

## **Inter-agency cooperation gone wrong!**

### **The challenges of practicing all-society prevention of right-wing extremism in (Central and Eastern) Europe**

Harald Weilnböck, October 2021

#### **Introduction – towards an entire failure of inter-agency communication and cooperation**

In the following I will describe an exemplary case of lessons learnt in which inter-agency cooperation between a high-level governmental actor and civil society workers failed entirely. This occurred during a series of webinars which were organized in summer 2020 on the topic of preventing radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – and the “elephant in the room” was right-wing extremism. I am writing about it because I was incidentally involved myself, being one of the presenters in this series of webinars, in reference to the projects I am engaged in in the CEE region.<sup>1</sup>

The following analysis picks up on my earlier writings about the Radicalisation Awareness Network in many ways<sup>2</sup> which I had helped building since its very beginning in 2011. While my essays on the RAN were quite critical in some respects, they were and are intended to help increase the quality of RAN work and, more broadly, of inter-agency cooperation between governmental and civil society actors. Also, while never having received any feedback or acknowledgement of my observations by the RAN or the EC’s DG Home, I am still hopeful that eventually a common engagement in open exchange and joint quality assurance will evolve – on the basis of a truly equal-level inter-agency partnership of civil society practitioners and governmental policy makers.

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<sup>1</sup> The ceepreventnet.eu project building on the earlier europeanfairskills.eu project and interlaced with the championsproject.eu.

<sup>2</sup> Harald Weilnböck (2018): The Radicalisation Awareness Network/RAN – concept and reality. A policy essay on interagency cooperation to prevent violent extremism and support resilient European societies, <http://www.cultures-interactive.de/en/ran-essay-en.html>

Harald Weilnböck (2019): The industry of preventing extremism – and the Radicalisation Awareness Network. Is the prevention industry part of the problem rather than of the solution?

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/the-industry-of-preventing-extremism-and-the-radicalisation-awareness-network/>

On a more personal note, reflecting my engagement in this current issue with regard to the webinars and in the broader RAN issues, I owe my writings and my inspiration to work in the area of violent extremism to many practitioner colleagues throughout Europe and to my personal family history. (i) When helping to build the RAN from scratch from 2010 onwards, I approached and won engagement of quite a number of practitioners across Europe, also from Central and Eastern Europe, who mostly did not know of each other before and then began contributing to the RAN. In so doing, they left aside all trust issues which they were fraught with in respect to working with a governmental agency as the European Commission's DG Home. In this, it was me and other civil society volunteer colleagues who served as trust guarantors for these new practitioner colleagues vis-à-vis the RAN – which now obliges me and us to be very transparent, explicit and critical about our experiences in what was announced as an on-eyes-level cooperation with state actors but may not have been so entirely in retrospect. (ii) As to my family, my parents and grandparents have been implicated in and affected by violent extremism/ terrorism during two World Wars, also in Central and Eastern Europe. It is the legacy of this family history which gives me a particular sense of purpose in much of what I do in this area of work.

### **The “scandal” - what occurred in the webinars?**

In a webinar series on “Radicalisation in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe” (cf. the RadPol2020 webinars) which was supported by the researchers and practitioners of three current Horizon 2020 projects and organized by the Polish Platform of Homeland Security, a European Commission officer originating from a Central European country gave a panel input, together with many prevent practitioners from the projects and a staff member of the RAN secretariat (Radicalisation Awareness Network) (<https://ppbw.pl/en/conference-radpol2020/>). The EC representative works in the unit “Prevention of Radicalisation” of the DG Migration and Home Affairs – and in opening her input she announces that she would speak about “trends of radicalisation as seen from the perspective of the European Commission”.

In her first point to the issue – in this webinar on Central and Eastern Europe – the EC representative says that “in recent years jihadist terrorism and extremism remain the main

threat in Europe". Accordingly, the first line of her first PowerPoint slide reads: "jihadist terrorism and extremism – the main threat".

Hereafter, the EC representative states that the "threat from violent RWE (is) substantial and continues to evolve" (slide 2) whereupon she explicitly adds that "we are speaking here of lone actors" (also alluding to "numbers of Europol"). At later point the EC representative says in reference to right-wing extremism that this "has been a problem in some member states" and then mentions Christchurch (New Zealand), Halle (Germany), Hanau (Germany) and the killing of district president of Kassel Walter Lübcke (Germany), later on also referring to Sweden and the prevention of right-wing extremism; she thus refers to large scale terrorist incidents only which happened no longer than one year ago and occurred West of Central and Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, the EC representative explains that she is aware that she "is supposed to speak about trends in Central and Eastern Europe today, but from the Commission's perspective it is somewhat evident that especially activities of right-wing extremism transcend borders". Then she adds, "it's now sort of a global issue and not limited to cultural and historical pasts of countries" but pertains more "to the ideas and narratives that can be found on the internet that are conspiratory in nature and mobilizing global audiences." This all occurs in the framework of a webinar series on "Radicalisation in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe" for which the organizers from three Horizon 2020 projects have asked the European Commission unit on "Prevention of Radicalisation" for an input.

