Preventing radicalisation of asylum seekers and refugees

The RAN Policy and Practice event in Rome on 11 December 2019 brought together policy makers and practitioners active in health and social care, youth and community work, education and police, to work in the interface of Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (P/CVE) and refugee-related policies. The aim of this meeting was to discuss current P/CVE approaches and good practice specifically aimed at addressing the potential vulnerabilities and needs related to refugees and asylum seekers from two angles:

1) **In the PVE field** – how to safeguard refugees and asylum seekers and how to build their resilience, including in refugee facilities and communities;

2) **In the CVE field** – how to prevent and counter far-right extremist narratives and mobilisation against refugees and asylum seekers.

Policy & Practice challenges and key messages shared during the meeting, as well as recommendations for further research and RAN activities in relation to these topics, are summarised in this ex post paper. One of the key messages was that those concerned about at-risk groups should timely deal with their needs, in order to raise resilience. Policies should be risk- and need-based.
Introduction

While the number of asylum seekers and refugees involved in extremist and terrorist violent activities remains very limited, considering the push and pull factors for radicalisation, refugees and asylum seekers are at risk of being radicalised or exploited by extremist recruiters. The RAN activities have shown that specialists considering P/CVE strategies for refugees should also consider or be aware of those who are still applying for refugee status, those who intend to do so, and those excluded from the procedures by being denied asylum.

At the same time, incidents and fake news around refugees and asylum seekers are often maliciously exploited in far-right extremist narratives. Migration has further fuelled far-right mobilisation against refugees and asylum seekers, and contributed to polarisation within host societies. All over Europe refugees are targeted by hate crimes and extremists’ violence. The RAN study visit to Sweden (2018) discussing refugees and P/CVE demonstrated that in most Member States there is room for further implementation of the longstanding P/CVE expertise and approaches in working with refugee communities.(1) To improve this process, this ex post paper summarises experiences, lessons and key messages shared among policy makers and practitioners, and provides recommendations on how to:

1) improve the policies and practice of P/CVE in working with refugees and asylum seekers, to safeguard them and raise their resilience against radicalisation and recruitment by extremist groups;
2) how to prevent and counter far-right extremist narratives and mobilisation targeting refugees and asylum seekers.

NEEDS, VULNERABILITY, RESILIENCE AND THE RISK OF RADICALISATION AND RECRUITMENT

In the study for the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism conducted by Alex P. Schmid, the likelihood of refugees arriving in Western Europe becoming radicalised is considered ‘very low’ (Schmid, 2016, p. 45), at least in the short term. However, Schmid argues that the vulnerability of refugees may increase if they are not fully integrated in host societies. Among refugees and asylum seekers, the RAN experts identified four groups of people with a higher risk of vulnerability to violent extremism or radicalisation: (2)

1) Refugees with mental health issues – those suffering from mental health issues/illnesses and socio-psychological problems;
2) Rejected asylum seekers – those excluded from the asylum procedures and who remain in the country, for instance because they won’t cooperate on their repatriation;
3) Unaccompanied minors;
4) Unaccompanied minors turning 18+ (young adults).

However, some vulnerabilities that have been noted as risk factors for radicalisation are vulnerabilities frequently felt by refugees, such as insecure legal status and uncertain prospects, financial struggles, emotional trauma or mental health issues. (3) After being granted official refugee status, there are still needs and conditions – like social marginalisation and discrimination, perceived grievances and injustice, the sense of not belonging and identity issues, alienation, disappointment and hopelessness – that can feed the breeding ground for radicalisation and increase vulnerability to recruitment. Those who are denied asylum are even more vulnerable due to their status, expectation of repatriation and the uncertain future in the countries they are returned to.

Radicalisation can be self-initiated, i.e. the individual becomes radicalises himself or herself – often via the Internet, for example – or can be groomed and recruited by another person. Recruiters target people feeling vulnerable; the more needs remain unfulfilled, the more vulnerable the person is and therefore the easier to influence their way of thinking. In consideration of these categories of persons within the refugee community and their potential vulnerabilities, policy makers and practitioners at this meeting have stressed the need to:

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(1) See: Krasenberg, J., Lenos, S., RAN study visit on ‘PVE and CVE in and around asylum centres and within refugee communities’, Ex Post Paper. Malmö, Sweden: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018
(2) Ibid.
1. Work harder on the safeguarding from radicalisation influence, integration and social cohesion;
2. Provide education, opportunity for work, and empowerment to younger refugees;
3. Develop a culturally sensitive psycho-social intervention;
4. Train and support professionals and volunteers working with refugees to raise their awareness level of radicalisation and to empower them to contribute to the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals.

