ready to share their story without the risk of self-harm? And how is it possible to 'measure' this?
- Should formers and victims receive **financial compensation** for their role to speak/participate in a campaign? Participation takes up a lot of time and effort to travel and present one's personal emotional story. Also consider financing mental health support afterwards when needed (aftercare).
- And at the same time: **how is it possible to limit the influence of financial aspects** on the decision to share stories and on the contents of those stories? How is it possible to avoid the risk that a person gets 'stuck' in sharing their story repeatedly because that is the story the audience wants to hear?
- **Can participating** in campaigns (either in the media or in an educational setting) help with the individual and/or the collective **healing process**?
  - Should there be a **disclaimer about ethical considerations** as part of the campaign?
  - **How is it possible to inform the media** on how sensitive this subject is? In the past, negative media attention has caused harm.

## Follow-up

During the meeting, participants were also asked to formulate any remaining questions or challenges surrounding this topic in a group exercise. This resulted in several potential follow-ups for this meeting. The most pressing ones are about these questions: 1) Who decides if a former is 'ready' to be part of a campaign and if a victim/survivor is ready to share their story without the risk of self-harm? And how is it possible to 'measure' this? 2) Should formers and victims receive financial compensation for their role to speak/participate in a campaign? and, 3) Can participating in campaigns (either in the media or in an educational setting) help with the individual and/or the collective healing process?





# **Further reading**

- Formers in prevention/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) Standards by EXIT-Germany, May 2023.
- The potential of restorative justice in cases of violent extremism and terrorism, 2021.
- <u>Organising direct interactions between victims of terrorism and terrorist detainees: guidelines</u>, 29 September 2020. Guidelines for setting up discussion groups between detainees who are convicted for terrorism-related offences and victims/survivors of terrorism.
- <u>Conducting direct interactions between victims of terrorism and detainees: a guideline</u>, 24 November 2020. A guideline for conducting direct interactions between detainees and victims/survivors.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2017), Dos and don'ts of involving formers in PVE/CVE work.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021), <u>Consequences of Extremist Digital Heritage on the Rehabilitation</u> <u>Process</u>.