### **Analysis of the rhetoric and implications**

To be true, the EC representative later on also referred to the complexity of the issue of right-wing extremism in more adequate and profound ways, for instance underlining the connection to hate speech and the need for strengthening digital resilience of societies and for being aware of new hybrid forms of radicalisation, among other relevant aspects. However, at last the EC representative closes by assuring the audience that the European Commission (EC) works on both Jihadist and right-wing extremism and almost all RAN working groups have recently prioritized right-wing extremism, "next to having a primary focus on Jihadist extremism" thus underlining on behalf of the European Commission that Jihadism is – and is supposed to be – the priority concern of the EU.

Clearly, what the EC representative has said in the first minutes of her presentation can neither be considered correct nor helpful – and it violates what has been drafted as the principles of good practice in PVE policy making. In fact, while the EC representative surely meant well, her input, at closer look, would need to be assessed as harmful – in light of what is required from a governmental policy maker in terms of accuracy, evidence base and appropriateness of his or her public statements. For without such accuracy, evidence base and appropriateness of governmental communication we will not be able to have success and work sustainably in the prevention of violent extremism, group hatred and intolerance, especially but not only in Central and Eastern Europe and above all if the speaker represents the EC.

But why exactly is it, that in particular in the first minutes of the EC representative's input would need to be assessed as harmful? Listening closely to what the EC representative said – and synthesizing the explicit, implicit, and the rhetorical level of her communication, the basic logic of her statements is the following:

- (1) Jihadist extremism and terrorism remain the main threat in Europe, implicitly also in Central and Eastern Europe.
- (2) If we also consider right-wing extremism then we “are speaking of lone actors” and “narratives ... of the internet” in “some member states” other than Central and Eastern Europe. Because right-wing extremism is “sort of a global issue” that is beyond national societal contexts and “historical pasts of countries”.

For sure, these statements, on the factual level, are incorrect and inappropriate and the communicational act of this presentation on the whole misleading on several accounts, especially if one also looks at the implicit and rhetorical level of the EC representative's input. Because (1) not only is Jihadist terrorism not the main threat in Central and Eastern Europe (arguably not even in the West and globally). Rather this threat is almost entirely absent there – and one wonders why an EC policy officer would implicitly suggest and emphasize an Islamist threat in a webinar series on “Radicalisation in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe”.

Moreover, (2) the association of right-wing extremism with so-called lone actors raises many questions – and, at closer look and from a prevent and rehabilitation practitioner's perspective, there actually is no such thing as a lone actor in violent extremism (while the widespread term “lone actor” may make sense in some specific criminological respects).

Rather, right-wing extremism – the most “home grown” of European terrorism threats – is widely connected to a great array of regional and (inter)national organizations and networks, criminal or not. Also, there are significant overlaps with far-right political parties both in personnel and ideology as well as many correspondences with even wider parts of the population that resonate with right-wing extremist populism and related prejudices and resentments – especially, but not only, in member states of Central and Eastern Europe. These connections and overlaps apply even to the loneliest of so-called lone actors.

Lastly, (3) the assumptions that it is helpful to separate right-wing extremism from the “cultural and historical pasts of countries” is false, given what we know through social psychology about transgenerational transfers of patterns of thought and behavior and the need to proactively remember and reflect. Also, it is clear to us all, National Socialism during World War II was present in disastrous ways in the “national past” also of Central and Eastern Europe and had inflicted tremendous loss and pain in these countries; and as I mentioned above personally, this past had impact on the parts of my family

Hence, it is mainly on these three accounts of a quick analysis of rhetorical structure, that I would tend to hold that the EC officer’s statements are incorrect, inappropriate and misleading. The question of how they also have to be considered harmful warrants further elaboration.

### **The harmful effects of the statements**

I do not want to speculate too much about the reasons that had led to these problematic claims in a webinar on “Radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe”. In particular, I do not want to speculate whether or to what extent it may have played a role that the Polish Platform of Homeland Security was the main organizer and the speaking EC representative originated from a central European country. Since the issue at hand is of a systemic nature. Also, on my own part, as German citizen, I am fully aware of how much and often it had occurred and – to decreasing degrees – still occurs in Germany that unhelpful and harmful political interventions interfered with and endangered the practitioners’ work of preventing polarization and

extremism on the ground; above all through a polarizing partisan political ping-pong game which uses the topic of violent extremism for party political ends<sup>3</sup>.

