

High Level Conference

Discussion paper

Radicalisation Awareness Network



June 2014

Across Europe, practitioners, researchers and NGOs have extensive knowledge on how to deal with different forms of radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism. The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) allows these experts and first line practitioners to exchange experiences about the best ways to address the challenge.

Practitioners can make a difference, as they work in close relation with citizens and communities and thus have the opportunity to detect worrying signs and act upon them.¹ The effectiveness of their engagement depends on the appropriate framework to ensure smooth cooperation between them as well as with policy makers. The RAN can offer its support in developing the appropriate mechanisms, e.g. through counselling, workshops, trainings.

This discussion paper highlights some of the many lessons learned and experiences exchanged within the RAN. Some of them are targeted towards the specific themes of the High Level Conference of 17 June 2014 in Brussels; others are of more general importance and relevance. They are not exhaustive but meant to stimulate the debate and trigger further reflection on operational conclusions and concrete implementation measures.

Countering terrorist propaganda

Propaganda spread by terrorists and violent extremists is easily accessible. It is harder to predict and detect violent extremist actions, as extremist messages are spread more widely, rapidly and effectively via internet and social media and authorities are often not able to hold people accountable for this propaganda. It has become increasingly apparent that preventing and tackling radicalisation leading to terrorism and violent extremism is not only a security issue, but is also about winning hearts and minds. This can be done notably through countering extremist propaganda disseminated both off line and online.

1. **Efforts must go further than prohibiting or removing illegal material, and include the development of counter-communication**

- Counter-communication can vary from a campaign challenging the factual basis to counter-narratives which discredit and de-legitimise the extremist narrative or providing an alternative narrative. Within the RAN we have seen different examples of (imprisoned) former violent extremists who wrote a letter rejecting their former violent ideology which provided a powerful counter narrative.
- RAN piloted a counter-narrative campaign 'Abdullah-X' (<http://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx>) focussed on the animated character of a young Muslim man who is about being real and present within the web space and showing extremists that they face an opponent who understands them better than they

¹ For a complete overview of RAN activities please view http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network

think. In the pilot period, the campaign received over 50.000 views and, compared to commercial campaigning, also scored high on user-engagement (subscription to the channel and comments). It provided us with some valuable lessons on counter-narrative campaigns, such as using different content styles (lengths, messages, and animations) in a frequent manner helps build user-engagement.

- Counter-communication alone may not interrupt the radicalisation process or may not de-radicalise individuals, but they can deconstruct extremist messages for individuals at risk. Online counter-communication should go hand in hand with counter measures in the off line domain for example by educating young people at schools about the consequences of violent extremism. Within the RAN much emphasis has been put on utilising testimonies of victims in class rooms to confront and discuss the consequences of violent extremism with young people.

Developing and implementing exit-strategies

Exit strategies consist of programmes aiming at re-integrating radicals (de-radicalisation) or at least dissuading them from using violence (disengagement). Exit-strategies need to be carefully designed and tailor made. The RAN will organise specific exit-workshops offering a model for developing and implementing de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes, focussing on elements such as the quality of the intervention (good practices, key principles), which professional competencies are required, and what type of support should be offered by national and local governments.

2. **Exit-strategies need to be tailor-made**

The returnees from Syria highlight that people often have very different motivational factors for travelling and returning. They can come back disillusioned, traumatised, injured, or radicalised and willing to continue the fight in Europe and/or to find new recruits. Different motivational and disengagement factors do not only apply to foreign fighters, but people involved in other forms of violent extremism, such as left-wing and right-wing extremism. In turn, governments across Europe have different legislation, agencies and practitioners in place to deal with exit-strategies. Therefore, there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to de-radicalisation and disengagement. Programmes should therefore be made to the individual and national situation and needs:

- Exit strategies should be tailored to a potentially large spectrum of the individual's personal and social needs.
 - In many of the cases discussed within RAN the exit-strategy was composed out of a mixture of measures combining e.g. individual mentoring, conversation, social and economic support, family support, community engagement, psychological support and religious or ideological counselling.
 - Radicalised people often have practical problems/questions (housing issues, no job etc.). Support with these problems, will help build the necessary relationship of trust.
 - Being open-minded, providing counter-narratives instead of stereotyping or challenging claims and ways of thinking instead of pressuring and preaching, are other key ingredients for a successful exit-strategy.
 - Even when all these requirements are met a voluntary exit-strategy is not always possible, after which compulsory avenues can be explored, such as taking away welfare benefits.

