

The Radicalisation Awareness Network/ RAN – concept and reality.

A policy essay on interagency cooperation to prevent violent extremism and support resilient European societies.

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Introduction –

The title of my essay promises much more than I can deliver. This is on purpose. For, I count on my readers to help me – and the RAN. Hence, the objective here is to make a collective effort in which RAN-experienced readers would spend some time contributing while reading through my humble observations – as well as the sometimes quite unruly and acrimonious comments of my dear colleague John A. Cranky whom I will introduce along the way.

So, dear readers, by all means, please add comments! Use the commentary section, and add your own experiences, thoughts, and recommendations – and please do so in view of how to best support the RAN’s future work!

The indirect impulse to write this came from a larger educational organization in Germany that asked me whether I would not want to write a “description and critical assessment of the RAN” for their online Info-Service. To be true, while I much wanted to respond to this wish and thus further support the RAN and our common cause of preventing violent extremism and group hatred of any kind throughout Europe, my feeling was that I could not possibly do this. For, such description and assessment would have to be done in a much more solid and evidence-based manner than I could ever provide. In a word, this would require means of extensive research and evaluation. I don’t have these means – none of us field practitioners has them, since the RAN is and has always been voluntary work for RAN working group chairs and participants like me.

The only thing I have is my personal experiences and observations when helping to build up the RAN in its first years and accompanying it ever since; as well as some views from RAN

colleagues throughout that time. Plus, as alluded to above, not the least of these colleagues is John A. Cranky, who is somewhat radical in all he says, sometimes even cynical – but with whom I often found it insightful to interact, in spite of having to argue with him a lot.

So, I realized that all I can do is: write an essay. Plus, I felt that such an essay could be quite worthwhile, since any future “assessment” and evaluation of the RAN will be able to build on it – and this could be all the more important since, to my knowledge, the RAN has never been evaluated nor was it ever planned to be so, which is peculiar enough. Hence, an essay – and the hopefully many comments of my colleagues – could serve a good purpose.

The RAN – the best thing of its kind!

To be sure, writing about the RAN is always a pleasure. For, whatever could be said in critique, the RAN is a great thing: it has brought many relevant first-line practitioners of prevention and derad work together on a European scale and in a European spirit, who had not known of each other before and who were only scarcely aware of each other’s work and national circumstances. Hence, already on the national level, these first-line field practitioners generally lacked connection to each other and to policy makers, let alone in a Europe-wide perspective. Moreover, these practitioners often experienced only very little recognition of the importance of their work; and they were usually not much called upon by the EU to participate in policy activities and share information for this purpose.

One of the especially exciting aspects of the RAN was its promise that policy making will learn – bottom-up – from first-line practitioners and thus create a truly European civil society-led PVE network. The policy makers of the EU DG Home at the time openly said “we are bureaucrats – we don’t know anything about it really ... and want to learn from you” (cf. further down). The outlook of being able to have an impact on policy making was most inspiring, of course, and made lots of sense to us – which is why we committed with much engagement and built the RAN.

Even John A. Cranky who I briefly mentioned above appreciated this a lot; and if Cranky appreciates something this means a lot. Since Cranky is really hypercritical, as well as being quite a difficult person, sometimes even cynical and unfair, including about the RAN. But he has a good heart and sharp mind; and he is a true first-line practitioner – who is always excited about meeting other practitioners from other countries and other fields of extremism. By the way, Cranky’s middle name is Always, which is why I often call out to him: “Hey, Always Cranky, what’s wrong today?” And he almost always felt that there is something terribly wrong, especially with the RAN. But I often found interesting – albeit not necessarily correct or pleasant – what he then pointed out, which is why I will occasionally come back to Cranky’s statements in this essay.

So even Cranky found it to be a great and helpful experience to meet all these EU colleagues who

work in some area of preventing violent extremism, because he now could discuss with them about what the standards of good practice might be – and engage in common projects. Moreover, even aside from effectively connecting practitioners which has great value in itself, the RAN evidently was – and is getting ever more – productive in many ways, producing various kinds of outputs. For example, the RAN has set up a methodology repository (the Collection of Practices) which is in constant flux and growth and shares methods and tools for preventing violent extremism throughout Europe. The RAN also, from the very beginning, maintained specific working groups which pertain to key aspects of the issue, and publishes issue papers based on the workshops which are authored by RAN participants. Based on these resources, the RAN then consults the ministries of Member States; this activity seems to have been enhanced lately.

These RAN activities effectively conveyed the key importance which the prevention of violent extremism and hate crime has for building and maintaining democratic and human rights-based societies in Europe. Plus, this all was done in high spirits, voluntarily, and in cost-effective ways. Not to mention how very timely the RAN was – given the pressing need to put the issue of violent extremism centre stage, which was done in 2011, ten years to the day after what is often referred to as “9/11”. In fact, this need should probably have been acknowledged and followed up on even earlier, given the evidence of neo-Nazi and right-wing extremist group resentment, group hatred and hate crime in Europe, especially after the fall of the wall. To be sure, the EU’s Commissioner for Home Affairs at the time, Ms. Cecilia Malmström from Sweden, who created the RAN in 2011 had right-wing extremist sorts of hatred in mind, which is why the RAN’s radicalisation concept is meant to cover all sorts of group hatred.

Hence, all in all, even my most hypercritical and crass colleague John A. Cranky maintains: the RAN definitely is the best thing of its sort! And those who say that this is not much, since there only is and never will be more than one RAN, need to realize: its supranational character and its profound legacy of European practice experience in preventive and rehabilitative methods and social interventions alone makes the RAN excellently positioned to fulfil its mission – and we may rightly assume that it will always strive to further improve its quality.

Therefore, all a “critical assessment” of the RAN could ask is: Can the RAN do even better in the future? Also, of course: Are there aspects in which the RAN could have done better in the past? Were there aspects which limited its scope or quality? How then could the RAN be supported to further enhance its quality and impact? – questions on which I can only render subjective observations and thoughts which may then, possibly, inspire solid evaluation.

How about evaluation anyway?

One answer to this question seems quite easy. What could have made the RAN better is: to have an evaluation be done on its work – preferably a formative evaluation by independent external practice experts from early on in the process. As said before, I am not aware that the RAN has

been evaluated nor was it ever planned to be so. Neither my steering group colleagues nor myself have ever been asked to contribute to evaluation at any time. This always seemed quite peculiar indeed – especially to project-funded practitioners like my colleagues and myself. Since, by governmental requirements, we as local practitioners have to evaluate all the time and are encouraged to include formative evaluation as part of every project from the very beginning – even for rather small project budgets.

Hence, it certainly seems peculiar that the RAN with over 30 million euros of spending over a time of eight years is not evaluated. Even more peculiar, it then appears as if, in lieu of proper evaluation, the RAN in its seventh year decided to conduct a customers' satisfaction survey in some of its workshops, assuring us that "some 96 % (of workshop attendants) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of discussion during meetings (52 % very satisfied)". For, a customer satisfaction survey will hardly be able to make up for the lack of proper evaluation and quality assurance, in particular if a project of the complexity of the RAN is at stake.

However, I must admit, having helped to build up the RAN, I am to blame myself, since I sat there at the steering committee for the first years, until 2015. We all seemed too busy to think much about evaluation. We might have brought up the issue of evaluation a few times, *inter alia*. But we certainly never got around to really pushing for it; and the European Commission (EC) didn't seem eager to put evaluation in place either.

Plus, it needs to be conceded: It would not be easy, methodologically, to evaluate the RAN. It would be difficult to determine what the most important criteria would be for assessing the performance of the RAN – given the complexity of the phenomena of violent extremism and prevention.

Yet, when I had to think and decide about it, for the sake of my little essay, the most important quality criterion seemed pretty evident to me. For, the most important aspect of the RAN's mission was expressed intuitively and quite poignantly already in the very first meeting of the RAN Preparation Committee in 2010 (which consisted of roughly two dozen experts and practitioners from five or six countries, aside from EC representatives). At this meeting, as alluded to above, the EC's key representative first stressed how much the commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, is personally invested in the RAN as a "first-line practitioner network" and then resumed expressively: "The thing is, we here at the EC, we are bureaucrats – we don't know anything about it really (i.e. about radicalization), but we became aware that you first-line practitioners know most about it. – So, we need and want to learn from you."

Hence, the RAN's explicit key ambition in the beginning was to focus on first-line practitioners in this field and proceed bottom-up in order to collect practitioners' field knowledge and practical expertise throughout Europe, bring this knowledge up to policy level and design a state-of-the-art European PVE policy – which will thus be as field appropriate and helpful as possible. One important aspect of this mission was the expectation that clear and outspoken communication between experienced "first-line practitioners" and "bureaucrats" may also function as a much-

needed nonsense control which had sometimes been lacking so bitterly in governmental PVE policy making in the past. After all, the inauguration on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the USA was also intended to position the RAN as an implicit answer to US anti-terrorism strategies from the first decade after the event – which was not at all guided by the experience of first-line practitioners of prevention work, to say the least.

This was an excellent strategy in our – first-line practitioners’ – minds, too. Since many of us had quite a bit of experience of being confronted with governmental policies which were obviously lacking sufficient knowledge about the ground realities and/or were politically motivated.

The RAN’s quality as a first-line practitioner network

Therefore, in view of a possible evaluation of the RAN, it would seem to me that the most appropriate criterion and guiding question is: where does the RAN stand today on its core objective of reaching out to relevant first-line practitioners, motivating them to join, winning their long-term commitment, engaging in intensive and open process practical discussions with them, and thus encouraging an effective learning process on the part of policy makers? In other words, how is RAN’s quality and effectiveness as a network of first-line practitioners? What is the RAN’s concept of a first-line practitioner to begin with? How effective and successful was the envisaged learning process by policy makers? In one sentence: to what extent could the RAN accomplish what it had set out to attain in its very beginning, when DG Home said: We are “bureaucrats” who “don’t know anything” and “we need and want to learn from you first-line practitioners”? These seem to be reasonable guiding questions for an assessment of the RAN.

On a less important note I should add, that it was my most difficult colleague John A. Cranky who has helped me to gain a clear recognition of this key criteria for assessing the RAN (which once again made me realize how helpful a hypercritical and sometimes cynical mind like Cranky can be). For, asking about the RAN’s quality as a network of first-line practitioners is by no means self-evident when evaluating the RAN. For example, given a latent and widely unrecognized self-contradiction which resides in the RAN’s basic concept – between being a “network of first-line practitioners” on the one hand and a “network of networks” on the other (see below) – one could easily imagine that an evaluation concept would decide to focus on the latter. It would then assess the “network-of-networkness” in a manner of speaking, rather than the quality and effectiveness of communications with practitioners and how well policy makers learn from practitioners.

Hence, one would need to have a particularly sophisticated evaluation concept in place, which puts the priority on the fact that, above all, PVE programmes need to be led by civil society and practitioners – and not determined top-down by government and the industry – while they also need to be able to establish a good rapport with statutory actors (I will say more on the latter aspect towards the end of the essay). But this is by no means self-evident. Evaluation can place different emphases and set different agendas. So, although the European Commission, at least

since the late 2000s, has stressed that “effective prevention means involving non-governmental organisations, front line workers, ...”¹, an evaluation of the RAN today may see reasons for no longer focussing so strongly on non-governmental, non-profit field practitioners. Instead it may want to emphasize the RAN’s concept of Centre of Excellence, or its function as governmental consultancy providers or, as said above, on the “network-of-networkness” (whatever this would then mean) – or on any other aspect of the RAN.

Now, my colleague John A. Cranky would probably find any of these evaluation foci scandalous – as he often finds things scandalous. He would probably call this a “total betrayal of the RAN’s original mission to foster a bottom-up process, support a first-line practitioners’ perspective and be a civil society network”, as I heard him say once; or he would complain that this “comes down to a sell-out to corporate ‘think-tanks’ in upper levels of politics and business”. But this is quite crass and not very helpful. Maybe the only helpful thing right now is to become aware that there has never been an evaluation of the RAN and ask: why is it, that the RAN doesn’t and never intended to have its activities evaluated?

Practitioners’ un-heard grievances – and “the RAN’s biggest selling point”

Now, not having any clue about the above question, I come back to my own impromptu evaluation questions – and focus on the first one: how does the RAN do in reaching out to relevant first-line practitioners and motivating their dedication and sustainable commitment to working with the RAN?

Being confined to my own personal impressions and those of some of my colleagues, I would tend to say: On the one hand it can safely be noted that the RAN, given its public statements, always held and still holds in highest esteem its key ambition to build a network for first-line practitioners. The term first-line practitioners is often referred to (and quite fortunately, nobody says front-line practitioners anymore!). Also there seem to be very many such practitioners at RAN events. For instance, at the 2016 RAN Plenary and High-Level Conference (HLC) it could proudly be stated that “more than 2000 such practitioners” are part of the RAN now – and that this number alone already may be called “the RAN’s biggest selling point”, as was said at the HLC by RAN representatives. (Meanwhile the number of practitioners quoted tends to be 3000); and I must admit, I am happy and a bit proud about this myself because my colleagues and I had reached out to many of these practitioner colleagues over the years and found this to be a very meaningful and gratifying initiative.

On the other hand, looking around at the RAN Plenary of 2016 and in RAN workshops lately, I personally had the impression that some people who were key in the first years were not there

¹ Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/publications/2016/communication-preventing-radicalisation_en.pdf.

anymore – and from a few of them I happened to know that they decidedly don't come anymore. Others say they are not asked to come anymore. Yet others are there but say things like: "Honestly, nowadays I am only here to show my face and get some information – and sure, I still like to see some of these people around", among other comments signalling some sort of reservation. In fact, one of the hallway jokes at the HLC coffee break, which was made with regard to the phrase about the practitioners being "the RAN's biggest selling point", was: "Hey, I wonder where Radar sold all the practitioners to who you don't see around anymore". This was also playing on the fact that RadarGroup (Netherlands) which runs the RAN secretariat, is not non-profit but a third sector business entity. And it wasn't even Cranky who made this acrimonious joke.