Key messages

- A preventive approach that also addresses unfulfilled needs could be more successful than an exclusive focus on risks.
- Refugee communities could be approached as potential partners in raising awareness and building resilience amongst their people.

HOW DOES ONE SAFEGUARD ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES FROM RADICALISATION, AND BUILD RESILIENCE IN REFUGEE FACILITIES AND COMMUNITIES?

Many factors can undermine social cohesion and integration of refugees into the host society, including social and economic isolation as well as discrimination and stigmatisation. The identification of isolation and discrimination as risk factors is especially important in preventing violent radicalisation. Another factor is that triggers for radicalisation are not the same for every refugee population or individual and in every host country. Thus, one of the conclusions of this meeting is that the adopted policies should be tailored to the specific needs of each refugee community and circumstances in different countries.

Current experiences in EU Member States, presented at this meeting, have shown that nationally and locally developed multi-agency P/CVE activities are not always sufficiently connected to the world of professionals working with refugees and asylum seekers. There is also an impression among practitioners that safeguarding vulnerable refugees or those denied status from radicalisation is not receiving enough attention by local and national governments drafting P/CVE policies. A recent exception to that rule is in Finland, where their new risk-based National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism dedicated one of its 14 actions to the at-risk group of refugees. P/CVE can be more effective if asylum seekers and refugee communities are not only monitored for signals of radicalisations, but are also seen as partners in preventing radicalisation and in helping build resilience, as well as investing in responding to needs that as a way of possibly lowering radicalisation risks. Most refugees have experienced the horror of extremist actions and could be natural partners in P/CVE.

In order to prevent marginalisation, and to lower the risk of radicalisation with the potential for violent behaviour, the EU has presented a broad range of activities in response to the opportunities and challenges raised by an increase in arrivals of young refugees and asylum seekers. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in its publication titled ‘Integration of young refugees in the EU: good practices and challenges’ (November, 2019) identified serious challenges across the EU in the integration of young refugees aged 16 to 24 and provided a multifaceted plan with several initiatives and promising practices. Another source of how to address challenges and solutions in working with young refugees can also be found in the European Union’s Work Plan for Youth (2016-2018), which highlights the importance of refugees’ access to youth work as a precondition of integration, so crucial to foster self-confidence and build resilience.

At this meeting we discussed how to safeguard asylum seekers and refugees from radicalisation and build their resilience at refugee facilities and communities through (1) the role of education in supporting refugee children, (2) mental health support to refugees, and (3) the contribution of first-line practitioners in managing polarisation and supporting the integration of refugees.

The role of education

Young refugees are considered an especially vulnerable population category. Thus, the role of education in supporting refugee children is highly important. Refugee children, especially unaccompanied ones, are often...
highly traumatised; this contributes to a variety of mental health issues, and hampers their successful integration, education and overall development. Schools (4) are the most important places for refugee children to develop relationships that will support their integration in the host community, and to build resilience to radicalisation. It is critical that educators understand how to create and sustain a safe and supportive environment in traumasensitive schools, and to implement trauma-informed teaching. (5) For recommended reading on how to deal with traumatised children, see Leony Coppens et al., ‘Teaching traumatised children. A practical handbook for primary education’ (2016; in Dutch). (6) Coppens’ work focuses on trauma-sensitive teaching, and provides practical knowledge and skills to deal with the behaviour of traumatised children.

Existing good practices employ a holistic multi-agency approach: Participants at this meeting explained how the ‘GO!’ project in Belgium involved schools, social care partners, mosques, parents, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), police and law enforcement to effectively manage a child’s trauma, while also employing Bart Brandsma’s model (7) for understanding and managing polarisation. (8) The RAN Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools (2015) is recommended practical guidance on how to create promising interactions at the educator, school, partnership and government level. Another element used in schools is culture as a way to deal with individual and group identity.

