



HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE – 29 JANUARY 2013, BRUSSELS

“EMPOWERING LOCAL ACTORS TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM”

DISCUSSION PAPER

Few would disagree that *preventing* violent extremism is a challenging, if not daunting, task that cannot be left only to a small number of authorities and actors. The nature of the phenomenon requires wide-ranging cooperation and a variety of expertise.

Across Europe, practitioners, researchers and NGOs have extensive knowledge on how to deal with the different forms of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. The Commission has brought together some of these experts, mainly practitioners who may encounter the target group directly, in the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). The RAN allows them to meet and exchange experiences about the best ways to counter violent extremism.

Although at an early phase of their work, the different RAN working groups have been asked to contribute with recommendations to policy makers¹. This discussion paper is based upon their suggestions.

A) Experiences and lessons learned by local actors in preventing violent extremism

Early intervention and a multi-actor approach are key elements to prevent radicalisation towards violent extremism, and local actors are among the ones best placed to take action.

Recommendations²:

- 1. At national level, support the setup of platforms or networks of first-line practitioners** to improve the understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and share experiences on the best way to counter it. The platform or network could be based on the model of the RAN.
- 2. At local level, develop frameworks for multi-actor cooperation and information sharing** between first line practitioners from schools, police, health, municipalities, youth workers, and other partners. Such cooperation could be done on a regular basis, or it could be activated on demand, depending on evolving needs. This kind of cooperation would be important for awareness raising, detection, and to find appropriate and tailored solutions. Within these frameworks, procedures could then be developed to raise and follow up concerns about individuals or groups.
- 3. At local and national level, train local and community police in how to prevent violent extremism.** Being active in the communities and hence in a position to detect and act upon radicalisation, the local or community police should be trained to detect signs of radicalisation towards violent extremism and should know how to deal with cases of concern.

¹ All recommendations will soon be available on the RAN webpage of the Europa portal:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/index_en.htm

² Please note that the recommendations are not classified by order of importance.

4. At local and national level, increase awareness in schools about radicalisation. In addition to the work already done in schools to teach children about democratic values, history and critical thinking, the RAN pool of experts could be used to raise awareness amongst teachers and pupils about violent extremism.

5. At national level, and with EU support, raise awareness among health practitioners towards signs of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. Some individuals who are drawn into violent extremism have been in contact, at one point, with healthcare. While respecting their confidentiality duty, health practitioners could play a greater role in recognising and safeguarding those vulnerable individuals before they are exploited for violent extremism.

6. At national level, and with EU support, raise awareness among prison and probation staff about radicalisation, and arrange de-radicalisation or exit programmes for convicted extremists. The risk of becoming radicalised and drawn into violent extremists' networks increases during prison stay. The prison and probation staff is best placed to recognise the risk and act upon it. Personal continuity of facilitators across institutions should be encouraged in order to increase chances of successful reintegration.

7. At local, national and EU level, involve non-governmental organisations more in prevention of radicalisation. The work of NGOs should be better recognised and associated to the work of the authorities. For instance, non-statutory actors could participate to a greater extent in institutional de-radicalisation initiatives. People feeling marginalised and sometimes alienated by state structures will rather accept to work with non-governmental practitioners than with authorities. Furthermore, 'government-NGO partnerships' would enhance a better understanding between communities and authorities.

8. At local and/or national level, help individuals and vulnerable groups to leave violent extremism, be it by proposing exit strategies or de-radicalisation programmes. This type of work is often best done in cooperation between several actors. For instance, closer cooperation between authorities and first liners who are able to establish a trustful work relation with the subject should be sought.

9. At local, national and EU level, ensure better support to victims of terrorism. Victims' voices are a powerful tool for prevention and de-radicalisation, but only if victims feel comfortable with sharing their story and have the necessary support available.

B) The role of Diasporas in preventing violent extremism

Every strata of society can be affected by radicalisation towards violent extremism. Nevertheless, it appears that certain Diasporas and overseas communities are more specifically targeted for radicalisation towards international terrorism. At the same time, members of the diaspora would know best how to build resilience within their own community, and this should be facilitated and supported by authorities and non-governmental actors.

Some of the recommendations regarding Diasporas may also be of value when working with other potentially vulnerable groups or individuals.

Recommendations:

10. At local and national level, as well as possibly at EU level, increase the dialogue with and the support to Diaspora communities. As Diasporas themselves can be well placed to target violent extremism within their own communities as well as in their country of origin, and have the opportunity to build from within effective resilience against extremist ideologies, it is important for authorities to engage in dialogue with Diasporas to hear their ideas of how they themselves can address these challenges. The authorities can then provide the necessary support for the Diasporas to put relevant ideas for prevention into effect. NGOs from, or already working in, the Diasporas may be important partners in this work. Authorities should seek to avoid solely addressing security

issues or prevention in its dialogue with diaspora but rather bring this up as an integral part of an on-going dialogue on broader issues.

11. At local or national level, establish support networks for families of prospective and departed “foreign fighters”. Successful programmes have been carried out in a few EU countries, targeting women, families, and community members close to violent extremists.

12. At local, national, EU and international level, engage former extremists to deconstruct violent extremist narratives. Former foreign fighters or former violent extremists in general can carry a strong message as they have their own personal experiences to share. For instance, a former fighter may explain about the realities of war and terrorist training camps, which are not as romantic as envisaged by those dreaming about going there. The message will come across more strongly when delivered by someone culturally close to the audience.

C) Communication on violent extremism, and counter-messaging via the Internet

Communication is a powerful tool that may, if used in the right way, make an impact in preventing radicalisation. Our possibilities are wide, ranging from improving our understanding of radicalisation on the internet, to building resilience via online counter-narratives. The use of internet needs however to be supported and complemented by offline initiatives to be truly effective. Furthermore, counter-messaging shall not be seen as winning the argument or winning over the target audience, but rather as a mean of planting seeds of doubt among violent extremists. In this context, counter-narratives can start a gradual movement in the right direction.

Recommendations:

13. At local, national and EU level, encourage public-private cooperation and research to better assess the scale and impact of violent extremism online and to develop more targeted counter-narrative actions. Research can help in better understanding the extent and nature of violent extremist material online, the impact of counter-narratives and the relationship between online and offline behaviour, whereas public-private partnership, with internet providers, social networks, and the online industry, will allow for online testing of various tools, evaluated with the help of research.

14. At national and/or EU level, set up a group of resources from public relations companies, film industry and other relevant partners to support local actors in developing counter-narratives. By using their expertise in how to get a message across to a specific audience, this group could, for instance, use the narratives of victims and former extremists, and help promote effective alternative messages online.

15. At local and/or national level, prepare for de-stigmatising communication by authorities following an attack. To prevent escalation after an attack, it is important to have a clear view on how to communicate without causing unnecessary stigmatisation. Labelling, misusing terms or stigmatising one category of population may have terrible side effects. Those who take part in the public debate should be aware that the perceptions that public debate leaves in society can escalate or mitigate the level of conflict.

Concluding remarks

The issues to address are numerous, but so are also the ideas on how better to counter violent extremism across Europe and beyond. The purpose of the conference will be to allow for a broad discussion based on the above mentioned recommendations as well as other innovative ways of preventing violent extremism. We hope that the conference can help the EU and its Member States to develop better tools to counter violent extremism.

We look forward to hear your views during the conference.