Much rather I would like to point out the impact and the particular effects that such inappropriate contestations have for the much engaged and vulnerable practitioners in the field, mostly in Central and Eastern European member states. For this impact is quite detrimental indeed. And policy makers should aim at supporting the practitioners work not hinder it.

Practitioners in Central and Eastern Europe who are dedicated to the most difficult ambition of preventing intolerance and group hatred and building pro-democratic skills and resilience do their work in a climate of wide-spread right-wing populism, far-right governments, right-wing extremist networks and a high level of anti-democratic and anti-liberal sentiments within the population and local administrations, also quite strongly among young people. Hence, these practitioners' work in their national spheres is already difficult and demanding enough as is – and at times even dangerous. If then, on top of everything else, the assigned EC representative joins the panel of a webinar on Radicalisation on Central and Eastern Europe, indicates that Jihadist terrorism is the main threat, “from a European perspective”, and right-wing terrorists are “lone actors” anyway who are beyond national contexts and “historical pasts of countries” and miraculously come out of the internet somehow, then this basically pulls the rug out under these practitioners' feet.

In other words, such statement most likely will feel like a betrayal from the upper top of European governmental representation. But also, aside of feelings – which however are of great importance in sensitive work as prevention – such statements will be concretely damaging for the work on the ground. Because how can you convince local authorities – or anyone in the community – to work on preventing intolerance, group hatred and the increase of right-wing extremist and terrorist structures in your country, especially among young people, if the responsible European Commission representative basically says that the problem does not exist in your country. Local authorities will likely hesitate to cooperate and support.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Harald Weilnböck (2012): The German invention of leftwing extremism – the importance of party-political narratives for radicalisation awareness (2012f). In: The Challenge Hate Crime project, Belfast/ Northern Ireland. On: [http://weilnboeck.net/pages\\_en/essays.html](http://weilnboeck.net/pages_en/essays.html).

## **How can it happen that prevent policy involuntarily supports extremism?**

What makes things even worse in this particular instance – with this presentation and within the context of an event on radicalisation in Central and Eastern Europe – is that the EC representative's input not only impedes on actual prevent work; but she unwillingly even supports violent extremism in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (even beyond and more proactively than just through hindering prevention).

How so? How the EC representative's statements unwillingly support violent extremism in countries of Central and Eastern Europe becomes more easily understandable if one looks at how the political discourses in these countries' national politics dealt with the issue of preventing violent extremism (PVE) – and also how the EC's own work and discourses in PVE have been structured over recent years, basically since the inauguration of the EC's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), being the flagship of EU prevent activity since 2011.

As my colleague Oliver Kossack and I have laid out in 2019<sup>4</sup>, the EU and Member States in their PVE discourses and strategies since the beginning of the 2000s had largely fallen prey to a harmful cross-the-board bias on so-called Islamism – thus obfuscating other forms and a more contextual and systemic view on extremism and history. The most concerning result of this Islamism bias undoubtedly was the underestimation of right-wing populism/ extremism, neo-Nazism, white supremacism, pertaining militias, and similar sorts of hate groups which, as said, would much deserve the epithet "home grown" (while this term is generally used in the area of so-called Islamism) – and which seem present in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, but also globally.

Now, in the Central and Eastern European region the negative impacts of these EU discourses were particularly serious. Since in these countries far right and partly right-wing extremist political elites welcomed the biased European Islamism rhetoric because it gave so much additional strength to their defamatory anti-refugee and Islamophobic populism and, for instance helped them equate refugees with terrorists and fuels Islamophobic fear-mongering. Moreover, being partly right-wing extremist, these political elites naturally welcomed that the EU and RAN did not talk much about right-wing extremism.

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<sup>4</sup> This essay was building in part on a larger essay about the RAN and its pitfalls of European inter-agency cooperation from 2018: „The Radicalisation Awareness Network/RAN – concept and reality....“ <http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html>.

Hence, in the end this politically motivated and somewhat self-centered bias on Islamism and the partisan ping-pong games over PVE politics on the side of the European Union and member states' PVE units – including the RAN – is likely to have effectively pushed Eastern European countries further into right-wing extremism instead of reducing extremism and intolerance. Because if an EU representative, especially if from a Visegrad country, publicly indicates that Jihadist terrorism is “the main threat” also in Central and Eastern Europe and right-wing terrorists are “lone actors” who are beyond national contexts, this not only hinders any PVE activity but also indirectly supports right-wing extremism and terrorism, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

This, of course, constitutes a significant political mishap – following earlier mishaps of this kind (cf. footnote 2) – which is why I then responded to the EC representative's presentation in my own contribution to the webinar series one week later, making pertinent comments and inviting the inter-agency audience to work together in order to achieve progress (as above: <https://ppbw.pl/en/conference-radpol2020>). In addition, I wrote to the EC representative and invited her personally to participate and exchange with me on this matter.