Of course, this is unfair, indeed, as all joking of this kind is. Fluctuations of attendants are perfectly normal. Plus, if you are in contact with two thousand people and can only invite eighty or ninety, what should you do? Hence, some floating dissatisfaction about this or that is bound to be there in any event; and RadarGroup being private business might, if anything, make them vulnerable to accepting strong political directions – rather than "selling practitioners", whatever that means anyhow.

Yet, as said above, quite a number of such jokes and also more sober observations and grievances seem to be whirling around among the RAN first-line practitioners in recent years – and I often wonder what they mean and what to do with them. Also many of such grievances were coming my way, due to the function I had in the first years of establishing the RAN. Some grievances I understood and even shared myself to certain extents, others I didn't find so substantial or had no knowledge about and thus could not judge. Still, being approached by the colleagues who I had originally reached out to in the name of RAN in the beginning years, I often felt responsible – sometimes even guilty – because I did not feel I was able or entitled to answer or give advice to my colleagues on how they should proceed with their issues. Most often I told them to write to the RAN. But I didn't really know whether this was promising at all – and whether there was any systematic and serious procedure in place which is able to productively deal with any such practitioner grievances about the RAN.

What is good practice in network building? – the need for a mechanism for managing networking quality

Yet, listening to all these comments and complaints and not knowing what to do and how to advise, one general point about network quality became clear to me: Having many first-line practitioners around in the numerous workshops and conferences of the RAN is good, be it 2000 as was said in 2016 or be it 3000 as was said in 2018; and this is without a doubt one of the RAN's greatest resources, in principle. But: building-up and working with a practitioner network takes more than just having very many practitioners around. Moreover, counting "one's practitioners" by each of them having shown up at once at a RAN event and then summing up the

total number, might be a misleading way of assessing the importance and quality of a network.

So what else does it take to generate network quality in a network such as the RAN? What is needed in view of the RAN's mission to create a PVE network for dedicated practitioners (and community representatives) and to support a civil society-led, interagency approach to preventing violent extremism and group hatred? Or put differently: What might have been missing in the RAN so far – other than maybe proper evaluation?

If one wants to maintain a productive and sustainable network with the most experienced and engaged first-line practitioners and if one wants to support a vivid learning process on the part of policy makers, who honestly say, as quoted above: “we are bureaucrats” and “don't know anything” and “want to learn from first-line practitioners” – then, in my view, a sophisticated mechanism for managing network quality needs to be put in place. This mechanism for network quality management would need to make sure that these experienced practitioners are there to begin with, that their trust in the initiative is built, that they are empowered to speak up, and that they get space and conditions to do meaningful (voluntary) work. However, the most important key prerequisite is that meaningful communication between practitioners and policy-makers can take place – and that the practitioners' voluntary engagement does in fact have actual impact on policy making, both nationally and on the EU commission level. Because without such prospects of making an impact, any truly dedicated first-line practitioner will not stay engaged but will leave the network or stay for purely strategic reasons. Then the risk is that more and more of those who were invited and spent time in the beginning phase of the network then say: “I don't go there anymore” or “I am here to show my face and get some information”.

Proactively addressing – even inviting – any grievances of the kind alluded to above, welcoming even the most diffuse complaints and processing them in transparent and productive ways, would be the minimum challenge which such a mechanism for managing network quality would need to meet. Further challenges may reside in the question of how to properly process the grievances.

“It-briefs-wellism” in policy making – one of two major threats to good inter-agency PVE work

Another challenge for maintaining network quality might possibly be that policy makers don't always easily listen to practitioners – for various reasons, for instance, because they lack experience in multi-agency cooperation with those who are not policy makers. Yet, there seems to be large differences among Member States in this respect. In other words, as emphatically as it was said in the first meeting of the RAN preparation committee in 2010 by one of the EC's representatives, policy makers simply are often not used to assuming the position that “we are bureaucrats – we don't know anything about it really (i.e. about radicalization) ... (and therefore) want to learn from you/ first-line practitioners.” Rather, as a result of what often is referred to as *déformation professionnelle*, some policy makers are used to assuming that they know it all.

Or else, policy makers sometimes seem to focus on what their superiors or surrounding politicians might like to hear when being briefed rather than on the issues themselves and on finding effective solutions. The phenomenon could be called It-briefs-wellism, for want of a new and broad enough term, which basically means that things are said and done in a network that are liked and welcomed and thus “brief well” to others, such as superiors, colleagues, politicians, or other audiences and relevant third parties – regardless of what field experts and practitioners recommend.

One likely consequence of It-briefs-wellism is that the network activities, such as discussions, recommendations, talks, papers have little impact on the actual policy making – and thus practitioners’ engagement does not materialize, be it on EU or national level. This is arguably the most serious challenge since such a lack of impact would undermine the practitioners’ trust in the whole endeavour. Consequently, especially those practitioners who are most dedicated and productive would be the first to say “I don’t go there anymore”; and others would say “I am here to show my face and get some information”. Hence, one quite tricky challenge of network quality is finding effective measures for preventing the various forms of It-briefs-wellism.

Moreover, while It-briefs-wellism stands in the way of the development of innovative solutions in any area, it might be particularly troublesome for preventing radicalisation. Because, looking at it more closely, aside from standing in the way of finding innovative and good solutions in principle, It-briefs-wellism is the very opposite of radicalism – or rather, It-briefs-wellism is radicalism’s invisible reverse side. Radicalized young people, per definition, express what does not brief well. Plus they are allergic to It-briefs-wellisms and have very sensitive antennas for it. Moreover, since quite a few so-called young radical people have been found to actually have a point and refer to legitimate grievances – which generally do not brief well –, we need to conclude: It-briefs-wellism just does not agree at all with the intention of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. Even more, being radicalism’s invisible reverse side, It-briefs-wellism will always tend to escalate any dynamics of radicalisation; which is why for a network like RAN, the main challenge is to avoid It-briefs-wellism at any cost.

Industrialisation of PVE and “NPO capitalists” – the second of two major threats to good inter-agency PVE work

A different yet similarly tricky challenge for network quality in radicalisation affairs is the fact that practitioners among each other often have a quite competitive dynamic and sometimes act in less than cooperative and candid ways. Especially among the heads of rivalling NPOs, quite a bit of strategic behaviour and also infighting, backbiting etc. should be reckoned with. In singular instances, one sometimes wonders whether it isn’t the case that some former radicalism had been turned into the relentless ambition of gaining power in the PVE area. But this touches upon the larger, philosophical question whether or not some forms of business making and power

struggling could also be viewed as mundane every-day forms of extremism. To be sure, through the lens of actual first-line practitioners some particularly eager NPO protagonists almost look like they are in need of some sort of deradicalisation.

In any event, the challenges around NPOs do not make it any easier to build a civil society-led, inter-agency and practitioner-oriented network for preventing violent extremism. For, the young people we deal with – who may be misguided, scary, and sometimes monstrous, but who are often also quite truthful in their own way – have very sensitive antennas for any form of disingenuous behaviours, as in business making, power struggling and It-briefs-wellism. They often sense these behaviours even before we do ourselves – and then they just silently turn away from us and our prevention endeavours.

This is why John Cranky, while being a practitioner himself, reserves his most acrimonious and cynical comments for “these NPO capitalists”, as he calls them. Sometimes he even calls them traitors: “These traitors have just missed out on becoming capitalists earlier in their lives – and now get into a frenzy of building their world empires of PVE.” Another of Cranky’s angry and generalizing statements about some NPOs is: “These NPO capitalists talk about non-profit, ethics, and society all day long, and then they hire business consultants, marketing people and lobbyists, place people in ministries, even in the RAN – and then fight against each other about business, funding and power!”

At the end of such tirades Cranky tends to lash out against RadarGroup: “And on top of this the EU commission gets a Wall-Street noted consultancy company for the RAN secretariat, Gosh darn it”. Well, as said, Cranky sometimes is quite crass, idiosyncratic and unfair. (For instance, RadarGroup is not listed on the stock market as far as I know.) Moreover, one would also need to concede: the tender for RAN’s second term in 2015, to my knowledge, was answered only by big private consultancy businesses (or by large organizations based on combinations of state and private interests). One wonders why civil-society organizations, which are sometimes quite large and professional, don’t apply for such tenders.

In any event, from my own personal experience I would certainly acknowledge that competitive and un-cooperative behaviour among NPOs and field practitioners is something that should be expected and requires intelligent measures of mitigation.

Yet, within the larger context of the “industrialization of PVE” one also needs to realize: governments and ministries often support NPO lobbying and undue business competitiveness among NPOs – unwittingly or not. Because the public sector, having had a difficult relationship with NPOs in many countries, prefers dealing with a small number, or possibly only one well-known contractor, who then is, as it were, the ministry’s favourite NPO – or its quasi-statutory NPO. To be sure, such quasi-statutory NPOs would then be more dependent and thus also be more likely to act in compromising ways or even be obedient in view of politically motivated

requests by governmental funders.²

The expectable escalation of such unfortunate forms of public-civil/private partnership – which are the opposite of inter-agency cooperation even though they may resemble it for a while – can be quite dramatic. The governmental actors, after some years of close cooperation may, in case of conflict, simply disband their favourite, quasi-statutory NPO, take all the know-how, hire some of their staff and just do the job themselves – as it seems to be happening in one German state at this point in time. Behind the scenes, there may even be some former “NPO capitalist” who acted particularly eager in view of what Cranky called the will to “build an empire of PVE” and who was then hired under most favourable conditions by the governmental actor. This certainly gives the term top-down a new dimension. Yet, we will never know for sure about these things – including on a European level – unless we get thorough investigation and mobilise the ambition to do better than this.

Hence, in a manner of speaking, the sum of “It-briefs-wellism” in policy making plus NPO lobbyists’ business making and power struggling may add up to a quite destructive dynamic of industrialising PVE, which, of course, is the opposite of sustainable capacity and structure building – and which messes it all up. Therefore, state funders need to consider taking some precautions against these industrialisation dynamics. For, in view of this it seems all the more recommendable to focus on building a truly bottom-up, civil society-led prevention programme which includes a larger number of NPO organisations and practitioners and thus also covers and actively includes a variety of sectors from civil society.³ Social prevention, especially in the area of preventing violent extremism – which needs to be a whole-society effort – should never be done solely by a small number of social entrepreneurs or by statutory actors alone. Moreover, in the long run, such bottom-up and diversity-oriented procedures would put us into a position that would enable us to establish professional associations and/or confederations of practitioners/ NPO approaches which may then independently develop a solid vision of the basic requirements and quality standards in PVE work and inter-agency cooperation – and will thus no longer be at risk of being politically compromised.⁴

Hence, it seems that any important (European) network in the PVE area – in particular any large high-level statutory network like RAN – should definitely place a key emphasis on preventing “industrialization” and on supporting diversity and a bottom-up, cooperative, and inter-agency spirit in the field of NPOs and among NPOs and government agencies, including in Member States. Because if it doesn’t, it will unwittingly support industrialization and strategic behaviour – and thus hamper the network’s capacity to engage first-line practitioners in inter-agency cooperation.

² Also see “Its lobbying, stupid!” – the industrialization of PVE as ‘added damage’ through increase of funding.” At: <http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html>.

³ For more details, see the concept of ‘triangular exit facilitation’ which emphasizes the factors of diversity and societal inclusiveness; the English translation of the concept in preparation on <http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html>.

⁴ The German prevention program “Live Democracy!” quite effectively puts an emphasis on the diversity of approaches and the bottom-up development of quality standards in PVE work and inter-agency cooperation. What is still lacking is sufficient bipartisan political will to ratify the law which would secure the financial support for the national prevention programme.

Network dynamics: drifting focus and interest(s) - funds/ profits, careers/ jobs, power, recognition, etc.

A more sober way of pointing out the above-mentioned challenges and risks to maintaining network quality is to describe the generic phenomenon of focus-drift. Each and every network, in case it endures and expands, is likely to experience such a drift of focus and interest(s).

What is this drift of focus about? Quite simply: over time, once a network has taken up some initial momentum, once it has gained significance and political weight, and once finances for its work increase substantially, any such network will have an almost innate tendency to lose contact with its original objectives, interests, and personnel. Then a certain drift usually sets in – and numerous other interests, intentions, and personnel become active, shifting the horizon of objectives and changing the ways in which things are done.

Put even simpler, any increase of a network's significance and finances means: there are funds and profits to be acquired, there are new jobs to be gotten, and careers may be boosted in many ways – not to speak of the professional recognition and acknowledgement to be gained by dedicating oneself to the network and its activities and discourses. This, of course, comes with great risks for the original objectives which the network had at first set out to attain.

Organizational psychology and formative evaluation know all about this. Because this is a general network dynamic; and they may also have mitigation strategies or at least have the basic skills to develop strategies and protect the network from damage. Hence, as a network, one can be aware of this challenge of drifting – and one can and should provide mitigation strategies from the very beginning.

Now, the RAN seems to be particularly at risk of this dynamic of drift. For the RAN has set out to bridge a very big gap of interests/ objectives – between the ground level of first-line practitioners in social hot spot areas and the high-level of a governmental body such as the EU Commission and connected national governments. Moreover, the RAN deals with highly sensitive topics – violent extremism, terrorism, diversity, human rights, liberty. Many political interests and agendas have a vested interest in these issues. Finally, thanks to the increasing political attention, there has been a major increase in PVE funds in many countries – which, for instance, meant for the RAN that in its second term it received more than triple the funds compared to the first term. Such increases always imply opportunities for project funding, career making, power struggling, ambitions etc.

It would be all the more important for the RAN to fully recognize these risks – and provide

mitigation strategies; just as any EU project proposal is asked to envisage foreseeable risks and define mitigation strategies. For, quite clearly, what any drifting in interests and ambitions would endanger most is: the RAN's original focus on first-line practitioners and their insights about how to most successfully prevent violent extremism. Because, in a manner of speaking, when dynamics of funds/ profits, careers/ jobs, power, recognition etc. come up, practitioners and their insights often get in the way and tend to be perceived as hindrances. Hence, endangering the focus on first-line practitioners would put the RAN's most original objective and core mission at stake.