There were three main challenges and primary solutions for educators presented at this meeting:

**Challenges**
- The lack of knowledge on an individual child’s trauma
- The lack of access to professional expertise and training
- The lack of time and continuity: short-term solutions for long-term problems

**Solutions**
- Supervisions, interventions, and coaching
- Training on trauma-sensitive education
- Long-term mentoring and monitoring, particularly for refugee children (including evaluation)

**Mental health support to refugees**

Mental health support to refugees is critical in understanding the relationships between pre-migration stressors and existing traumatic experiences, post-migration living difficulties, and issues that could trigger radicalisation and violence. The RAN activities have shown the need for a better understanding of how concepts of assessing and treating mental health conditions actually work when applied to traumatized refugee populations from different cultures. Moreover, there is also a great need to better understand the relationship between refugees’ mental health and their integration in their host countries’ societies, including factors like acquiring language skills, ability to find work, economic independence, and personal quality of life.

On the other hand, caregivers working with refugees who suffered extreme violence are themselves often exposed to secondary traumatisation. Providing care to traumatised people can be emotionally very difficult and requires additional skills development and training to deal with such refugees, and to cope with stress. As recommended reading on this topic see: Zipfel, S., et al. (eds), ‘Refugee mental health’ (May 2019), a presentation of research findings on mental health issues in refugees from different social, economic, and cultural settings around the world. How can mental health sector support refugees? An examples of a good practice is the Danish Institute Against Torture – ’DIGNITY’, which works with traumatised refugees with physical, psychological and social problems to fight torture and help torture victims and their families to a better life.

Policy makers and practitioners highlighted the following main challenges and solutions in the mental health sector:

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(4) The RAN meeting on ‘Safeguarding troubled refugee children in the classroom’, held in Zagreb on 3-4 October 2019, discussed how education can help to ensure the resilience and general well-being of refugee children, and to minimise the risk of vulnerability to potential radicalisation.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Translation of the Dutch title: Lesgeven aan getraumatiseerde kinderen: een praktisch handboek voor het basisonderwijs: een praktisch handboek voor leerkrachten in het basisonderwijs

(7) See: https://insidepolarisation.nl/en/

(8) See the RAN ex ante paper on Discussing the draft ‘Polarization Management Manual’, 6 July 2017, Amsterdam
Challenges
- Difficulties in diagnosing mental health problems
- Legal restrictions and imposed waiting periods before refugees are eligible to access services
- Obstacles to requesting assistance (financial reasons, fear of separation from family/children)

Recommendations
- Early screening and detection of trauma in refugee families
- Early diagnosis and treatment
- Mental health support/care plan that includes local government, mental health institutions, doctors, welfare programmes and community assistance.

First-line practitioners and refugee integration

First-line practitioners working in hotspots and first reception centres face different challenges, including safeguarding asylum seekers and refugees from far-right violent extremists and Islamist extremist recruiters. What can be done to provide adequate support and build resilience among refugee communities? One of the previous RAN study visits to Malmö (Sweden) in 2018 has shown that many EU Member States need and have opportunities to incorporate lessons learned from the prevention of radicalisation into the asylum-seekers and refugees sector.

According to Eurostat, Sweden accepted more refugees per capita than any other country in the EU in 2015. Thus, the Swedish experience in leading P/CVE efforts in the asylum process at the city of Malmö can be used as an effective model on how to deal adequately with emerging threats among vulnerable refugees. Measures effectively implemented include the establishment of a national centre for preventing violent extremism, the national centre for unaccompanied minors, and collaboration with faith communities. To learn more about the Swedish experience, see: The city of Malmö – A ‘community that cares’ PVE strategy plan (9). (10); A discussion on engaging different community stakeholders toward defining a shared community vision and addressing related challenges and needs. The plan promotes wider efforts of fostering social cohesion, preventing seclusion and building the resilience of the refugee community.

Other examples of good practices in working within refugee facilities and communities can be found in Belgium and the Netherlands:
- Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil, BE) — through 60 reception centres, Fedasil provides care during the reception of asylum applicants and ensures the quality and conformity of the different reception structures.
- The Dutch Council for Refugees (NL) - with a widespread network of both paid staff and over 13,000 volunteers throughout the country, the Council offers support to refugees throughout all stages of the asylum application, including towards becoming residents in the Netherlands.
- The National Support Centre for Extremism (LSE, NL) – provides family support, individual counsel and group contact with people who are or have been dealing with radicalisation or extremism. The centre works with a multidisciplinary pool of experts and case management teams with expertise in radicalisation, religion, ideology, psychology, child and youth care, trauma and family support. They assess cases and advise on the local multi-agency approach. The national centre offers mobile expert teams for strategic support to local efforts.