### **The RAN: smoothly mitigate or double up?**

Given that this political mishap occurred from the side of a governmental representative on European Commission level whose work is likely somewhat apart from the first-line areas of practice, this could be a typical instance in which the RAN comes in in order to smoothly mediate the situation and provide careful contextualization, adjustment and correction – so that negative effects may be minimized. For the RAN has been designed (by the European Commission's DG Home Affairs, executed by the consulting firm Radar Group) to support first-line practitioners around EC prevention policy making and assure that their perspective is sufficiently recognized and included in order for the notorious policy practice gap to be reduced. Moreover, in this webinar the RAN secretariat member seemed ideally positioned on the webinar's program to mediate, adjust and mitigate, since he was placed to speak directly after the EC representative.



In his contribution the RAN representative quite appropriately underlined that the RAN is a first-line practitioners' network which comprises all types of practitioners, as "teachers, youth workers, policeman" – and "local authorities as well actually". In fact, this last remark of the RAN representative's input made me ponder about the question of whether and in what sense not only local but also central and EU authorities, too, may and should be perceived as practitioners – namely practitioners of inter-agency cooperation – who could be invited to workshops to engage in exchange and training.<sup>5</sup> However, one slide of the RAN representative's PowerPoint then seemed to underrate this most important aspect of "multi-agency cooperation". For, while underlining the intent to "foster awareness for the need for and implementation of multi-agency cooperation" on one of his slides, the RAN representative then gives the examples of "NGOs, communities at risk, victims, formers", thus leaving out the key axis of cooperation between governmental and NGOs actors – which would then, later on, become so visibly problematic in his and the EC representative's side-by-side input to this webinar.

In his introductory reference to the webinar's overall topic, the RAN representative said that "he would love to share the RAN's expertise on trends (of radicalisation) in Central and Eastern Europe", however, "the RAN is still in the process of looking for the trends" thus implying that there simply is not much expertise yet with the RAN on trends in Central and Eastern Europe. Thereafter, the RAN representative added, that he was pleased with the EC representative's "efforts to picture some of the trends" and invites more input on this from all sides. These are a quite peculiar opening statements, indeed, given the wealth of empirical knowledge on right-wing extremism in this European region and RAN practitioners' known ability to provide numerous first-hand accounts on this matter.

Thereafter, the RAN representative proceeded to discuss EU numbers on extremism broadly. As to right-wing extremism in particular, this issue he came to mention only later in his input and not in reference to any concrete European member state. Rather, when giving think tank or Europol figures on right-wing extremism, the RAN representative referred to a trend report on "Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe" without commenting on his Western focus. He also did not discuss in what sense these kinds of figures are the appropriate resource to

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<sup>5</sup> This brought back memories of a short phase of the history of RAN where workshops for "representatives of member states", i.e., members of national ministries were offered by the RAN since winter 2014/15 (cf. RAN Update 25). Since these workshops seemed quite promising to me at the time when I contributed to one of them – and they now seem even more promising in view of avoiding mishaps as the one described here above. However, these kinds of workshops seem to have been discontinued.

approach the question of violent extremism in Central and Eastern Europe – and that civil society has voiced legitimate critique about how state security agencies process extremism related statistics.

Rather, the RAN representative focused much on the point that these figures indicate 37% of perpetrators are so-called lone actors – which the RAN representative then made the main emphasis of his presentation, thus repeating and strongly reinforcing a claim the EC representative had made. The RAN representative further buttressed the EC representative's claim through yet another slide the diagrams of which suggested that the "perpetrator type" of so-called lone actors has significantly increased in recent years (once again, as the EX-representative, without defining the term). Still, the RAN representative did not repeat the EC representative's claim that right-wing extremism "is now a global issue" in which "cultural and historical pasts of countries" do not have a key importance anymore. What the RAN representative would state though in passing, is that "right-wing extremism is a relatively new topic" which seems to be a peculiar statement to be made in this context or at all.

In all that, neither the EC representative nor the RAN representative discussed the question of what a so-called lone actor is supposed to be to begin with – and in what sense this category may be significant at all. As to further statistics, the RAN representative refers to the 2018 "numbers of Europol" on "terrorist attacks and arrests" in Europe, here again picking up on and reinforcing a remark the EC representative had made when she mentioned Europol figures but did not show any. On the Europol map which the RAN staff member presented, France, for instance, shows 310 arrests, Germany 59 – Poland 2, Czech Rep. 2, Slovakia 1, and Hungary shows no entry at all. In total, the PowerPoint slides presented by the RAN staff member tend to suggest that right-wing extremism is not really an issue in Central and Eastern Europe and that Jihadism has the higher rates, thus once again reinforcing the main gist of what EC representative has stated – and what we came to recognize as inappropriate and harmful.