Once again: a mechanism for securing network quality is needed

To be sure, many different and promising ways can be imagined which could help to secure/ improve network quality and cultivate good first-line practitioner relations. As said above, at the very least, this would include a sophisticated mechanism of network quality management; this mechanism would proactively invite, facilitate and process feedback, critical views, grievances as well as helpful suggestions from RAN practitioners – not necessarily an ombudsperson, but rather a RAN-Info-House, to apply an analogy to the well-known Danish good practice approach in community based prevention. More ambitious concepts of securing network quality would put on track an elaborate mechanism of RAN self-research, which actively investigates pertinent issues of network quality, practitioner relations, and the learning process of policy makers. Such a mechanism could resemble formative evaluation but would be even more comprehensive.

Hence, any such idea about securing network quality would be quite promising. Also, as said above, organizational consultants would probably be able to procure the needed know-how. Without a doubt, the mere attempt to launch such an initiative of RAN self-research or formative, on-process evaluation of network quality would have positive effects. Once again, one can be aware of the challenges – and muster solutions.

Yet, the important point to be made about the RAN in this respect is: The RAN does not have any such mechanism for securing RAN network quality and safeguarding practitioner relations. Also, in my limited view, the RAN gives no sign of being aware of the above-noted risks nor does it have the necessary mitigation strategies – just as there hasn't been any thoughts on evaluation.

In fact, following up on one of John A. Cranky's often quite wilful and polemical assessments, it sometimes even looked as if the RAN distinctly does not want to ponder any such mechanism for securing network quality and safeguarding first-line practitioner relations – as if the RAN wasn't really interested in any evaluation and network quality of this sort. Because, putting Cranky aside, I must say, concrete suggestions to develop and establish such a mechanism for network quality in the RAN have been made both orally and in writing. Yet, neither DG Home nor RadarGroup have ever responded to these suggestions; nor even acknowledged receipt.

But to be fair, this all might also simply be our own fault, at least partly, having sat at the steering committee for some years. Especially in the beginning of the RAN when such things as practitioner network quality and RAN self-research are best and easiest introduced. We all didn't push for it enough, being busy with all sorts of other things – except maybe one person, Ulrich Dovermann from the Federal Agency of Civic Education, who already in a RAN preparation meeting had suggested having one additional body for “discussing fundamental issues” (he used the old German term “Grundsatzabteilung”). In hindsight we can say, an additional body on fundamental issues – which one could also set up as an aspect of formative evaluation – would likely have spotted the at first unrecognized and later denied need for a network quality mechanism early on. We seem to have missed out on this in the early years – and seem to not be ready to consider it today; and one of the immediate side effects of this is that some people “don't go there anymore” or show limited commitment.

How do practitioners fare in the RAN?

Yet, aside from the fact that there is no sophisticated mechanism for securing network quality, how are first-line practitioners doing at the RAN? Do practitioners have a say in the RAN? And how is practitioner knowledge processed at the RAN? Do policy makers actually learn from the knowledge of practitioners?

Once again these questions are difficult to answer and would require proper – and intelligently designed – evaluation procedures in order to be answered with any validity. Left to my own devices and subjective impressions, I think back to many steering group meetings and workshops which I participated in and/or moderated myself. From this I can truly say there were lively discussions and controversial debates between practitioners as well as with policy maker to a certain extent – and most of all: it was inspiring and great fun for all of us, especially in the beginning years, of course, when people first met who otherwise don't usually meet. So, bringing first-line practitioners together and having them meet among themselves and, on certain occasions, with policy makers as well – and thus maybe even bringing in an element of “nonsense control” into policy writing – is a good idea indeed; it may, in principle, result in lots of insight and added European value.

RAN practitioner workshops – the very source of all RAN work

One way of finding first answers to the above-noted questions is to look at the RAN workshops and at how the practitioners' knowledge is collected and processed there – before informing policy

makers' learning. This question is key, since the RAN workshops are where it all happens. The workshops are the very place where the knowledge and field wisdom of first-line practitioners is harnessed. This is why the minutes are so important which are taken at the workshops in order for the discussions, topics, controversies, and conclusions to be put in writing and documented. For, with the help of these minutes more elaborate papers may then be drafted and policy makers consulted – at least that is the concept behind it, as far as I understood it.

Our first question should therefore be: How do minute taking and paper writing work? In my personal experience, serving as working group chair in the first RAN years, minutes were regularly taken at workshops, then shared as drafts with the attendants, inviting them to comment before the final version was drafted.

Now, before looking at this in more detail, it needs to be remarked that, today, the minutes don't seem to be shared as drafts anymore. From a two-day RAN workshop in 2018 (Exit Academy) which I recently participated in, together with Cranky, we received "short minutes of the meeting" (amounting to a bit over a page) – while we were not invited to comment, suggest changes or make additions beforehand, as it used to be the case in earlier years in order to cover discussions, controversies, debates. This seemed all the more surprising since the RAN invitation mail advertised the workshop as being a "highly interactive peer-to-peer setting" in which experienced peer practitioners "share lessons learnt ... and discuss challenges". From there it would seem essential that any minutes or papers are shared for comments beforehand and thus commonly drafted to a certain extent, so that we don't miss out in recording the most important "challenges and lessons learnt".

As if to make up for this lack of a feedback loop, the RAN invitation mail included the announcement that "a more extensive ex-post paper will follow in due course". However, there was no indication in this mail as to whether practitioners are going to have a chance to give feedback or contribute to the writing of this ex-post paper. In fact, it wasn't even stated who will write the paper and how it will be written. Only upon inquiry did we then learn that the paper will be provided by a RAN staff member who was involved in organising and managing the workshop.

So, while we may be relieved that some form of written results other than the readymade minutes will come from the workshop, it is unclear how the "experienced peer practitioners" who attended the workshop will have any say in this and how the procedure of writing ex-post papers works, other than being done by RadarGroup staff members. In particular, one wonders how this form of documentation will be able to reflect the many controversies and disputed issues that are always likely to emerge whenever engaged practitioners – as well as some statutory and academic persons – enter a lively exchange of information and discussion.

Going back from here to how documentation was dealt with in the earlier years of RAN, I must say that minute writing from RAN workshops, even back then, was done in a way which wasn't very welcoming, nor transparent. There just wasn't much room or openness to include input from participants in the minutes, let alone process controversies, disagreements and disputes – and

thus to also include and foster commitment from conflicting voices and off-stream opinions.

In one instance when I was a bit more controversially engaged in the editing of workshop minutes and suggested some rephrasing, additions and changes (in my function as working group chair), my RAN contact person at some point frankly said that it does not make much sense to edit minutes because they will not be published anyhow – which is formally correct since the only text published are the ex-post papers. So in a way it seems only consequential that today no drafts of minutes are shared anymore for comments but instead “short minutes” are finalized by an anonymous RAN author and then handed out to the attendants.

Yet, if important feed-back loops are eliminated and replaced by anonymously edited “short minutes” plus an ex-post paper which doesn’t seem to foresee any interaction with participants – this raises concerns. One of them being: Is it really the quintessential practitioner knowledge that is harnessed here and which the RAN so often and proudly refers to, while policy makers claim “we don’t know anything about it really”? Where else would such “learning from the practitioners” possibly come from, if it wasn’t through these practitioner workshops and the minutes which are taken and carefully processed after the workshops? Also, what do the ex-post papers then consist of if they are not fully saturated with quintessential practitioner knowledge?

These are serious questions. For, let’s not forget, the RAN’s very *raison d’être* is: “first-line practitioners know most about the issue and what to do about it” and can serve as “nonsense control” and a resource of learning for policy making in the PVE area.

The risk of “added-damage” and “puppet-theatres” is always with us

Also let’s not forget the biggest risk behind this *raison d’être* of the RAN. If the practitioners’ input is not harnessed and facilitated in the most welcoming and diligent manner through minutes, feedback and the like, if it is not particularly inviting to participate in producing the minutes and the minutes thus do not illustrate the more controversial and off-stream standpoints, then one thing will inevitably happen: the currently available PVE discourses –from the media, policy makers, think tanks, consultancy etc. – will simply get recycled. If practitioners’ feedback and “nonsense control” is not really effective, the risk is that all the It-briefs-wellism views and estimates will be traded on and on, without their evidence base being improved or questioned. This cannot be a good thing for sure. Since It-briefs-wellism, as defined above, basically means that those things are said and done in a network which “brief well to others”, e.g. superiors, politicians or other relevant third parties, regardless of what field experts and practitioners say.

Even more troublesome, if it is at the same time strongly emphasized that “we at the RAN” have 3000 practitioners as our “biggest selling point”, while practitioners’ knowledge is not really being harnessed to the fullest and in adequate ways, then what one gets is: “It-briefs-wellism” upgraded

and enhanced by some sort of a “approved by RAN practitioners” stamp.

This, of course, is the very last thing we want or need. Because looking at it from this side, immense risks become visible. In fact, strictly speaking, the risk would be to spend much money and create added damage instead of added value. For, “It-briefs-wellism” upgraded by a “approved by RAN practitioners” stamp would certainly be added-damage of significant magnitude – since in some respect it would definitely be less than there was before.

To make things even more disturbing, any true first-line practitioner throughout Europe will instantly react quite allergic to any signs of added-damage, especially if it is unacknowledged added-damage, thus doubly cutting in on her/his trust and commitment to a governmental network. For, unacknowledged added-damage violates the golden rule of “Do no harm” which true first-line practitioners rigorously aim to obey.

Plus, there is another factor of network dynamic which always comes into play in such circumstances: Whenever practitioner affairs and bottom-up procedures seem endangered by big risks (for instance an increase of “It-briefs-wellism” and political influence), people like my highly irritable practitioner friend John A. Cranky tend to totally lose control – and then act out. To be honest, on the issues around minutes and papers Cranky just acidly remarks: “This RAN business is all a puppet theatre anyhow, and in the end it’s the DG Home who decides what is done and written and what not. And on top of it they give you the speech about 3000 practitioners, civil society and all the rest of it – it’s sick!”

Now, Cranky’s outbursts should never be taken at face value. – But they are very real; and they may easily become viral. Hence, there are definitely good reasons to look into the question whether the RAN’s processing of minutes, papers, in a word its knowledge management, is really what it could and should be in terms of practitioner involvement, transparency, and quality assurance. A related question naturally is whether there are not any more sophisticated mechanisms available which could help to proactively identify, invite and facilitate practitioner knowledge, as well as conflicting voices and controversies. This would further help to mitigate the risk of current policy and media views and “It-briefs-wellism”-discourses being automatically recycled through the RAN.

What has DG Home got to do with it?

Yet, when I confronted Cranky about his polemical remark regarding the puppet theatre at the strings of EU policy direction, he said something which made me pause. I had known RAN participants frequently complained that the RAN ex-post papers often take quite a long time before they actually come out. This also seems to be the case with the more substantial RAN issues papers – which are written by RAN practitioner experts, which is very good! If it is true what

I heard, it sometimes takes months after finalizing a paper until it actually goes public on the RAN website.

So, this I have known; and to be honest, in my opinion we should not complain about such things too much. We should rather have patience – especially if time is needed to assure quality, for instance by checking back with first-line practitioners for feedback and comments, because these network processes are important. What I did not know, however, and still don't know for a fact is what Cranky then gave as the reason for the long wait. For, not only was it not the intention to check back with first-line practitioners but what Cranky told me was: "Some say that RAN papers take so much time because they sit at DG Home the whole time to be checked".

Now, this might just be rumour and utter nonsense – and only proper evaluation of the RAN might possibly establish a more accurate picture of such issues. However, if it was the case that RAN papers are handed up to and checked by DG Home (in whatever way and with whatever purpose this may happen) and if on the other hand it is also the case that RAN minutes and papers aren't really properly shared with, let alone checked by first-line practitioners and workshop attendants – then this would constitute a serious problem. Because this could possibly make it look like a "puppet theatre", as Cranky said – while the RAN truly isn't. Much rather, as said above, the RAN is the best thing of its kind which should not be put at risk in any unnecessary manner – and which has a great future ahead of it.

So, in order to get a handle on these uneasy observations, any formative evaluation of the RAN would probably need to systematically ask the following kinds of questions: Is it true at all that RAN papers and minutes go to DG Home before being published? If yes, is it a known fact to everybody in RAN that this is the case? In other words, does this constitute a formalized and transparent procedure, which was put down in writing somewhere and are RAN participants made aware of it? Another question would be: For what purpose exactly do the texts go to DG Home? Is the purpose to acquire a DG Home approval of these texts? If yes, what does DG Home look at in terms of approving or disapproving any text, passage, or statement? Have there been examples of texts or passages that have been disapproved and rejected? If yes, what are they and for what reasons were they rejected?

Now, in a more constructive and potentially path-breaking dimension, one line of questions could be: Provided it was agreed that there are problems with the ways in which RAN workshop minutes and paper editing is done now, how could things be done differently and better in the future? If a process of checking and approving of texts by DG Home is deemed necessary, how could this then be communicated in a sufficiently transparent way so that the attached risks are minimized? Would it make sense then to also introduce a complementary process of "checking with first-line practitioners" so that it is not only DG Home who is checking RAN products? To be sure, many more worthwhile and helpful questions may be raised – the most important of which will, of course, always be: How can the important validity of RAN papers as a reflection of first-line practitioners' experience be secured in all this editing and checking?

There is no need to emphasize how important these questions are. One only needs to look at political and strategic dimensions. For, if you don't get clear on these key issues of field collaboration and transparency, people will come in and say, as Cranky did above: "This is all a puppet theatre anyhow. In the end it's DG Home who decides what is done and written and what not. ..." – and so on.

It is even riskier, of course, if people pick up on and use these rumours who are less well-intentioned, goodhearted and pro-democratic than Cranky, as for instance representatives of populist anti-EU parties or other pro-Trump-and-Putin sectors of society and the EU parliament. This could cause some unnecessary extra political friction. For, the conclusions these people would come to would be pretty fast and radical. They will just say "prevention is nonsense anyhow! It's just some re-education plan of the elites and the EU commission! They just enhance their careers and make money from it! So let's do away with RAN, prevention and all the other liberal nonsense!".