Community and civic support for integration of refugees can facilitate inclusion and prevent xenophobia and radicalisation. Examples of transferable practices include projects such as the ‘Bike Repair Shop’ (to strengthen social solidarity), the ‘Next Door Family’ (to boost interaction between immigrants and the host society), ‘Dialogues with Refugees’ (to promote social and cultural coexistence), and the ‘Open Kitchen’ (to connect people from different cultures by promoting international cuisine).

The following challenges and solutions for first-line practitioners were presented at the meeting:

Challenges

(9) See: Krasenberg, J., Lenos, S., RAN study visit on 'PVE and CVE in and around asylum centres and within refugee communities', Ex Post Paper. Malmö, Sweden: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018
(10) To read more on ‘Communities That Care’ process see: http://www.ctc-network.eu/
• The lack of intercultural competence
• Awareness of one’s own and other people’ beliefs and values
• Managing and balancing expectations of refugees and asylum seekers on one hand, and the host society on the other

Recommendations
• Improve one’s knowledge of the cultures, history and general way of living amongst different communities and nations
• Create culturally informed interventions as well as the expectations and preferences of the affected population
• Provide proper training for professionals and volunteers working with refugees.

A key message

• Provide integral and simultaneous solutions – include specialist and peer counselling, personal mentors, well-trained educators and care providers, evaluate implemented measures, share information and connect different stakeholders at national and local level with refugee and host communities.

**HOW ARE FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST NARRATIVES FUELLING HATRED OF AND MOBILISATION AGAINST ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES?**

The large number of refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in Europe in 2015 as well as the continuing migration flows have also exacerbated social tensions and hostility in some host countries. Anti-migrant organisations have capitalised the lack of knowledge in the host society about violent extremism and terrorism. This often leads to the stigmatisation of refugees, increasing the risk of further tensions and polarisation within the host societies. What has also been recently observed is an increasing support for far-right movements, the spread of fake news and a rise in hate crimes and violence against refugees.

These conditions create a favourable environment for radicalisation, recruitment and propaganda by far-right extremists and Islamist extremists. It is evident that far-right extremists capitalise on the fears in hosting communities in the EU Member States. The recently published RAN Factbook ‘Far Right Extremism – A Practical Introduction’ (2019) explains how the far-right extremist (FRE) scene has moved online, with a visible increase in cross-border activities and transnational networks, and through use of the internet has created virtual FRE communities. As presented in the Factbook, they are becoming more and more visible in public debates, using as central themes in their narratives phrases such as: ‘We are under threat’, ‘There is a conspiracy to weaken us’, ‘Multiculturalism will never work’, ‘We are not living according to our nature’, ‘The Great Replacement’, ‘Migrants are favoured over natives’, and ‘Loss of self-government’. Especially in the digital environment, removing extremist content is a crucial contribution to P/CVE, one which requires social media platforms to assume their responsibilities and cooperate with other stakeholders in PVE.

Social media and online platforms act as propagating mechanisms for spreading FRE narratives to inflame hateful sentiments, persuade target audiences, recruit and radicalise FRE members, and fuel anti-refugee attacks. For example, a recent study conducted by Müller and Schwarz (2019) has shown that in Germany alone, during the peak of refugee flow from 2015 to 2017, 3,335 incidents of aggression against refugees occurred. The most common occurrences were property damage to refugee homes (2,226 incidents), followed by assault (534), incidents during anti-refugee demonstrations (339), and arson (225). The results of this study suggest that “increasing use of social media can act as a propagation mechanism between online messages and violent crime.”

Why do these narratives resonate, and how can an effective alternative narrative be formulated? Based on the experiences collected in the RAN community and in recent research, there is a need to intensify efforts in the

(11) See: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/crschwarz/fanning-flames-hate.pdf
areas of inclusion, social cohesion, education and integration in order to minimise the breeding ground for FRE propaganda. How should existing P/CVE strategies be adjusted to the challenges of a rising polarisation of public opinion in order to mitigate the effects of FRE narratives? An interesting and inspiring project on how to address social media hate speech against refugees is the World Association for Christian Communication – Europe Region (WACC Europe) project.