Clearly, as to our hope that the RAN as a European first-line practitioners' network may take on the important function to carefully contextualize, adjust and correct a governmental actor's statement from a practitioners and academic point of view – and thus mitigate what governmental actors may have expressed in misleading ways, we must soberly concede: The RAN has not observed this important function very effectively. On the contrary, the RAN's input did much to even reinforce the misleading remarks of the EC representative – and thus doubled up the harm which was done instead of mitigating it. This is most concerning indeed

since the RAN is not only defined as a practitioners' network; by implication the RAN is also meant to secure adequate space for civil society in European Commission PVE work.

But to be realistic and clear: The fact that this important function of contextualizing and correcting – and possibly even confronting – the EC representative was not observed here by the RAN is no coincidence at all. To be clear and frank about this: If one replaces civil society and independent practitioners' networks by a consulting firm – Radar Group Inc., providing the RAN secretariat – that is chosen and financed by and thus dependent from the European Commission, this is the most logical thing to happen (cf. footnote 2).

### **Can diplomacy help us any further? Or do we instead need a new modus operandi of inter-agency cooperation and communication on PVE issues in Europe?**

To be fair to the RAN and its representative in this event, his presentation can also be read as an attempt of diplomacy. Hence, aside of having failed entirely in contextualizing, correcting and mitigating the governmental actor's statement from a practitioners and academic point of view, as the RAN's natural position should have been, this attempt of diplomacy deserves recognition, regardless of whether one considers it to be a good idea or not to be diplomatic with regard to such serious risks for democracy and security threats for the populations as is caused by right-wing extremism/ terrorism.

It thus should be noted that towards the end of his presentation the RAN representative spoke more vividly about the prevention of right-wing extremism. Also talking more off his PowerPoint slides (none of which referred to Central and Eastern Europe), he stated with some emphasis: "We are definitely (also) going to look into right-wing extremism. It's a relatively new topic ..." and then added that "indeed the focus of RAN work has been on Islamist extremism and there will be more on Islamist extremism but besides that there will be some on right-wing extremism" whereupon he switched to the topic of "women and children in Syria and Iraq who may still be influenced by Islamists". Hence, as awkward as this flow of statements may sound, the RAN representative seems to try to diplomatically inch his way towards a more appropriate and helpful way of speaking about extremism in CEE countries, but then seems to pull back quite suddenly – which may be understood as being diplomatic.

Adding to this, the RAN representative expresses the hope that the new interest in issues of right-wing extremism may “allow Central and Eastern European countries to step forward” into the European PVE area, become more involved and “even take up the lead in the discussion” within pertinent RAN events. In stating this, the RAN representative sure meant well, attempted to suggest a participative and empowering partnership with practitioners in CEE and, in any event, seemed intent to approach the issue on diplomatic paths. Yet, while making this diplomatic move he most probably did not notice the somewhat shocking inadequacy of animating local practitioners in CEE countries to step up more with respect to right-wing extremism – which may mean that they risk their jobs and wellbeing – while the RAN comfortably sits in Brussels or Amsterdam and diplomatically plays up to EU policy makers idiosyncrasies. Coming back to my personal role in helping to build up the RAN from 2010 onwards, this were certainly not the conditions on which my colleagues and I approached field practitioners and civil society representatives in CEE and other countries and won them to support and engage in the RAN – and to add another personal note: I still feel having to apologize to them for where the RAN went since and for incidents like the one here above.

Nevertheless, the RAN representative then conceded that “a clearer picture of what is going on” in CEE would be needed; since there seems to be a wide array of different “right-wing extremist actors” and “forms of organizations” and phenomena, including militias and “lone actors”, also “lone actors in a swarm” (!) among other things. The latter concept of course begs the question of how a “lone actor in a swarm” can be a lone actor at all – but again, this may be motivated diplomatically. And by the way, the concept of “lone actors in a swarm” is also genuinely funny which creates some extra added value. Also, the RAN representative spoke about the need “to get better in understanding the grey zone” and “what is legal and what is illegal ... and problematic” around the topic of right-wing extremism. This, too, may have been intended to be diplomatic but, for the records, this statement is highly questionable and should never come from a person speaking for the RAN and the EC. For, this statement suggests that some things in right-wing extremism could be unproblematic – something about extremism could be okay. Yet, we should bank our work on an unshaken and evidence-based awareness that nothing in violent extremism can be acceptable and unproblematic, for otherwise it would not be violent extremism.

The RAN representative eventually may then have reached the climax of his diplomatic endeavor when saying, in passing, that “there is lots of confusion” around these topics and afterwards, thinking aloud, wondered: “Is it taboo, is it denial or profusion (!)”? which seems potentially helpful and promising, even if the question was then not elaborated on at all and

thus went away seconds later. In his closing remark the RAN representative then shares that he “woke up this morning with the news that there are training camps in Eastern Europe” where right-wing extremists from the West “get trained in ideology and in I don’t know what” and that there is so much “fog and confusion around it”.