Hence, too much If-briefs-wellism and acceptance of governmental control may come at an immense political cost.

What are first-line practitioners anyway? – and why would we need 'practitioner mainstreaming'?

Before the challenge of how to take minutes, write papers and thus harness practitioners' knowledge from RAN workshops lies an even trickier one: that is the challenge of identifying and reaching out to the most suitable first-line practitioners and inviting them to these workshops. A closely associated further challenge then is to define the setting in which these practitioners would work together effectively and sustainably, in order to provide the input for the bottom-up learning process by which European policy makers "want to learn from practitioners", as was said in the first meeting of the RAN.

To begin with, one of the biggest assets of the RAN in its first years was indeed that it was designed to consist of first-line practitioners only – so that other stakeholders (academics, policy makers, consultancies/ think tanks etc.) were referred to other forums. Although we did not explicitly formalize this as a policy, as far as I can remember, or even define criteria for how a person qualified as a "first-line practitioner", there was a commonly shared understanding of the RAN's practitioner focus. – However, I must say, what was mentioned above as "unrecognized self-contradiction residing in the RAN's basic concept of being a 'first-line practitioner network' on the one hand and a 'network of networks' on the other hand", this was already there in the beginning. – But leaving this aside, if I were to try to resume today what our intuitive concept of a "first-line practitioner" in the area of PVE was at the time, I would say that we pictured 'a person who has worked in a direct, relationship-based manner with radicalized or vulnerable young people for an extended period of time during her/his professional biography – and ideally still does

so today to a certain extent’.

Hence, at the RAN of the first years we were very much focusing on colleagues who know the young people of concern very well from their personal work experience and who also know work settings very well. It therefore seems advisable and helpful to clearly differentiate between these first-line practitioners and other types of PVE experts who may have had a lot to do with PVE issues over a significant number of years and possibly also have read and written about them a lot – but did not have extensive and direct contact with the young people of concern, let alone work with them in direct interventions.

One reason for me emphasizing this is that some of us had the impression that the distinction between practitioners and experts became a bit blurred later on in the RAN. Consequently, in our informal discussions the term “actual first-line practitioners” was coined by some in delineation to other experts. Because this was an important distinction for us working group chairs (especially in the groups on prevention and derad) because our task was to find such colleagues throughout Europe and across all kinds of extremism in order to determine which approaches and methods work best in the field – and what may thus be fed into the bottom-up policy learning process.

However, on a less technical and more principal level, the distinction between academic/ think tank experts of PVE on the one hand and “actual first-line practitioners” on the other – who have extensive work experience with people from the young target group – also seems to be important in view of where a network such as the RAN may be headed in the long run. For, actual practitioners and more academic experts act and choose differently in certain moments of debate or dissent. Here it is my – entirely subjective – impression that experts sometimes lean more towards those conclusions and options which “brief well” with the respective audiences; but this is debatable.

Be that as it may, having a clearly defined concept of “practitioners” and taking good care of the ratio between practitioners and other kinds of attendants, as for instance PVE experts, seems to be helpful for a “practitioner network” like the RAN. Therefore, it was recommended early on to the RAN to devise and install a sophisticated mechanism for “practitioner mainstreaming” which could make sure that a sufficient number of actual first-line practitioners is involved and that they are specifically given authority in order to guarantee that practitioner knowledge is really harnessed to the fullest.

Now, to determine how successful RAN was in attracting and involving these actual first-line practitioners in its attempt to gain field knowledge and, in particular, tap into the often counter-intuitive practitioners’ insights, would be quite difficult a task – and certainly beyond what I can reasonably do here. Without a doubt the RAN today encompasses both first-line practitioners and general PVE experts; and some say that the number of PVE experts has increased so that practitioners are now outnumbered by experts. But any of this could only be ascertained by a solidly resourced evaluation of the RAN over its first eight years.

“The best horses to run”? – in a “traveling circus”?

Equally important is the question of what kind of workshop setting should be offered for first-line practitioners to meet and collaborate in the long term. This was an issue I felt particularly helpless about as working group chair myself. My colleagues and I were constantly trying hard to reconcile two conflicting objectives. On the one hand there was the need to provide some continuity in the group and secure institutional memory (and thus avoid doing the same things over and over again after a while). This would cater to the wish of the more committed participants to be continuously invited to workshops and work together regularly – and focus on certain concrete objectives and products that need more time to develop. To be sure, if such continuity is missing entirely the whole initiative would be at risk of turning into a mere conference hopping – adding one output after the other, losing quality, credibility and practitioner connectivity.

On the other hand, there was the ambition to identify and include new participants from new Member States, in order to mitigate the “usual suspects” phenomenon, or sometimes put the focus on an entirely new angle of our work and thus aim for new kinds of practitioners altogether. This seemingly irresolvable tension between continuity and change always needed to be carefully moderated – and each working group may have taken a different path in reconciling it.

Therefore I would not be sure what to recommend. However, what I think should definitely be avoided at all costs in terms of workshop settings, topics and invitations, is what a rather erratic voice within the RAN had once argued for. This voice simply believed that “we (the RAN) define what the relevant topics are – and then we book the best horses to run for each meeting”.

As an aside, Cranky just smirked at the phrase about “booking the best horses” and then said: “Are we a travelling circus now? – He should better add that what he means by ‘booking’ is asking us to work without pay – which the private consulting company RadarGroup will then make tons of profits from.” Once again, this was quite crass as is almost always the case with Cranky; and it also was unfair, since most of the people working at RadarGroup are much more sensitive and understanding. I found these statements quite funny, because the person who had voiced them has a good sense of humour. Plus, s/he was sort of a dynamic “let’s not be romantic ... life is hard” consultancy type – who personally did not have much experience in prevention or derad practice but was otherwise good fun to work with. Some of Cranky’s colleagues then internally called him the ‘McKinsey guy’. It’s just that people like Cranky and firms like RadarGroup don’t always mingle well in the long run.

In any event, this “let’s not be romantic ... best horses” view evidently did not place much importance on practitioners’ self-determinacy and on a concept of the RAN working groups and workshops which would allow for continuity and organic productivity. Because what usually happens if you “book the best horses to run” and define the “most relevant topics” in a more or less top-down manner, is that topics and conclusions don’t really reflect what first-line practitioners

think. Rather, such procedures tend to invite the above mentioned It-briefs-wellism. Moreover, the image of “the best horses to run” itself is not likely to include the actual first-line practitioners. For, “best horses” for RAN conferences or workshops tend to be those who one deems likely to be successful with audiences, hence be good speakers, presenters, writers etc. – but who are not necessarily also very experienced in interventions with vulnerable young people.

Hence, the “best horses” approach – while it thankfully was not at all the majority view in the RAN secretariat in my times – may signify an important risk to watch for in any network building. It may be all the more important for any evaluation to look into, especially when assessing the present state of affairs at the RAN.

The RAN steering committee – How to avert the two big natural enemies of any civil-society PVE network?

With regard to our key question of how “first-line practitioners are doing at the RAN” and how well “policy makers are learning”, it is also quite worthwhile to have a look at the RAN steering committee (SC) and its ways of operation. For the RAN SC’s formal function is to steer the RAN as a civil society- and practitioner-led network for preventing all aspects of violent extremism.

In principle, the RAN SC has a most promising architecture which lends itself well to achieving the RAN’s key objective of transferring the field wisdom and experience of practitioners bottom-up towards the EU’s policy level – and in so doing is also able to provide a sort of ‘nonsense control’ in the sense explained above. For, as already said with regard to the RAN workshops, the SC, too, was designed to consist of first-line practitioners, even if we may not have formalized this as a policy backed up by clearly defined criteria (as was tentatively done here when defining first-line practitioners as “persons who have worked extensively in a direct, relationship-based manner with radicalized or vulnerable young people and thus know them well”).

In any event, the SC that I was part of during the first years, in my estimate, did encompass quite a few of these actual first-line practitioners. Maybe around half of the RAN SC could have counted as actual practitioners, which is a quite substantial ratio in comparison with other committees in this area of policy – though in retrospect I tend to think the SC probably should have been 100% practitioners, aside from other significant changes in its operations. The meetings of the SC were then led by DG Home and RadarGroup staff which runs the RAN secretariat. During my times the committee met three or four times a year to discuss key issues of the RAN, while SC members acted in pairs as co-chairs of the RAN working groups.

If I remember correctly, the SC members and working group chairs were, in essence, chosen by DG Home and RadarGroup in some way which wasn’t really transparent to us, while we at the SC were asked in the end to look into the designated person’s profile and speak up in case there

were any objections (which I think never happened) – and otherwise formally appoint the person. Lately people around Cranky seem to say that “on top of the Commission appointing the SC members (!) ... when preparing for RAN 2, powerful ministries from Member States also exerted their influence to decide who was appointed (as working group chair)”. Clearly, none of us RAN and SC practitioners would be able to ascertain how this was in fact handled and whether or not it would be unavoidable to do things top-down this way at the EU commission level or whether there would have been alternatives. Therefore, we should not judge this by listening to Cranky’s hearsay and rather count on proper evaluation to be done first. So I just smirked at Cranky and said: “Well, I wonder what happened when they appointed you, Cranky!”, he then smirked back: “Okay, but that was the early Wild West days then, they needed us” – and then we agreed that there are still plenty of fine practitioners around at the RAN SC and workshops.

So, all in all, the RAN SC’s architecture by itself, being designed to focus on first-line practitioners, was quite promising indeed. At the time when the RAN was set up, this was consciously done in order to make sure that stakeholders who do not have extensive practice experience would not be there – or at least not be too numerous. The key thought behind this was, as said earlier, that if academics, think tanks/ consultancies, policy makers and the “Member State experts on terrorism” (who are appointees from the ranks of national ministries) were not there, this would make sure that the already established discourses on PVE and all the above-mentioned It-briefs-wellisms would not overpower the practical discussions of first-line practitioners – and effectively support them to talk shop based on their original experience. For, the phenomenon of overpowering It-briefs-wellisms had often been observed in conventional networks, conferences and policy settings.

Moreover, setting up the RAN by focusing on practitioners like this was also quite smart thinking, indeed. Because this SC architecture also held the promise of being able to keep at bay what arguably are the two big natural enemies – or rather: societal adversaries – of any civil society-led and practitioner-oriented network in the PVE area, which quite evidently are: government and business. (Of course, “NGP capitalists” as Cranky called them, may also come in at either side as we saw above). For, put very simply, general experience seems to indicate that both government and business tend to hamper and put at risk sustainable civil society -led prevention and networking efforts. Governments tend to want control and interfere with practitioners’ activities; and business, naturally, tends to put an emphasis on growth, market power and profits (cf. above regarding the “industrialization of the PVE area”). Not to mention that government and business belong to the most potent generators of what we earlier called discourses of It-briefs-wellism. And this is not good for any innovative problem solving, let alone for preventing violent radicalisation because, as we heard above, young radicalized people are allergic to It-briefs-wellisms and are able to sense it on the spot. Therefore, the RAN’s strict focus on first-line practitioners is certainly a quite worthwhile route to take.

The RAN steering committee – a good place for innovative proposals of practitioners?

All the more important is the question of how first-line practitioners are actually doing at the RAN

steering committee. Here I can truly reiterate what I said further above in view of the RAN practitioner workshops. As far as I can tell from my membership in 2011-2015, there were many lively discussions, controversial debates and good ideas, driven to a large extent by the in-depth field experiences of practitioners – so that the SC meetings were an inspiring and pleasurable experience for all of us. Even my dear colleague John A. Cranky sometimes found these meetings worthwhile and fun. Moreover, the SC was quite productive and successful especially in those objectives which were most important for the start-up of a network: to identify and engage relevant practitioner colleagues from various pertinent areas in all EU Member States and to identify the most worthwhile topics – also to start building expertise in good practice methodology on how to do prevention, distancing, exit/derad and rehabilitation work (practitioners’ memoranda, good practice declarations, issue papers, the collection of practices etc.). This was a lot given that it was all done in voluntary work on the part of SC chairs.

Yet, aside from all the lively discussion, inspiring work and good fun we had, even in the first years we sometimes wondered how things were actually processed and decisions made in the RAN. Because this just didn’t become entirely clear – and some of my colleagues felt increasingly uneasy about this: “You just don’t know and see what comes from all of this”, meaning all the discussions “and whether you have an impact at all – or whether it’s just all talk and politics”.

Personally, I was slow in catching up to this scepticism and I am still not entirely there – maybe because I always belonged to those who had the most fun at such SC discussions (which is why Cranky sometimes called me naïve). Though, I did realize, of course, that when the EU Commission’s communication on “Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU’s Response” came out in 2014, we RAN practitioners at the SC had not been asked to contribute or comment beforehand. Some colleagues of mine were more critical and dissatisfied earlier on in the process – maybe they were just more experienced. In any event, in more recent years of the RAN the hallway jokes during coffee breaks about the RAN went more like this: “So, there is another SC meeting next week?” ... “Well yes, we go up there, pick up the new directions and then leave again”. And since it wasn’t even John A. Cranky who has said it, I found this a bit disquieting.

To this day I am convinced that such jokes and comments are unfair and inappropriate! And lazy, in a sense! Because we all in the past and present SC are and should be self-assured, candid and outspoken enough to voice any doubts and make suggestions! We all can proactively see to the task of improving things and further building the RAN as a civil society-led EC network!

Though I have to admit that even during my time, whenever any such suggestions were made, they didn’t really seem to fare too well, or rather: one had no idea how they really fared, except maybe the suggestions which were brought up by the EC commission or Radar themselves and were thus likely to pass. For instance, as I mentioned above, at some early point the suggestion was made to the RAN that it should develop and establish a mechanism for network quality, in order to strengthen first-line practitioners’ voices at the RAN and in the SC. But although this suggestion had been made orally and in writing, neither DG Home nor RadarGroup/ RAN secretariat ever responded nor even acknowledged receipt – nor was it to be found in any

minutes.