For practical guidance see:

- **The RAN polarisation management manual** (Lenos et al., 2017), which takes stock of several RAN meetings and papers on the subject, introduces the Bart Brandsma polarisation management model (video), explains the mechanisms of polarisation and offers practical guidance for different sectors.
- **The RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices: Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism – Delivering counter- or alternative narratives** (2019 edition), which involves the delivery of narratives that challenge or supplant extremist narratives, either online or offline.

**Strategic communication**, as explained by the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN), can play a key role in countering far-right extremist narratives targeting refugees and asylum seekers. Strategic communication can also build and disseminate alternative narratives and plays a critical role in preventing far-right mobilisation and polarisation within the society. One of the characteristics of extremist narrative is the use of generic categories or labels, such as ‘Muslims’, ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’. On the other hand, same or similar categories are also used in public discourse. One of the key messages from this meeting is the need to remember that beyond categories and labels, there are individuals with their own stories, experiences, trauma and skills. Therefore, when considering refugees and asylum seekers, focus should be on both risk and needs. The security aspects, of course, should not be underestimated. However, the specific needs of these people should be recognised, and proper intervention provided to prevent radicalisation and create a safe society.

ESCN, policy makers and practitioners offered the following recommendations on how to use strategic communication to provide effective alternatives to FRE narratives:

1) Analyse and prepare
   - research is good: make sure you analyse it
   - test the assumptions: gut feeling is not enough
   - perception is truth: statistics are not enough
2) Change the target audience (who you speak to)
   - hold your own narrative and contest the space
3) Change the topic (offer facts, not bias; speak for all; challenge hate)
   - address real-world grievances
4) Change position — maintain flexibility and agility
   - support dialogue platforms and practical actions to foster connections and understanding
   - ensure refugees and migrants have a voice in all relevant matters
5) Change the tone — language should not feed polarisation
6) Evaluate and learn.

Key words that are often used in the P/CVE dialogue, such as ‘Resilience’, ‘Integration’, ‘Polarisation’, ‘Stigmatisation’ should be used to create solutions for preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. On these words we should build policies and measures that will improve the resilience of asylum seekers and refugees to radicalisation and violent extremism, that will promote their integration in the societies in which they live, measures and policies that will prevent polarisation in the communities and that will counter narratives that stigmatise these people, increasing the risk of their radicalisation.

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Successful integration is one of the best narratives to counter FRE
PVE should be based on needs and on a culturally sensitive approach
Prevention of radicalisation is critical, and each step should be done in a timely manner to increase effectiveness and avoid possible tension and polarisation.

Research gaps and recommendations for future RAN activities

1) How are refugees, asylum seekers and those rejected asylum covered in the national action plans regarding prevention of radicalisation and building resilience in the EU Member States?
2) What is the scale and urgency? How big is the actual problem? Are there any numbers on radicalised asylum seekers or returnees? How many cases were assessed and how many turned out to be false alarms? How many of the executed and thwarted attacks were by asylum seekers, refugees or rejected asylum seekers?
3) How best to identify and mitigate breeding grounds for extremist narratives and mobilisation targeting refugees and asylum seekers?
4) Integration is the key – how effective are implemented measures in building trust and preventing polarisation?
5) What opportunities do local governments have to work on PVE through social cohesion?
6) How does one work with communities to boost their capacity?
7) How do national policies for P/CVE in relation to refugees compare between EU Member States?
8) What is the P/CVE challenge in first-reception countries and hotspots? What is being done, what isn’t, and what can we learn from either?
9) After a specific analysis on the different narratives about targeting migrants/asylum seekers/refugees, what are the possible responses in terms of strategic communication?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

1. Eleftheriadou, M., Refugee Radicalization/Militarization in the Age of the European Refugee Crisis: A Composite Model. Terrorism and Political Violence, 2018
2. European Strategic Communications Network Thematic Paper, Jihadi Influence in Europe (June 2019)
3. European Strategic Communications Network Thematic Paper, How the (violent) extreme-right ‘radicalises the mainstream’ in Europe (February 2019)
4. European Strategic Communications Network Compendium (December 2019)
5. Krasenberg, J., Lenos, S., RAN study visit on ‘PVE and CVE in and around asylum centres and within refugee communities’, Ex Post Paper. Malmö, Sweden: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018
10. Müller, K., Schwarz, C., Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime, 2018