Hence, the end of the RAN representative’s presentation, again, seems wanting to diplomatically move into more helpful and outspoken directions, mentioning that taboo and denial may be at work here with regard to right-wing extremism. But he was eventually not following through with this at all! These moves were just a little innuendo – and quick glimpses of what would need to be talked about in terms of radicalisation and terrorism in Central and Easter Europe. For instance, in reference to the closing note on training camps, for the records: members of right-wing extremist groups in Western Europe have been going East to train military combat and liaise ideologically since the 1990s and not since “this morning” in 2020. Also there have been so-called “foreign fighters” from CEE and other countries in Ukraine and Russia since this conflict broke<sup>6</sup> (before that CEE nationals were in the Bosnia wars with the NATO and then were veterans in their countries) – and the RAN hasn’t really been speaking about this ever in any depth – let alone would bring it up here and now; while researchers and practitioners that visited RAN events since 2012 have known and told about these important issues all along and could have been quoted on this by the RAN. Hence, the “fog and confusion” which the RAN representative mentions are rather on the level of the RAN and the EU Commission, multiplying itself in tandem, but certainly not on the level of empirical facts or local practitioners’ knowledge.

To conclude, overall in his presentation – and in the written notes on the slides – the RAN representative did quite the contrary of being helpful and outspoken on behalf of practitioners in CEE countries or in Europe. In a sense, he has much rather reinforced what he himself alluded to as “taboo ... denial”. And this is counter to what the RAN had been designed and financed for by the EC in 2011 when then commissioner Cecilia Malmström put it on track – also in order to set an example vis-à-vis the first American decade of counter-terrorism action.

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<sup>6</sup> As to the most recent publication on this cf. “The Threat of White Supremacist Foreign Fighters to U.S. National Security” <http://gppreview.com/2020/07/28/threat-white-supremacist-foreign-fighters-u-s-national-security>.

The RAN representative's statement about right-wing extremism being "a relatively new topic" is a particular case in point. Because, first of all, the statement is wrong, as everybody knows. But secondly, the statement could also have been meant to read as referring to the topic of right-wing extremism within the RAN – which would reflect the reality of the RAN indeed. Since the RAN in its history had not really dealt too much with right-wing extremism<sup>7</sup>, while we practitioners always demanded from the RAN to do so, so that this now is indeed "a relatively new topic" for the RAN – which certainly is not helpful for preventing violent extremism. What is even less helpful is that the RAN has recently made efforts to portray a somewhat more positive impression about its track in activities of preventing right-wing extremism. It produced a map of its activities with regard to right-wing extremism which, however, do not date back longer than 2017<sup>8</sup>, as one would duly expect from "a relatively new topic". Certainly, such efforts of retroactive window dressing cannot escape coming across as just another slap in the face of those first-line practitioners around the RAN who have been pounding the RAN's and DG Home's head since 2013 to give equal attention to right-wing extremism. Moreover, whether the RAN looked at right-wing extremism/ terrorism with adequate emphasis only in 2019/20 or 'already' in 2017 does not really matter much when looking at how Europe's most home-grown form of violent extremism has been grossly underrated and partly denied by the EC's and member state's policy makers since decades – and still remains to be underrated and even neglected by some (cf. further below).

Clearly, with regard to what we had looked at as diplomacy here above we have to conclude that this seems to not be helpful at all – and is certainly not appropriate, given the seriousness of the subject matter. Because, once again for the records, saying on behalf of the EC that right-wing extremism is "a relatively new topic" which is beyond the "cultural and historical pasts of countries" and basically comes from so-called "lone actors" etc. is nonsensical and dangerous, however diplomatically it may have been intended – and, as explained above, it is harmful for prevention and resilience building Europe wide. In fact, these kinds of diplomatic statements damage our efforts not only in preventing right-wing terrorism. Rather, such statements hamper any prevention program on the whole. Since prevention only works well when done systemically, when all relevant contexts and forms are considered – especially the

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<sup>7</sup> For some more empirical observations re the RAN cf. footnote 2 in: „Prevention of group hatred and right-wing extremism in Germany and Central and Eastern European – experiences, lessons learnt and ways forward from the European Fair Skills, Fair\*in and CEE Prevent Net projects“, on: <http://cultures-interactive.de/de/fachartikel.html>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. "RAN Roadmap on Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE)"

home-grown forms. If this is not done and instead politically motivated strategies are put in place, prevention will not work, harm will be done – and “EU added damage” will occur.