Now, I have to admit that it was me who had made this particular suggestion and that I sometimes tend to make suggestions which were not really asked for and also are somewhat off from what briefs well in the actual context – which is why these suggestions may well vanish into a soundless void. This is another reason why Cranky sometimes calls me naïve – “don’t be stupid and waste your time writing these emails; they won’t even look at this!”; and I then respond: “Of course they do. And even if not, isn’t that what practitioners are good for?”

But also, the suggestions which DG Home and RadarGroup/ RAN secretariat actively invited sometimes didn’t fare any better. For instance, more than once DG Home and RadarGroup had asked the SC practitioner colleagues to think about what additional working groups it might make sense to establish within the RAN. Especially when preparing for the transition into RAN’s second term in 2015, this was a key question since at that time we had a clearer idea of which new aspects a civil society-led prevention network should possibly include. On this very occasion, I proposed three new working groups: (i) sports/ football/ hooliganism (also emphasizing considerable options for gaining financial contributions from professional football), (ii) religious organizations, like churches and mosques with which there was already considerable cooperation, (iii) the military sector/ veterans which seemed to be a big issue especially in some neighbouring Eastern countries.

Yet, not only were none of these suggestions implemented – which is fine, since there may have been very good reasons for deciding to not concentrate on building up any of these three suggested new working groups (and, instead, build RAN Young, although this was not suggested by the steering committee; cf. further below). But, neither DG Home nor RadarGroup/ RAN secretariat ever responded nor even acknowledged receipt of these suggestions which I also communicated in writing after I had argued for them at the SC meeting. Plus, these suggestions were not to be found in any minutes – as if they had never happened.

But let’s not be too strict about all this. While this lack of communication is certainly not good practice, one cannot always answer all emails and respond to all ideas that might come up in a lively setting; and this doesn’t mean that the ideas are lost. They may well register anyhow and then come up again at a later time.

However, a more important example for unprocessed suggestions regards the issue of decision making in the SC. In one of the SC meetings during the first or second year when, as described above, we increasingly had the impression that the discussions were not sufficiently in-depth and didn’t really go anywhere in terms of impact, two particular suggestions were made by practitioners. Firstly, the feeling was, “Gee, why don’t we ever take enough time to discuss key issues in-depth? And why don’t we ever bring in expert input from outside on certain issues which the SC didn’t feel they were sufficiently competent to judge. So let’s invite external experts!” (I think it was the topic of gender and extremism where this seemed to be the case, since a small fraction of the SC seemed to feel that gender is not too important and that there is too much talk

about gender anyhow while other fractions believed that gender is key in prevention.)

Secondly, the feeling was “Gee, why don’t we ever formally come to any conclusions here? For instance, we never vote on anything! Even on controversial issues, we may talk a lot, but no proper resolution is accomplished. So let’s vote!” Here it was suggested to introduce a new mechanism which would allow the SC to discuss certain topics more intensely (plus use additional expert input for this) – and then bring them to a vote to determine what follows from that for RAN activities.

To be clear, the intention here was not to vote on anything which the RAN or DG Home would then be obliged to implement. Evidently, this would have been a nonsensical idea, since no DG Home in the world can afford to have a group of practitioners vote on what they then have to do. Rather, the idea was to render more visible where the SC’s first-line practitioners actually stand on certain issues and what their reasons were. In turn DG Home and/or RadarGroup would have had the opportunity to comment on their part on the issues and give reasons for why the eventual decision then went as it went. In this manner the discussions could have gained in substance and also become more transparent in terms of the impact that civil-society organizations had in this process. The minutes of such SC meetings could then rightly document this quite interesting process of inter-agency discussion and cooperation – also for later generations to look at in terms of how civil society-led PVE programs may evolve over time.

To this day these suggestions about an inter-agency discussion-making mechanism seem like good ideas to me. Maybe there just wasn’t enough time for all of this. For, as might already be expected by the kind reader of this essay, these ideas also did not receive a response nor were they acknowledged by RAN/ DG Home or found in any minutes. Hence, these suggestions just vanished without leaving any traces. Needless to say, we never got external experts’ input (in my times there), we never voted in any way, nor did the issue of how to make the discussions and decision-making of RAN SC more transparent and graspable in terms of impact and inter-agency dynamic ever come up again. Even more needless to say, this also was the very key moment when John A. Cranky first coined his most notorious phrase: “Don’t be stupid! You practitioner guys at the steering committee are just a puppet theatre anyhow, so that DG Home/ RadarGroup, associated think tanks and all the rest of it can legitimize big politics ... as being approved by practitioners”... and so on and so forth.

Could the RAN do better – taking the Austrian PVE network as a role model?

I still think that Cranky’s bitter word about the RAN as a puppet theatre is inappropriate und misleading! And there are many ways to prove this. But the thing is that nobody can take it away from Cranky very easily; and that’s a problem, also politically, as pointed out above. Hence, the conclusion that we need to draw at this point is: In terms of developing a truly civil society, practitioner-led and inter-agency approach for preventing violent extremism and thus also

supporting resilient and empowered European societies, the EU and RAN could have done things differently and better than they did. Therefore, unless a systematic and well-equipped evaluation of RAN brings evidence to the contrary, some fresh thinking and restructuring seem to be in order. To be sure, a RAN customer satisfaction survey in year seven, assuring us that “some 96 % (of workshop attendants) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of discussion during meetings (52 % very satisfied)” will hardly suffice as a measure of network quality management.

While this may not be the place to make concrete suggestions, one of the inspirations, resources and models for such suggestions could be the current establishment of the Austrian Federal Network for preventing violent extremism that was inaugurated in 2017. The Austrian network, similar to the RAN, is commissioned by Home Office. But, contrary to the RAN, the Austrian Ministry of Home Affairs does everything it possibly can to avoid taking any lead, be it in methodological or conceptual respects or be it with regard to steering group members, the PVE strategy, or the structure of working groups.

Moreover, the Austrian network is financed not by DG Home alone but aims for an all-government architecture of funds from more than one ministry. This makes lots of sense in view of the question of whether DG Home is such a good place to attach a prevention network to, given any DG Home’s habitual inclination to take control and intervene. Also, the Austrian network seems acutely aware of the risks of non-cooperative/ strategic behaviour on the part of NPOs and of the risks of industrialization of PVE – and has put in place a mechanism for formative evaluation carried out by independent external experts in order to alert of and mitigate any such risks.

Hence, the question of whether or not the RAN could receive some inspiration from Austria, of all countries in 2018 (!) while the RAN originally set out to give inspiration to EU Member States, could very well be considered. To be sure, quite a few Member States had PVE programmes much earlier than Austria – and some of these programmes are very good; but in terms of how to build a bottom-up, civil society-led inter-agency programme from scratch, Austria seems quite unique.

Are first-line practitioners really so important? – “What’s so bad about how we did it?”

Now, while there cannot be any doubt that things should be set up differently, if one truly wants to build a network led by civil society and practitioners, one could still say: Well, what’s so bad about how we did it? It was quite successful, wasn’t it! After all, a recent RAN customer satisfaction survey indicated that “some 96 % were either satisfied or very satisfied”. So why would we possibly ask for anything more than that?

To be sure, the assumption that focusing on and learning from first-line practitioners is the most important criterion for any systematic PVE work, is not set in stone – and must also be up for

evaluation itself. In other words, the fact that commissioner Cecilia Malmström strongly wanted it that way at the time, for whatever reasons, and DG Home impressively pronounced that “we are bureaucrats” who “don’t know anything” and want “to learn from first-line practitioners”, does not necessarily mean that they were right. Maybe first-line practitioners and civil society are not even half as important as we thought they are! Maybe this bottom-up thing is much less quintessential than we thought it is! And maybe nothing bad happens if you don’t really focus on the practitioners and civil society as much anymore today! – Just having some practitioners around to a certain extent, as is already the case in the RAN today, might be entirely sufficient.

Now, I personally still think that it is absolutely indisputable and a prerequisite for any democratic and liberal society, that PVE is done in a bottom-up, community-immersed, inter-agency and most of all: in a civil society- and practitioner-led manner (and not in a top-down control- and output-oriented manner) – and that there is no way around it, out of principle. But why not ask these kinds of questions anyway – just for the heck of it; and also because we know that some people don’t care too much about focusing on practitioners and don’t have such a clear idea about the civil society approach and social resilience. These colleagues tend to value top-down control designs, output orientation and “efficiency” much more; and they generally lean towards asking more pragmatic kinds of questions – like “did anything bad happen?”, “did any damage occur?”, “everybody was 96% happy anyhow, what else should we ask for?” etc.

Hence, since the spectre of “added damage” was raised earlier, the question now needs to be: Is there any proof that substantial damage has occurred because of how the RAN was managed? More precisely: When were practitioners not properly listened to in the RAN – and significant detrimental effects came from this for the EU-wide prevention of violent extremism?

Did any “added damage” occur to building a European PVE approach?

Clearly, even proper evaluation settings with all their means and methods would have quite some headaches with these questions – if they even got around to asking them. Left to my very limited devices and thrown back on my purely personal judgment and tentative hypotheses, I would tend to say: I can think of three topics where I and some colleagues had the impression that disregarding actual first-line practitioners’ assessments and opting for more conventional – and more well-briefing – conclusions did harm European prevention rather than strengthening it. – And this always means: three topics aside from promising to build a practitioner-led network and then not really fully doing it or rather simulating a practitioner network does of course damage rather than strengthen European prevention.

Now, given how long this essay already is, it might be a good idea to not go on too long here but further elaborate on these three topics at a later point and in a separate, second part of the essay – and maybe even more topics will come from my readers and colleagues.

However, what I should do here at the very least is to say what the three topics are that I am thinking about – and elaborate a bit on what my main points are.

Added damage_1 ? – How about so-called “counter narratives” and campaigning?

Counter narratives and campaigning launched on the Internet and social media have probably been the most emphasized CVE strategy in recent years – and counter narratives have often been talked about as if they were a sort of silver bullet that will fix the problem with one shot.

Yet, in my view the situation of this discourse is basically as follows. All of those “actual first-line practitioners” who I have discussed this issue with since 2012 always said: Counter narratives do not work at all with the young people of concern – they don’t even get through to them in their various echo chambers. And even if they did, counter narratives could not possibly work with them, given where these young people are situated in their lives and their psychological structures. In fact, if anything, then counter narratives would tend to make things worse, since any such campaigns with these young people tend to support further alienation, cynicism – and thus radicalization.

Therefore, no actual first-line practitioner – and nobody who really knows young the people of concern well – would ever fall for the idea of creating counter narratives. This, by the way, is the reason why twenty years of high-quality Federal Model Projects for preventing right-wing extremism in Germany have never even considered the idea of launching a counter narrative campaign on the Internet. The practitioners just knew better – which is why they then, by themselves, also did not engage in counter narratives when Islamism became an issue. Also, on the RAN steering committee, first-line practitioners did not really discuss whether or not they would participate in online counter narratives. The RAN working group on the Internet seemed to have been automatically set as a given entity at the very beginning of the RAN; as if it was so clear that when the Internet is part of the problem then it sure would have to be a significant part of the solution as well. In first-line practitioners’ views, however, this is erroneous thinking that is unknowing of how the young people of concern really function; and it fundamentally misunderstands the key difference between propaganda and face-to-face mentoring which is: propaganda and the Internet can radicalise people but people cannot be de-radicalised or distanced from extremism by the Internet or by any propaganda.

Hence, these practitioner colleagues have always believed that counter narratives in principle are a mere waste of money. They even think that counter narratives are also detrimental for society on the whole, because counter narratives would suggest that there is a quick solution employing media tools, such as emotional videos, factual corrections, strong proclamations. To make things worse, these videos tended to be too emotional and sometimes quite self-righteous, creating feel-

good bubbles of we-are-the-true-democrats-feelings. Counter narratives would thus suggest that we/ societal mainstream are exempt from having to engage personally and directly with these issues; and this hampers self-reflection within the mainstream which is needed for good PVE strategies. All in all, those practitioners believe that the media focus would damage society's resilience on the whole.

Not to be misunderstood, none of these practitioners argues against doing online street-work, video workshops, producing teaser videos which are designed to get vulnerable young people into direct online conversations and eventually offline. Plus, there is certainly nothing wrong with having good documentaries and enlightening journalistic material. – But these two strategies have little to do with what is generally referred to as counter and alternative narrative messaging or campaigning.

In fact, there is some empirical evidence that these conclusions by actual practitioners are quite valid. Yet, these practitioners' views and the supporting evidence did not seem to count; they were practically absent from the discourse within the RAN (as well as in any other It-briefs-wellism discourses in PVE). It almost seemed as if these views and evidence were actively muted somehow (which is not true). Personally, I well remember the one moment when one practitioner voiced some of these points at a RAN steering committee meeting in the earlier years. The person brought forth a few arguments for a minute or so which was the maximum of time for such controversies, and suggested inviting further expert input on the topic. But then a leading DG Home person – who also had expressed the “we bureaucrats don't know anything” stance so powerfully in the beginning of the RAN – said that s/he just does not believe that counter narratives are ineffective; and that was the end of the discussion. No experts were heard - and the discussion did not show up in the minutes of the meeting.

As if to expressively enhance this gesture of non-discussion, the very first RAN issue paper – published when RAN became a Centre of Excellence – was a paper on online counter narrative strategies and campaigning (2015) – as if to say that PVE is mostly equal to online counter narratives. The paper was produced by a RAN member organization which evidently had a vested interest in the counter narrative area but at the same time didn't have actual first-line practitioners among their staff. The paper also did not include any of the practitioners' critical views nor referenced the critical publications from inside or outside the RAN on this issue.

Later on, the RAN introduced the “Civil Society Empowerment Programme” in order to “support civil society, grass roots organizations and credible voices” – begging the question of who would define which voices are ‘non-credible voices’ and how to deal with them within civil society. However, more importantly, the RAN's “Civil Society Empowerment Programme”, in essence, equates society with social media. Society thus is “the positive power and tremendous reach of the internet” which “empowers these different groups to provide effective alternatives to the messages coming from violent extremists and terrorists” – as if it didn't make any sense to talk to each other personally without cameras and microphones.