- As discussions within RAN have shown, there are different types of exit-programmes involving statutory actors or non-statutory practitioners, depending on the specific national context and situation.
 - Exit strategies executed by non-statutory practitioners may have the advantage of a certain degree of independence and perceived impartiality. On the other hand, statutory practitioners may be best placed to provide exit-strategies, as they have (legal) duties to execute similar tasks. Where trust in authorities is lacking, employment of a non-statutory practitioner seems however preferable.
 - Non-governmental practitioners need to be entrusted by and have good working relationships with governmental institutions. However, discussions within the RAN revealed that non-governmental and governmental professionals (intelligence, police) do not always liaise very well. In some countries they have, until recently, tended to view each other as adversaries. Hence, it is recommendable to build and support public-civil partnerships between non-governmental and statutory actors within multi-agency teams. This is typically something RAN can support Member States with by identifying the relevant actors within a Member State and setting up rules of procedure and protocols for information sharing.

Provide family support

Family members are most often the first to detect worrying signs of radicalisation of their child, but often do not know how to deal with the situation. The involvement and engagement of families may also play an important role in the rehabilitation, reintegration and, to a lesser extent, de-radicalisation of their children. To play an active role in dealing with children at risk, families need the appropriate support.

3. **Support for family members needs to be easily accessible, exploiting and enhancing existing structures**

- Those offering support to families should clearly advertise their services and the relevant programme information and contact details. Phone numbers/hotlines for those affected or leaflets could be distributed in affected communities or they could try to ensure that their services become the first internet search result.
- It is often not necessary to set up completely new agencies of support. However, it is important to have specific family support structures within existing agencies (e.g. ministries of social affairs, police/security services or within frameworks of trusted civil society partners) in which practitioners are trained to listen to the needs of family members and respond with the appropriate means for countering violent extremism.

4. **Family support can take different forms and shapes depending on the relevant needs and broader context**

- *Family support can be given individually or collectively:* Family group talks may be suitable in big anonymous cities. On the other hand in small and sometimes very ethnically diverse communities in which youths have recruited each other ('peer recruitment') approaching and helping families individual might prove more effective.
- *Family support can take different forms:* it can range from very pro-active support (making house visits) to leaving the initiative for support completely to the families (families phoning a special centre for support). Support can be purely therapeutic,

stimulating parents to address their emotions and anxieties, or encourage families to actively challenge and deconstruct some of the extremist narratives.

- *Family support can take place at different stages.* In its earliest stages family support can be targeted towards parents with individuals at risk, by talking about their anxieties and creating an open atmosphere in which children can talk and discuss extreme ideals and positive alternatives can be provided. When these ideals turn into violent extremist behaviour (and imprisonment), families can be supported whilst their child is imprisoned, by counselling for their grief and advice on how to rehabilitate and reintegrate their child after imprisonment (daily routine, support in going to school, finding a job etc.). Family support related to foreign fighters should be provided before, during and after travel. An example of support during travel is establishing contact between parents and child, and supporting parents in creating a positive environment for a child to return home to.

Engage and empower civil society

Preventing violent extremism is a common effort between communities, authorities and practitioners. Their interaction and cooperation needs the appropriate framework and support.

5. It is important to identify and engage the relevant first line workers that can make an important contribution to preventing violent extremism, provide them with guidance for their involvement and train them accordingly

- First line practitioners that are often in direct contact with potential vulnerable individuals who may be at risk of radicalisation include teachers, youth workers, community police officers, child protection workers and (mental) health care workers. Awareness raising and training can help them to recognise individuals at risk and refer them to agencies or practitioners who are specialised in further assessment and de-radicalisation. For example, if a minor hands in an essay at school claiming that the Holocaust could have never happened, the teacher should be able to recognise that this minor is an individual at risk and should be able to act upon signs of concern.
- The discussions within the RAN revealed that some individuals at risk, in particular 'lone actors', have mental health issues. It is however sometimes difficult for practitioners to act as they are bound by patient confidentiality. For health care practitioners who deal with such individuals, RAN has developed practical guidelines to share information in such cases without infringing patient confidentiality rules. The RAN can facilitate the deployment of small teams of experts who can provide Member States with support in setting up information sharing protocols.