### **Lessons learnt and opportunities for change – beyond the denial of “home-grown” right-wing terrorism**

But to be fair also to the EC representative, coming from a CEE country, what she did in her talk – i.e. the dissociation of right-wing extremism from any country or EU region and, in fact, from any “cultural and historical pasts of countries” – resembles what Western countries and also Germany have often been doing until very recently and still do to certain extents: to deny their own history of group-hatred and right-wing violent extremism and terrorism – and sometimes even systematically alienate and struggle against those who work to make us remember and acknowledge this history (e.g. by suggesting these are left-wing extremists).

For example, it is only ten years ago that a German minister of interior wanted to make all civil society organizations of prevent practitioners sign an extra pledge to the constitution or otherwise withdraw funding. This most unwise and ideologically motivated act was meant to suggest that part of the organizations invested in prevention are left-wing extremist – which is an outlandish and absurd view to take in Germany of 2010 and effectively disparaged and alienated all those who are doing the brave and risky work of safeguarding democracy and human rights in difficult to access and sometimes also dangerous areas of the country. This was a dark year for inter-agency cooperation between civil society organizations and governmental actors in Germany (cf. footnote 1) – while shortly thereafter the news about the National Socialist Underground and its targeted killings broke which, however, did not make the minister reconsider her decree.

Yet, the prime example of denying right-wing extremism and terrorism in Germany is the Munich Oktoberfest bombing of 1980 – which will also bring us back to the issue of so-called “lone actors”. From very early on, there had been a wide array of compelling evidence that the bombing was a right-wing extremist terrorist attack, committed out of a group; but this had been systematically denied, evidence disappeared and the act was attributed to a psychopathic “lone actor” for decades until quite recently (cf. footnote 1).<sup>9</sup> Most tellingly, only

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<sup>9</sup> In July 2020 the files on the Munich Oktoberfest bombing of 1980 have been closed, concluding also officially that it was a far-right terrorist attack. This was well-known to insiders all along but had been denied for decades (with key evidence having disappeared from police archives). What is unlikely to ever happen is an investigation of how



these days, in July 2020, the files were close on this case (a second time), concluding that, indeed, it was a right-wing extremist, neo-Nazi terrorist attack. But it was explicitly not decided whether the attack was committed out of a group and had logistic infrastructure while overwhelming evidence indicated this – and some of this evidence also pointing to the need to investigate state and intelligence agencies’ cover-up and evidence tampering, hence, the so-called “lone actor” still is not off the table.

Therefore, from a German and Central European perspective at least, the Munich Oktoberfest bombing should be sufficient reason to be maximally careful with the term “lone actor” in the context of European initiatives on preventing right-wing violent extremism. This is also true for the EC representative’s word on right-wing extremism being beyond “historical pasts of countries” since the Oktoberfest bomber was part of the infamous paramilitary combat-group “Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann” and other right-wing extremist organizations which were deeply entrenched in the history of German neo-Nazism and National Socialism.

All the more evident it is: We need to get smarter than this and steer into a different direction entirely. Because impactful and sustainable prevention and resilience building strategies cannot be implemented on such grounds – they need the full awareness about how we ourselves may be the problem and what our home-grown history of violent extremism is. To use and rectify the words of the above representatives of both the EC and the RAN: One cannot be successful in the prevention of extremism and terrorism if one is easily galvanized by unhelpful concepts like the one of “lone actors” or if one denies the “cultural and historical pasts” which individual countries have in violent extremism, most importantly in one’s own country in which one’s parents and great parents lived, having been either supporters/perpetrators of violent extremism or victims – or bystanders. Sustainable prevention and “taboo ... denial” just do not go together. This we need to understand, as we also need to gain a strong awareness of the essential necessity to facilitate remembrance and self-reflection of our own home-grown factors of violent extremism – be this in Central and Eastern Europe or elsewhere. This strong awareness then needs to be shared by inter-agency teams of governmental and civil society workers which will need to be built in the future in all EU countries and on EC level (!) in order to effectively implement sustainable prevention and

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systematically the public was lied to about this far-right terrorist attack;  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oktoberfest\\_bombing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oktoberfest_bombing). „Anschlag in München: Bundesanwaltschaft stellt Ermittlungen zum Oktoberfestattentat ein“, 7. Juli 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/oktoberfest-attentat-muenchen-ermittlungen-beendet-1.4959372>



resilience strategies. And wherever the relationship between civil society and state has deteriorated to the point that even minimal trust seems to be a challenge (which may be the case way beyond CEE countries), particular efforts of piloting trust building experiments need to be envisaged. For, absolutely nothing will be achievable in the long run unless true inter-agency and multi-stakeholder constellations can be brought under way on behalf of preventing group-hatred and violent extremism.

In these respects, the side-by-side presentations of the representatives of the EC and of the RAN – which almost seemed as if being aligned beforehand – need to be considered a failure. In particular they failed to achieve what inter-agency cooperation between governmental authorities and civil society practitioners in the PVE area is supposed to do and provide. For these two presentations were clearly governed by “taboo ... (and) denial” – and/or by some sort of diplomacy, which comes at an unacceptably heavy cost for practitioners.