I vividly remember a key protagonist of this line of activity at the RAN steering committee, speaking about the vision of a society which becomes a “counter narrative machinery” – which would have made Cranky lose his temper entirely had I told him. But even aside from Cranky, many practitioners and citizens believe that civil society is supposed to be different from and more humane and, in fact, social than a “counter narrative machinery”. Yet, it almost seems as if significant parts of the RAN today are on the verge of turning the RAN into a “counter narrative machinery” – disregarding what actual practitioners have to say about it.

Therefore, all in all I would argue that the counter narrative discourse and how RAN deals with it, is not only not good practice for network building, but it likely has caused “added damage” to the European engagement in furthering a practitioner and civil society-led approach to preventing violent extremism – and in supporting civil society resilience.

Added damage_2 ? – How about recruiting young people for RAN?

The second issue which in my view might possibly be a case of generating what above was called “EU added damage” to the RAN mission of creating a high-quality European prevention strategy in a bottom-up manner from actual first-line practitioners’ knowledge, is: The RAN Young initiative, which aims to include young people in the RAN and CVE activities and strategies.

The issue of RAN Young is connected to the issue explained earlier in this paper – social media messaging and counter narrative campaigning. For, when hearing some practitioners’ impressions about the first few events of RAN Young (which I can only do from my very limited, subjective perspective) it sometimes seemed that RAN Young is about summoning a certain kind of chosen young people in order for them to act as youth representatives and youth spokespeople for given RAN issues – which also implies being an element of the event’s media coverage and of the RAN’s public relations and media strategy.

The video which was generated from the first RAN Young event seems to support these impressions.⁵ The video’s title is: “Involving young people in the prevention of radicalisation”. It, thankfully, is a relatively modest video which shows photos of young individuals and adds speech bubbles containing their key statements. For instance, a young woman about 17 years old who looks very nice, educated and from the middle class says: “I understand the way young people look at the world and what will grab their attention”, sounding a bit like the opening of an advertising initiative for a certain product line. An also very nice-looking young man with an immigrant background says: “I am a credible voice to other young people”, hinting at media outreach capacity (and again touching upon the above-mentioned question: what are and what to do with non-credible voices). A similarly looking person says: “I have peer-to-peer access to networks that include vulnerable young people” (which made me worry whether intelligence

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i05in32-WNA>

services' might develop an interest). Other 'young voices' say: "I am used to working with social media and relevant online platforms", "I am innovative and creative" or "I can help the effectiveness of outreach and narratives" – and so forth.

Ten out of fourteen of these voices explicitly refer to media skills/ activities. The "Main Lessons" section of the video is then entirely devoted to social media issues ("produce content as long as the content hits the heart", "use online platforms that are relevant for young people", "increase digital literacy"). It thus narrows down significantly what the video's title promises – and what young people could possibly do (let alone what they should not be asked to do). Since "involving young people in the prevention of radicalisation" here seems to come down to 'involving young people in the internet strategies and media outreach of the RAN'. Plus, the RAN media outreach sometimes seems to be more important than the young people themselves who are shown in the video. For instance, one of these young people I happen to know personally. Upon my asking, s/he wasn't even aware that a video with her/his picture in it existed. What s/he remembered, however, is having been asked for "two key words" about his/her engagement. At least in this single instance it seems that the RAN Young's direct offline engagement with the young person could not have been too intense and personal.

These initial impressions about RAN Young may indicate a need for further reflection/ evaluation. Because it seems that the young people get entangled in the function of being a youth P&R element on behalf of RAN issues – one implication being that they are youth representatives, while they, in fact, have no mandate whatsoever to truly represent what we sometimes all too quickly call "our young people". Most importantly, though, the young people here are at risk of being turned into a "counter narrative machinery" as was observed above in view of civil society at large.

Moreover, with regard to the RAN's discourse and decision making, the RAN Young topic seems to have much in common with how the topic of counter narrative campaigning evolved. For, most of the "actual first-line practitioners" which I spoke about the RAN Young with have quite well-founded reservations about any such youth/ media strategies. Practitioners tend to regard it as highly problematic and risky to engage young people in these ways – and, as it were, 'recruit' them to be "young voices" on explosive topics such as anti-terrorism, professional networking issues, prevention of violent extremism. Even more so, if these "young voices" are then a significant part of the event's media coverage and internet strategy; and especially if these events are largely pre-designed, public, and governmentally funded and may also be impregnated with various different sorts of particular interest (as discussed above regarding the topic of industrialisation of PVE).

In fact, practitioners even think that such measures are bound to turn counter-productive and possibly become harmful to the young people; which is why they tend to regard such RAN Young and "young voices" initiatives as plain unethical, pointing out various responsibility issues, political issues and even security issues. Cranky just yelled: "This is pure child abuse – youth abuse!"

But even aside from these serious ethical issues, some more strategic and pragmatic questions would have to be raised: Why would we need a RAN Young group to begin with, if we already have a RAN working group on Youth, Family & Community and another one on Education (the latter dealing mostly with schools) and on the internet/ Social Media/ Narratives, and so on? Also, why would we need RAN Young if the whole RAN, in a sense, is and needs to be mostly about young people anyhow?

The latter question certainly is quite serious. For, if you have an unnecessary – and possibly even problematic – RAN group, this also means that you are not having and, in fact, are sacrificing one of those other possible RAN groups that might be undoubtedly more relevant. Hence, having RAN Young may equal not having RAN Football/Hooliganism or RAN Religious Organisations, which would without a question have high importance for PVE practitioners (and signify key issues in young people's lives) – and which had been suggested to the RAN early on (cf. above).

Therefore, one needs to take a closer look at how RAN Young has been justified within the RAN in more detail. Around the kick-off event of RAN Young in March 2017 two key statements have been raised in support, the first being that “professionals and practitioners should not only talk about young people, but also with them” (RAN Newsletter 37). This, in fact, will make any actual first-line practitioners frown in disbelief. For, actual first-line practitioners always talk with young people all the time anyhow. That's their very approach and *raison d'être*.

If at all, then it may be policy makers or the not so “actual” and not so “first-line” colleagues among the attendants of RAN meetings who may not have talked with young people enough yet. But even for them it would make much more sense to find some local young people to talk with in their home environments, instead of an EU-wide RAN meeting. In fact, if I was an angry young person who felt their respective policy makers never talked to them, and if I then were to see them run off to some high-end selected young people's event at the EU level where I would never get to go because I am maybe not so nice looking, I would be even more frustrated and angry than before. Plus, meeting and talking to the young people in their home environments would ensure that policy makers also get to hear the not so “credible” voices – which may be especially important. So one wonders what RAN Young is actually needed for.

The same holds true for the second statement of justification which was that “young people should have the opportunity to interact with each other on the topic”, meaning the topic of radicalisation. Well, just as above, in actual first-line practitioners' work, young people do “interact with each other on the topic” quite intensely and all the time anyhow. This is an essential part of the interventions practitioners do all the time – that is if they have sufficient financial means for their work. Similar conclusions can be drawn with much of the other rhetoric on behalf of RAN Young.

Therefore, from the actual practitioners' point of view it is not only the more critical colleagues who are pretty clear about this and say: “We should better refrain from pulling young people into agendas, onto stages, before microphones and cameras and then have them say things which we

expect supports our (prevent) agendas – and/or move our audiences to tears.” Any such use of young people is problematic on many accounts – plus, it is simply “too close to what recruiters and radicalisers do already”, as one practitioner colleague said.

As quoted above, a crass character like Cranky would then add: “This is pure child abuse – youth abuse! You are using young people as voices for your self-righteous campaigning rhetoric. See, I told you so, first you RAN practitioners have been turned into a puppet theatre where you legitimise what big politics want from PVE – and now in year six they start eating up the kids” ... and so on and so on ... Cranky at his most intense!

Yet, Cranky has a point – just like some of “our young radical people” who do not show up in the RAN video. For, serious ethical and responsibility issues around the topic of RAN Young are also quite recognisable in the 2018 “RAN Young Issue Paper - Policy Recommendations”. For one, this paper, once again and like many other RAN papers, expressly speaks only about “the militant Islamic fundamentalist group Daesh, and the subsequent emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon” – which omits other extremist groups and thus also excludes significant groups of young people; and it also violates ground rules for good practice in PVE work (cf. further beneath regarding the Islamism bias).

Secondly and most importantly, the paper views young people as “an underexplored resource in the fight against extremism” (1). Concretely speaking, this means that young people are seen to act “in a comparable way to existing collaborations with education practitioners and community figures” (4) or comparable to “a wide range of stakeholders including those in faith communities, the education sector, mental health fields” and “... young people” (8) – which, however, strictly speaking also includes security forces.

To this end, in order to explore young people as a resource, “capacity-building” is recommended to be put in place that “can help youth leaders” and “youth influencers” who “engage in counter-extremism activities to substantially widen their reach in vulnerable communities” and “target ... their friends and peers” (6). Even in the area of “targeted prevention, RAN Young ambassadors recognise that it is vitally important to intervene in cases of individuals exhibiting signs of radicalisation, and encourage collaborative efforts with a wide range of stakeholders including ... young people.” (8)

Unsurprisingly, the paper also recommends “that the internet be used as a tool to empower youth activism” (5) since young people are believed “to be more in tune with emerging technologies” (10) and thus are “natural preventers”. Young people “should therefore be equipped with the skills and tools required to create and disseminate the counter narratives and alternative narratives ... and counter-speech ... targeted at their friends and peers” and to act as “peer-to-peer intervention providers” (6). Furthermore, “young people ... should also be trained in leading discussions and workshops to help their peers resolve identity crises ...” (6).

Most notably, the paper proudly claims that “RAN Young participants from the UK” have

“supported their government’s prevention strategy” and also “supported the Prevent Duty, which empowered stakeholders from diverse institutions such as schools, healthcare, and the prison and probation services”. This means, however, that RAN Young youth are enlisted to support a national government’s measure that are highly controversial on the national and European scale and which most actual first-line practitioners from the UK were most critical about two years ago already – because they believe, as Cranky said, that it is “youth abuse”.

As the RAN paper says itself about the Prevent Duty: it “empowered stakeholders from diverse institutions such as schools, healthcare, and the prison and probation services to refer individuals to the Channel programme for targeted intervention”; and the paper identifies it as “good practice” that the young people from RAN Young joined in and thus agreed with the governmental measure and potentially themselves engage in “referring individuals to the Channel programme”. Moreover, the paper claims that RAN Young participants have recommended the Prevent Duty “as a good practice”; it also states that this would be an assessment which is “supported by the EU-funded network-based prevention and learning programme Terrorism and Radicalisation (TerRA), which termed it the most comprehensive preventative approach in the world”.⁶

It is not specified in the paper whether RAN Young’s adherence to the Prevent Duty has implied that under-age youth or young adults are referring each other to derad programmes and what this would mean on a larger societal scale.

To sum up, the RAN issue paper suggests that young people – more precisely: “youth leaders”, “youth influencers”, “RAN Young ambassadors” along with “schools, healthcare, and the prison and probation services”, inter alia – are chosen and trained to “engage in counter-extremism activities” even “in vulnerable communities”; young people are recruited for “youth activism” and as “intervention providers” in order to “target ... their friends and peers” in view of “mobilis(ing) their peer groups and influencing their attitudes and behaviour” (5); young people are even viewed as a factor in “targeted prevention”, aside from being put in the usual but no less questionable positions of “credible voices” and “messengers” vis-à-vis their “friends and peers”, “creat(ing) and disseminat(ing) counter narratives”; not to speak of the recommendation that young people “help their peers resolve identity crises” – and the claim that they “supported the UK government’s Prevent Duty” and possibly participated actively in referring other young people to security services.

Clearly, something must have gone terribly wrong in the thinking of policy makers and at RAN. Because these RAN Young strategies bear the tendency to overstep key limits and responsibilities which are normally observed when dealing with young (under-age) people – so that Cranky’s words about “youth abuse” do not seem entirely outlandish after all.⁷ Yet, the paper shows almost

⁶ The paper was written “by the RAN Centre of Excellence and Edwin van de Scheur”, also from the Netherlands, who seems to be a video and international relations practitioner, also the co-founder of the video project Dare to be Grey – and thus does not seem to be an “actual first-line practitioner” in the meaning suggested above.

⁷ One reference for general orientation in issues of youth work cf. the “Declaration of Principles of Professional Open Youth Work”; at: http://poywe.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Declaration-of-Principles_Professional-Open-Youth-Work.pdf.

no sign of being aware of any such risks here – aside from one paragraph that refers to an author by the name of Margaret Williams who “cautioned that over-securitisation in any youth agenda should be avoided” and who emphasised that “young people’s opportunities and equality should be viewed from a peace-building perspective rather than from a security perspective” (5).

Now, given all these observations, how did the RAN Young initiative come about to begin with? Looking into this is key for my question of where “EU added damage” may have occurred through not listening or asking actual first-line practitioners. As elaborated above, the RAN Young activities do not seem to be something which actual first-line practitioners of youth work would ever come up with – or even allow to be implemented if asked for their opinion. To be sure, what I have heard about where RAN Young came from and who wanted it, is all hearsay. I do not know anything for a fact about this. However, the hearsay suggests that the RAN Young initiative has not come from the RAN working group on Youth, Family & Community (Y,F&C) or from any other working group. Nor was RAN Young discussed at the RAN steering committee openly and at sufficient length before the decision to implement was taken by RAN. It thus appears that the RAN Young initiative had in some way descended on the RAN steering committee after it was brought up and driven forward in other places. But as I said, there is no way for me to check this information – and once again, these kinds of issues can only be clarified by proper evaluation. As far as my humble essay is concerned, I personally draw the conclusion that planning and implementing RAN Young is another case of “EU added damage” which occurred through not listening or asking actual first-line practitioners.

Added damage_3 ? – the Islamism bias and special damage in Eastern Europe

The third topic around which RAN work might have caused “added damage” pertains to the EU-wide Islamism bias. Concretely speaking, Islamism bias means that the EU counter terrorism and PVE initiatives – including the Radicalisation Awareness Network – are predominantly using a quite one-sided awareness rhetoric around issues of Islamism/ Salafism/ foreign fighters etc. This leaves little linguistic room for the topics and terms around right-wing extremism, neo-Nazism, hate crime, hate groups, militias, inter alia; or else it relegates these topics to some vague terminology around “polarization”.