6. Investing in community engagement and empowerment helps prevent violent extremism

- Communities, and key figures within the community, are able to identify individuals or groups at risk and may employ support measures for neighbourhoods, families or parents. Key figures within communities can help individuals at risk in challenging extremist narratives, being a role model/ mentor and by providing practical help and emotional support to the individuals concerned and their family members.
- Measures and initiatives of engagement can take on different forms, such as:

- Promoting leadership of community members and young people within specific communities through training of leadership skills,
- Mentoring and role models;
- Organising dialogue, discussion forums and democratic platforms;
- Training key religious figures to engage with youths not just on faith-related matters, but also social and intergenerational matters;
- Training to identify vulnerable individuals.
- Community engagement initiatives need to be carefully designed taking into account the sensitivity of the matter:
 - *Permanent versus ad hoc engagement*: Most projects have been set up after a major incident which heavily impacted society. Currently communities, families and authorities are worried about the European foreign fighters travelling to Syria. Such a common sense of urgency often provides an effective starting point for community engagement and empowerment. However, ideally, community engagement should be an ongoing activity.
 - *Avoid stigmatisation*: Actors should be aware of the sensitivities surrounding community engagement and empowerment. Some claim that it stigmatises certain communities as 'problematic' and labels them as communities at risk of radicalism, when communities are approached on the basis of their faith or ethnicity.
 - *Communities as partners*: Communities are also worried to be considered or to serve as the 'extended arm' of the security services. Addressing these sensitivities and being transparent instead of operating covertly is essential.
 - *Do not focus on radicalisation only*: Community engagement should not be limited to the issue of radicalisation, but address other worries, anxieties and fears of communities such as social issues, discrimination and polarisation.

RAN offer for Member States

RAN can be of assistance to Member States in putting into practice some of the lessons learned, best practices and above recommendations by:

5 deployments of RAN expertise at the request of Member States

RAN can provide Member States with expertise and support on specific challenges related to countering violent extremism and terrorism, such as the development of a key project plan or reviewing a policy area. RAN experts will visit the Member State to help them with their specific question.

3 workshops on exit strategies for 4 Member States per workshop

RAN will organise three workshops on both disengagement programmes and de-radicalisation programmes. These workshops, both dealing with general principles as focussing on current forms of violent extremism will be organised in cooperation with Member States who wish to attend them. The aim of the workshops is to inform, inspire and empower attendees to develop and enhance exit strategies in their countries. As Member States face different challenges, each one-day workshops will focus on a specific form of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. Member States are invited to participate in the workshop matching their challenges best: right-wing violent extremism, Islamic

violent extremism and foreign fighters. The subject of the third workshop will be determined on the basis of the Member States' needs.

RAN DNA train-the-trainers course to be deployed in 5 Member States

Leading RAN Members and European specialists in the field of developing and executing training for practitioners are – together with the RAN Secretariat – developing a train-the-trainer programme for a *Workshop on Awareness and Action*, based on the most important lessons of the RAN working groups ('RAN DNA'): a preventive approach to counter the risk of vulnerable individuals being radicalised to violent extremism and terrorism; the necessity of multi-agency working and attention for the local context and practitioners. The workshop enlarges the awareness of radicalisation and shows what different practitioners can do to recognise, share information, prevent and counter radicalisation. After two days of training the local trainers will feel comfortable to deliver the one-day workshop themselves. They can use the complete one-day programme or select elements that suit their needs and possibilities. The RAN trainers will hand over the training materials translated to the national language. The workshop materials will be tailored to the context of the Member State and can be adapted. This way the trainers will be empowered to deliver the workshop to colleagues. It can also be integrated in the existing curriculum for training of practitioners, like police, prison personnel or social workers.

Supporting 6 national (RAN) groups

Creating a network of practitioners to exchange knowledge on radicalisation leading to violent extremism is one way of implementing and reproducing the benefits of the RAN model at national level. National groups of RAN practitioners already gathered in a limited number of Member States. At the request of a national authority, the RAN Secretariat will connect RAN practitioners from that Member State with the national authority.

One or two national group leaders, to be recruited by the national authority, are needed to assist in setting up such a group. The RAN Secretariat will provide limited assistance and guidance to the national group leader(s), providing documents, contact databases and suggestions in setting up a secretariat.

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http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/index_en.htm