To be sure, this Islamism bias may represent the ultimate It-briefs-wellism on violent extremism in the Western world – which says: Talk about Islamism mostly and not so much about right-wing extremism! Because the latter (right-wing extremism) usually does not brief well with important interlocutors, while the former (Islamism) briefs excellently with all sorts of PVE audiences and superiors. Yet, any such bias or overly one-sided focus on only one of the various sorts of violent extremism and group hatred is damaging. This is especially the case if the one-sidedness also inspires terminologies which refer to religious communities such as Islamism/ Salafism – which should therefore always be avoided at all costs. The simple reason why this would be damaging is: whenever one unnecessarily focuses on one extremism and/or on a religious group within the

context of a matter as complex and politically sensitive as extremism, one will inadvertently cause effects of stigmatisation and polarisation in society and thus hamper society's resilience against challenges of intolerance, hate speech, and group hatred that are the kernel of all forms of extremism and anti-human rights populism.⁸

An Islamism bias such as this is most unfortunate when it is picked up by the EU commission and the RAN – and then, on top of that, is also transferred to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). For, the populist governments and xenophobic movements in these countries routinely abuse any such Islamism rhetoric in order to support their defamatory anti-refugee rhetoric and Islamophobia – and at the same time obfuscate domestic hate crime and right-wing violent extremism issues (i.e. neo-Nazi hate groups, militias etc. in CEE).

For instance, a London-based PVE expert with a Muslim background from the Quilliam foundation was invited to a 2014 Prague PVE congress by the European Values Foundation which was connected to the centre-conservative parties' block in the EU parliament. This expert proceeded to communicate a strong sense of threat to the Czech audience. The Czech Republic should be very careful about their Muslim population, he implied, because "it can happen anytime" that an individual from this community radicalises and commits a terrorist attack.

To be sure, this expert's views may seem quite understandable coming from a London perspective. But the place where he spoke was quite different. There are a few thousand citizens of Muslim faith in Czech society and so-called Islamism is not considered a problem in the country (Mares 2014: 207). At the same time, other attendants of the congress who courageously asked why there is no talk about foreign fighters from the Ukraine and Russia who sometimes form right-wing militias in the country upon their return, did not receive much attention. There was no input planned on right-wing extremism at this event. Hence, the speaker and his expertise were quite unbecoming within the context of where he was invited to speak. Moreover, those who invited this expert are not unlikely to have been motivated by political strategies when issuing this particular invitation.

Another example comes from Slovakia – whose Muslim population is just as small as that of the Czech Republic and which has also been a model country in the region for struggling with the challenge of building an exit programme for people entangled in right-wing extremist organisations and movements since 2016. Within the context of designing this exit programme, an expert from the same organisation again issued a strong warning against the dangers of sudden Islamist radicalisation. In doing so, he emphasised the need to be particularly alert about any mosques since mosques, he emphasised, imply special risks for radicalisation.

The fact that there is not a single mosque in Slovakia underlines how foreign and unbecoming this discourse is in CEE countries – and also how easily this discourse may be used for political and

⁸ Therefore, some actors in the field use neutral terms such as "violent extremism" or "religiously legitimated extremism", especially in texts such as policy papers and conference programs, or otherwise resort to terms such as "so-called Islamism".

populist ends. These risks become all the more evident when considering that the reason for the absence of mosques in Slovakia most likely is the fact that Islam is not even an officially acknowledged religion and the Slovak laws on registering a new religious group seem to have got tougher recently (requiring at least 50.000 members while there are only around 5.000 Muslims living in Slovakia according to estimates and only 2000 according to the last Census from 2011).⁹

The issue becomes even more critical when looking at Bulgaria which is the only CEE country where some signs of Islamist radicalisation can be found in one of its southern provinces, and the incongruity and detrimental effects of this EU-wide Islamism discourse become fully evident. One aspect of this is the fact that the recruiting activities in this province are launched by a person who came to the region recently and had been radicalised in Germany and/or Austria. The second and more important aspect is that the Muslim population that has been living there for many generations in good rapport with the local people is not the prime target group of this recruitment. Rather, recruiters increasingly approach and manage to attract individuals from the Roma population who have generally been non-Muslim. However, Roma individuals have become and will be vulnerable to Islamism to the extent that they suffer discrimination by the mainstream population, which of course increases if the country's unchecked right-wing populism and extremism discriminates against them, while at same time using an anti-Islamism rhetoric which appears to be backed by the EU.¹⁰

It thus seems that the lopsided extremism/ Islamism discourse across the EU not only does not help to prevent right-wing extremism and similar sorts of "home grown" violent anti-human-rights movements and milieus; and not only does it instead effectively fuel right-wing extremism. Even worse, it seems that this EU-backed extremism/ Islamism discourse and how it plays out politically in CEE countries unintentionally creates and supports Islamism which wasn't there before – even with those groups that are not predominantly Muslim, such as Roma.

To sum up, these kinds of PVE events and Islamism discourses are not very helpful, to say the least. In fact, they most likely have very detrimental effects for raising awareness about and generating resilience against all forms of violent extremism in society – so that the term "EU added damage" seems quite in order to describe what is happening here.¹¹

Now, while the Prague and Bratislava PVE events were not organized by the RAN, in 2016, the RAN supported and engaged in a Hungarian radicalisation awareness conference which was

⁹ Information given in a personal conversation by Lukas Zorad from PDCS, Bratislava. For further information on the political dimension see <http://www.islamonline.sk/the-response/>, where it is stated that Muslim persons are attacked, "robbed" and "strangled" at public transportation stations while the Prime Minister makes insulting statements about Muslims and Islam.

¹⁰ Mila Mancheva (ed.) (2015): Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends. By: Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia. Working Paper, February 2017

Mila Mancheva and Rositsa Dzhekova (2017): Risks of Radicalisation in Bulgaria. A case study in the Iztok community Pazardzhik. Working Paper, February 2017. By: Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia.

¹¹ For more context on CEE activities see "Prevention of group hatred and violent extremism in Germany and Central and Eastern Europe – experiences, lessons learned and ways forward from the European Fair Skills, Fair*in and CEE Prevent Net projects", publication in process in the proceedings of the Annual International Forum (AIF) within the German Crime Prevention Congress (DPT) (2018).

state-driven and conducted in a top-down manner through a quasi-governmental body, the freshly created Migration Research Institute which independent observers have viewed as “Fidesz’s favourite think-tank and alleged money launderer”.¹²

Given this top-down and government-enmeshed procedure in a country like Hungary, it does not come as a surprise that the public report about the event, issued by the Institute, used language that, in its tendency, appeals more to the Hungarian government’s populist anti-refugee and Islamophobic rhetoric than to any genuine RAN prevention issue. For, while the words RAN and radicalisation figure large in this text, one also often reads terms like “Muslim community”, “Islam” and “inmates with foreign backgrounds in Hungarian prisons”, “third countries” – which do not have much relevance for the Hungarian situation of violent extremism. Never does one read the words “hatred”, “hate crime”, “group hatred”, let alone “right-wing extremism” or “racism” (while other sections of the report thankfully find a more moderate perspective on “violence-promoting ideologies”).

Even more unfortunate, when some PVE grass-root organisations in Hungary voiced doubts about such strategies of top-down, government-enmeshed activities to RAN/ RadarGroup and suggested pursuing more bottom-up procedures of work and issuing invitations to practitioners, they received some odd answers from the RAN. An email from the responsible RAN coordinator said. (1) “When it comes to organizing national networks, the national governments will be leading” which sounded strange, since the RAN was designed to be a bottom-up practitioner-led network and not a governmental one. (2) “In our own RAN activities, working groups and other events, we are better positioned to invite practitioners”, which was even stranger, since the aforementioned grass-root people were the very practitioners who had built the RAN to begin with – and it was felt to be inadequate for RadarGroup to speak of “our own RAN activities” in opposition to theirs. And finally (3), “I strongly advise you to cooperate with (the organizer) from a positive attitude” which was the strangest of the three statements, indeed, because we practitioners never ever do anything in any other way than a “positive attitude” – which, of course, is also why we generally do not easily give or take “strong advice”.

On top of this less than appropriate way of interacting in a bottom-up network, in retrospect one should also note the observation that nothing ever evolved from this Budapest conference in the two consecutive years after it was launched. It thus almost seems as if publishing the report and ringing a latently Islamophobic tone – “Muslim community”, “Islam”, “inmates with foreign background in Hungarian prisons”, “third countries” etc. – was the main political motivation behind it, while also allowing Hungary to use some EU Internal Security Fund money.

¹² <http://budapestbeacon.com/public-policy/szazadveg-to-create-migration-research-institute/27134>

Coup d'état? – Are the ministries of Member States now taking over the RAN anyway?

Now, there seems to have been some more recent developments around the RAN on high-level ministerial levels over the last year or so, both nationally and centrally, which can hardly be understood by any practitioners, i.e. outsiders, like me who don't receive any formal information about such things and only hear this or that. Hence, it needs to be said again: What I note in the following, once again and even more than before, is hearsay – and this hearsay spoke about a high-level expert group and a new structure or “mechanism” to be situated above the RAN soon in order to steer it together with some other related EU activities.

Moreover, on the level of public hearsay, for instance in Q&A sections at international conferences one could sometimes hear emphatic and ominous sounding statements like: “No, this is not a coup d'état” of the RAN by the ministries of Member States! – which sometimes is a sign that a coup d'état of some sort is in fact happening. Other voices claimed that RadarGroup and DG Home vigorously defended and safeguarded “the practitioners” against member states – which sounds peculiar, given what we came to realize throughout the essay, indicating that in the current RAN there is much less genuine concern for bottom-up procedures and practitioner affairs than it would seem.

Yet another thing which hearsay and rumour has been offering recently is that this newly “proposed EU cooperation mechanism” for RAN issues has in fact fended off a much bigger coup d'état or appropriation of the RAN than the “new mechanism” may constitute itself – which seems to lend a conciliatory aspect to this “new mechanism”. In fact, some say that a sort of worst-case scenario for the RAN was avoided by the “mechanism”. This worst-case scenario seems to have been some plan to found a German/French-led EU agency or centre on radicalisation and prevention issues. This scenario would most probably have meant that “Member State experts” from the ministries of home affairs of two powerful EU countries would have come together, while one of these two countries has almost no tradition of PVE work and, for instance, had recently undertaken the highly questionable initiative – against all EU advice! – to install “governmental deradicalisation camps” which then expectably failed. Hence, it seems that such an EU agency would have been a rather bad idea indeed. It might have been all the more worthwhile to ascertain in more detail how this idea might possibly have come up to begin with. For, needless to say, RAN practitioners were not asked about this either.

While being relieved that any such worst-case scenario has been avoided by the “mechanism”, the question now is what the price for this was, or possibly what the benefit was, i.e. what was really behind this alleged counter-coup d'état or appropriation by the Member States and their newly “proposed EU cooperation mechanism” for radicalisation issues. Only very recently (June 2018) have we been able to look into a semi-public report which was issued to Member State authorities and EU agencies – but made it onto the internet.¹³ If one looks at the main body of the document, there is much emphasis on the fact that “the Commission has set up a High-level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R)” on 17 July 2017. This Group is

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/high-level-expert-group-radicalisation-completes-work_en.
By the High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R)

designed to consist “of a large number of EU agencies and of Member States’ competent authorities”, which means delegates from national ministries with some expertise on the issue – and usually does not include any first-line practitioners. However, there is only little said about why this was deemed necessary and what the aims are. The report then conceptualizes the “new mechanism”. Its main objective is “to ensure closer Member States involvement” and “that EU initiatives are geared towards Member States’ needs and requirements” – which again is surprising since doing this already was and is a key objective of the RAN.

As to the tasks of this High-level Commission Expert Group, among these are: To be a “coordination and knowledge hub for activities at EU level”; to “elaborate a set of principles and recommendations for the implementation of targeted and effective measures to prevent and counter radicalisation”; to “map national prevention initiatives ... existing practices, approaches, projects and expertise” (4). Further tasks are “to enhance capacity building measures and better pool resources ... give overviews of EU actions ... facilitate coordination and synergies in priority countries ... effectively support the different stakeholders in Member States” ... and at union level to also “stimulate increased exchanges and collaboration between the different stakeholders, networks and initiatives” and “pool and better disseminate the relevant research findings”.

There is nothing wrong with these most valuable objectives and tasks, except maybe that, once again, these objectives are pretty much what the RAN was originally designed to work on and did in fact work on to varying extents. This begs the question of how it came about and why it is that the “new mechanism” is now established – which seems to be creating some double structures. In other words, the question is: what went wrong?

To make things even more confusing, in other parts of the report it is stated quite expressly that “the RAN would continue to work as a platform for the exchange of expertise among first-line practitioners and the development of recommendations and support material” – though nothing is said about the extent to which this work will be continued and how it would differ from what the current status of the RAN is. What also remains open is whether the new “mechanism” would be more willing to learn from actual first-line practitioners than was the case with RAN/ RadarGroup/ DG Home until now. In other words, the question is how the new “mechanism” would mitigate the evident risk that the recurring mainstream views within policy making, think tanks, consultancy and media will simply be further recycled and the usual “It-briefs-wellism” discourses prevail, as was already the case in the RAN in some important respects (cf. further above).

When looking into the report more closely, some more scepticism comes up about the “mechanism’s” capacity to effectuate a more substantial and practice-based discourse. For, there we learn that the new EU Cooperation Mechanism will be “composed of a Steering Board” by the EC and Member States’ ministries which “would give advice on overall policy orientations and priorities for actions to be taken at EU level”. There also will be a “reinforced support and coordination structure within the Commission ... called ‘the Task Force’ ... advising and governing existing EU networks and instruments”. In addition, a “network of national prevention policy makers” will be built. In all that, as a matter of course, “it is for the authority of each Member State or other public entity to decide on who will represent them”.

Clearly, this new “mechanism” in the area of preventing radicalisation, whatever its value is, could not possibly be any more top down and government-led than it is, “advising and governing” in all sorts of ways, for instance, “advising and governing existing EU networks and instruments” and “giving advice on overall policy orientations and priorities ... to be taken at EU level” (23). Also, needless to emphasize, this setup does not seem to be designed to include much interaction with first-line practitioners. Rather it is “Member States’ competent authorities”, “Member States’ Experts” and “other EU agencies” and non-practitioners who seem to be the key groups of stakeholders which are foreseen to build this Group and employ its new “EU cooperation mechanism”. Maybe, the Group envisages that the first-line/ actual practitioners are sufficiently involved through the RAN – but this, in reality, is much less the case than it seems (as we saw above); and a new governmental super-structure on top of the RAN is unlikely to solve this problem.

To be honest, just the wording of this report and its lack of background context and authenticity – while, however, it might also be viewed as diplomatic (!) – would pose a hindrance for any actual practitioners to trustfully enter an inter-agency cooperation with the Group, should this be an option at all (which does not seem to be the case at this point). For instance, the report doesn’t tell you what the “Member States’ needs and requirements” are and whether and why the RAN was not sufficiently catering to these needs. In fact, the more professional and field immersed a practitioner is, the less ready s/he would be to engage with texts/ authors who just don’t tell you openly what the problem is/ was – and what is wanted now. Rather, these kinds of policy communication would prompt colleagues like John Cranky to say cynical things like: “this new mechanism is just about some big bureaucracy egos fighting over power and fame – and we guys at the RAN SC were just a puppet theatre anyhow. So, what happens now is only a logical extension of this!” Hence, the report’s language alone makes it clear how differently policy makers and practitioners communicate and act – and how much attentiveness it would require if one intended to develop an inter-agency cooperation with practitioners through a new “EU cooperation mechanism”.

Yet, among all the open questions, two things seem pretty clear to me: Firstly, the term “coup d’état” of the RAN and us first-line practitioners is a misnomer. For, we RAN practitioners were not really an “état” to begin with – in the sense of being a sovereign, independent or at least a clearly delineated entity which steers itself, has discussions, votes, takes minutes, commonly drafts and ratifies founding documents. And this needs to be stated clearly because people likely are not aware of this (cf. further above). Secondly and more importantly, this new “mechanism” will probably result in a final “coup” against “actual practitioners” and the RAN’s original objective to facilitate a practitioner-based bottom-up process. This would certainly not happen on purpose but it is the most likely involuntary thing to happen – and this would not be good for our common overarching objective to develop inter-agency cooperation.

What I am not so sure about is how this “coup” actually came about. Whose fault is it? There are so many mixed signals throughout the report – for instance, indicating that this quite top-down “mechanism” also aims to “affirm the value of a bottom-up approach”, inter alia. Plus, as mentioned above, nothing is said about what the problem was with the RAN – and if there was a

problem at all. Also one wonders, if it is really conceivable that the Member States' ministries run counter to the RAN and its (seemingly) independent first-line practitioners (which would be in line with what practitioners have sometimes experienced from statutory actors) but also in a way run counter to their own ministerial peers at DG Home who support the RAN a great deal? Why on the other hand would DG Home defend – and shield off – “their practitioners” so vigorously, to begin with, if they are not genuinely interested in bottom-up approaches anyway? Also, if the Member States in fact intend to take over, why then would the Group's new “mechanism” still emphasize so much their willingness to “maintain the bottom-up approach of practitioners and experts feeding their experiences and learnings into the policy process”?

To sum up: whether or not the new “EU cooperation mechanism” for radicalisation issues is a coup d'état by the RAN by Member States' ministries and what the problem was to begin with – this will remain open here. We practitioners would certainly be the last to be in a position to find out.

Yet, for me personally the most crucial question here is: How will the actual practitioners fare in all this? How will we be able to arrive at a future “mechanism” that is not so much “high-level” but instead truly ‘eye level’ and thus constitutes an ‘actual first-line practitioners’ cooperation mechanism? How could we get to the point that policy makers and fully authorised practitioners interact at eye level with each other – while also catering to “Member States’ needs and requirements”? It seems that an inter-agency “mechanism” of this sort would truly have to be of an entirely new kind, regardless of the effort it may take in terms of the essential mediating and facilitating procedures. For, what we have seen so far was not new and at eye level, it just sounded like it sometimes; and it was quite expensive, given the size of the financial investment.

No, it was the RAN itself who messed it all up!

Well, looking at the above question about a possible coup d'état and from there also looking at this audacious heading of mine, I become all unsure again myself, and I have to reiterate: Not even the most sophisticated – in fact, investigative – evaluation could promise to fully clarify the matter. And all I can do is build a personal perspective and an opinion. So I spent yet a bit more time and called a few people who might be able to comment. What I heard eventually made me conclude that the developments which led to the High Level Expert Group may be yet another instance of “EU added damage” – and arguably the most detrimental one – caused by implementing the RAN without properly listening to actual practitioners. For, systemically and also very practically speaking, DG Home/ RadarGroup seems to have messed it all up! – This, at least, is my view as well as that of my colleagues on this issue.

To be clear, by messing it all up I mean more than what has been elaborated throughout this essay, namely that the RAN from the very beginning had not properly managed the key relationship to first-line practitioners in essential aspects of its procedures – though some would

probably say that this already justifies the phrase that “all was messed up”. Instead, what I mean here in addition to this is that the RAN seems to have not properly managed the key relationship to the experts of the Member States– so that these then felt, rightly or not, they have to do something and began to envisage a huge superstructure as the “new mechanism of cooperation” above the RAN.

Most likely, one negative side effect of this was that any fledgling awareness of ministerial policy makers from the Member States about how important first-line practitioners’ knowledge and bottom-up, inter-agency procedures are, was harmed by how RAN managed this key relationship. This would certainly equal significant damage, given that it cost 8 years of work for roughly 30 million euros, including voluntary work– and the most valuable idea of building a bottom-up and inter-agency first-line practitioner network in order to inspire discussions and policy makers’ learning was put at stake.

How did I come to this conclusion? When talking to people around the RAN and in ministries today, in 2018, quite a few utter experiences and impressions that indicate that the RAN and/or DG Home have somehow alienated the policy makers from the Member States over the last years. In other words, there seems to have been an increasing concern, sometimes even irritation on the part of national ministries of home affairs about the RAN/ RadarGroup and/or the EU Commission’s DG Home – and implicitly also about “these first-line practitioners” because RadarGroup/ DG Home seem to have referred to “their practitioners” frequently as justification for how things were handled.

The reasons for these irritations cannot be easily determined, and certainly not with my very humble means of research. I only hear bits and pieces of this or that individual experience and views – and will gladly leave it to any professional evaluation to put the puzzle together and formulate the resulting lessons learnt. To give an example of such bits and pieces: Especially in the beginning years, the RAN asked national policy makers for names and contacts of local practitioners in various national fields of practice in those countries. This I can personally attest to, since I was doing this myself at the time quite intensively when serving on the RAN steering committee (yet, I mostly asked practitioner NGOs). What I didn’t know, however, is that the RAN later on seems to have declined enquiries from national ministries asking the RAN to facilitate contact between them, as national ministries, and the country’s national practitioners who were already active in the RAN. In other instances, in countries in which statutory and NGO actors are in good rapport, it seems that “random invitations” on the part of the RAN and lack of communication with ministerial actors have caused disturbances.

Not knowing why this had happened – or even whether this happened at all – some suspected that quite possibly data protection concerns may have been part of this. But such concerns of data protection could easily be solved (if e.g. RAN had communicated the ministries’ interest to the national practitioners and left it up to them to decide whether they want to get in contact). Others assumed that there was a sense of protecting first-line practitioners from their ministries and thus also of safeguarding the bottom-up mode of procedures at the RAN. This, of course, would equal an entirely erroneous concept of protection – because shielding practitioners from

ministerial experts does not protect anything really, on the contrary. Also, as we saw above, the RAN's concern for practitioners and bottom-up processes is less developed than it may appear. Plus, many practitioners I know would have much liked to have better contact to their national policy makers by working in the RAN.

Moreover, a more collaborative and less 'protective' attitude on the part of the RAN would seem to have made it easier for those national ministries who intended to get in contact with their country's RAN practitioners in order to build a national bottom-up practitioner network themselves. In this instance, the RAN was not only confusing for national policy makers and harmful to an important strategic relationship, it was plainly unhelpful in light of the overall European PVC agenda which is: to build a European inter-agency prevention and resilience collaboration.

Be that as it may, building a good working relationship with governmental stakeholders does not at all run counter to a bottom-up and practitioner-based approach – quite the opposite, it presupposes it. Since the field knowledge of practitioners is supposed to be brought up to policy making level – and needs to be well received and welcomed by policy makers. Direct personal contact and a good relationship between field practitioners and ministerial experts is key for this to happen. Here it seems that mistakes were made – up to the point that RAN representatives were perceived as showing an arrogant attitude vis-à-vis Member State representatives in singular cases.

Even more problematic, among some national policy makers – and also practitioners – there seems to have been an additional and related grievance about the RAN at the time. For, one of my interlocutors claimed that there was an instance in which the RAN appropriated the national practice knowledge without it even being properly referenced. – Now, this may have happened just one time in the history of RAN, or even not at all; I would not be able to tell for a fact since my source may have been mistaken on this point. As said many times, only proper evaluation could tell. But if such a pattern had in fact occurred, then this would mean the following: RAN/ RadarGroup asked national policy makers for national practitioner contacts and their practice knowledge and on the other hand declined to facilitate contact between national policy makers and practitioners, while at the same time taking national practitioners' knowledge and appropriating it into the RAN/ RadarGroup consultancy data base.

Such patterns would certainly not look good. Without even beginning to discuss any issues of fairness, ethics, and governance in any such procedure, one thing seems clear: Should these kinds of complaints have existed among RAN participants and possibly still exist, then – regardless of how substantial they were – essential mechanisms for mitigation, hearing grievances and resolving conflicts should have been in place. Moreover, these mitigation mechanisms should have been put in place especially in view of the always sensitive key relation between the two most important partners of any inter-agency network: civil society practitioners and statutory actors. If one allows for irritations to come up between these two groups of actors and possibly even fuel such irritation, however unintentionally, one is truly "messing it all up".

Already in political respects this should have been avoided by all means. Just imagine what hardcore practitioners and activists like John A. Cranky would say about all this. The most likely conspiracy theories would always be a part of it. So, RAN/ RadarGroup accumulating knowledge, amassing contacts and not sharing them, possibly claiming the need for ‘practitioner protection’ for “their 3000 practitioners” while not really having a convincing record of caring about practitioner affairs and bottom-up approaches to begin with – any such grievances would possibly prompt Cranky to ventilate his most acrimonious phantasies about the consultancy industry wanting to make money or administrations and “bureaucrats” wanting to generate importance and power. So, better not ask Cranky about all this in detail; rather think back to what we said earlier about the need for some “mechanism for network quality management”, “RAN-info-house”, or “formative evaluation tool” which would be able to fruitfully handle such grievances, phantasies, conspiracy theories.

Yet, my most important point about this does not have much to do with any such particular issues. Rather my overarching point is: Whatever went wrong and whatever mistakes have been made at the RAN/ DG Home/ RadarGroup that led to the policy makers of the Member States feeling so alienated today that they decided to take action (and spend yet more money) – no actual first-line practitioner would ever have made these kinds of mistakes. For, actual practitioners have a totally different logic of (inter)action. They first and foremost are facilitators, mentors, mediators and, in fact, “relational workers”, as explained above – and as was already formulated in the handbooks of the 2012 Danish EU Council presidency. Preventive relational workers would always think and act in systemic and mediating terms. They thus would not allow any such alienation and polarisation to happen; and they would be very alert to any signals of such polarisation – especially at those systemic fault-lines where polarisation is most likely and most harmful to happen, between practitioners and policy makers.

Hence, in view of my key question of where “EU added damage” may have occurred through not listening or asking actual first-line practitioners, one conclusion seems evident: Had one asked actual practitioners about how to run the RAN and how to manage its key relationship to the policy makers of Member States, these quite harmful mishaps would not have occurred. Instead, practitioners would have brought in their key expertise in dialogue, mediation, systemic communication and conflict transformation – and their good intuition about where polarisation is most likely to happen in any context and how to prevent it. But, needless to say, practitioners were not asked – and the resulting cost is quite extensive in this case, since now another structure of “steering boards”, governmental “task forces”, and committees seems to be in the making where one reasonably built inter-agency network should have sufficed.

‘Eye level’ versus high-level – towards a provisional closure

As to the above mentioned future inter-agency cooperation mechanism – which is not “high-level” but truly ‘eye level’ and builds an eye level cooperation between policy makers and practitioners:

Certainly, such cooperation of the new kind would more adequately reflect what we mean when emphatically speaking about resilient European societies in times of heightened global challenges – following the RAN’s foundational inspiration when being inaugurated on 11th September 2011, ten years after “9/11”, intending to open the second decade of CVE/PVE with a different tone and with a different strategy than that which characterised the first decade.

With this future cooperation in view – this is now really the point where I should bring my long essay to a provisional end. Because for one, as said many times, it would take much greater means of research and evaluation to check the validity of any of the observations and thoughts of my colleagues and myself – and even with any commissioned evaluation, one would still have to make sure that the key questions about practitioners’ involvement and bottom-up inter-agency procedures are pursued in-depth.

And secondly, this now should be the moment for you, my readers – and RAN practitioner colleagues – to come in and provide their own observations, views and thoughts.

Therefore, I cordially invite comments and contributions in the beneath commentary section. I would also like to ask the kind contributors to shortly indicate to what extent they are what has been described above as “actual first-line practitioner”, or from what other backgrounds and resources her*his expertise in radicalisation issues comes from.

All your inputs will be greatly welcomed and appreciated as yet another important piece of help on the way to strengthening the RAN’s mission and further developing its performance. For, we all will thus give a truly European response to violent extremism – and demonstrate our dedication to building resilient European societies.