Hence, there are important lesson in there that we can and must learn with respect to inter-agency cooperation and the needed on-eyes-level relationship between governmental and civil society actors.

Moreover, the RAN representative’s webinar input in particular seems to have been entirely oblivious of what the RAN was originally meant to be and do – when being devised and inaugurated by Cecilia Malmström, the Commissioner of Interior in 2011. Coming back to my personal role in building the RAN from 2010 onward, Cecilia and her team did certainly not mean for the RAN and its secretariat to have a role in which they just trail and back up whatever EC representatives say at any occasion around PVE – and thus fail to effectively speak for practitioners in their most vulnerable positions. And she also certainly did not mean the RAN secretariat to replace civil society while being more of an executive branch of the EC. On the contrary, as we had understood and supported Cecilia’s wish to build a RAN at the time, this network was meant to represent European practitioners as independent experts of field-work, with an emphasis on civil society practitioners and inter-agency cooperation with state practitioners. Hence, the idea was to support, be responsible for and responsive to and safeguard first-line prevent practitioners as a valuable asset of European societies – thus securing practitioners’ indelible impact on policy making and reducing the notorious policy practice gap. The RAN secretariat’s role was foreseen simply to facilitate and support this process. Hence, this all was meant to work bottom-up and, as said above, it was also intended to create a promising example of civil-society based bottom-up prevention vis-à-vis the first American decade of counter-terrorism action which was perceived to be heavy-handed, top-

down and aggressive – which was the reason why the RAN’s inauguration in Brussels was set on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

Yet, the challenges and risks that have emanated around the RAN since then are quite substantial – and have again become highly visible in the webinar series discussed here above. In short, the risk is that the RAN, while having been designed or at least announce as a bottom-up practitioners’ network would in reality ever more become a top-down arm of the executive branch of the EC and its DG on Home Affairs – which makes inter-agency cooperation very difficult. More particularly, the risk is that the RAN would not properly observe its responsibility to support and safeguard practitioners and take care of practitioners’ concerns (and instead, for instance, ask them “to step up against right-wing extremism” while it does not do so itself very convincingly). Another risk of a RAN as arm of the EC executive branch would be that it would stop being in touch with and responsive to practitioners’ issues – and also stop being responsive to their suggestions and criticism. This non-responsiveness was certainly exercised with regard to the critical assessment I had provided in 2018 (cf. footnote 2) since neither the EC nor the RAN ever responded or at least dutifully answered my mails. In particular, no action followed my most evident observation that the RAN has not been evaluated over eight years – and still isn’t. Hence, we may assume that also all other critical practitioners which may have come forward or “stepped up” will have had no response either from the RAN or the EC – which is why we never hear from them, so that basically nobody knows what is going on in and around the RAN which conflicts with general transparency and good governance guidelines. Arguably the biggest risk for such network eventually is to gravitate towards becoming a make-believe network, i.e., a network that pretends to be a responsive bottom-up network of and for first-line practitioners but really is not; because this might actually be more unfortunate than not having an EU network at all.

Hence, here too, there are quite some important things we can learn. And to be sure, there is no challenge or risk and there is no failure which is not meant to be transformed into a lesson learnt – in order to inspire progress in our relentless effort to provide inter-agency structures of European skills and resilience building in the area of preventing violent extremism and terrorism.

These major opportunities for learning key lessons are also the reason why I consider the webinars of the EC and RAN representative an outstanding and important moment in the history of European PVE policy making. In discussing with colleagues shortly after the 2<sup>nd</sup>

webinar was given, some concluded that the EC representative was just not the ideal speaker for this event which seemed a plausible conclusion at first. But in hindsight I would say: On the contrary! This was a most authentic EC input which may help us a lot to become more aware of a systemic challenge within the European Commission's PVE policy making and political communication. Therefore, this incident speaks so powerfully to us about what needs to be changed – we just need to pick up on the opportunity and discuss how change could best be brought about through concerted effort and stepped-up inter-agency cooperation.

Furthermore, this incident also may help us to take a fresh look at diplomacy. Maybe diplomacy with and among EU governmental representative needs to be like this – and most certainly this is how diplomacy works generally. For diplomacy constantly works on finding common denominators between the most different parties and build commonly agreeable terms and a shared language, even at the cost of occasional absurdity and sometimes even at the cost of involuntarily ringing almost cynical in the ears of experts and historians. No doubt, diplomacy is needed and is a great art – if applied rightly and within its realms. But, clearly, in the PVE area stakes are too high and most importantly: the RAN, the practitioners and civil society actors of prevention should be left out of this kind of diplomacy and be safeguarded from it due to these high stakes. Therefore, one of our most valuable assets in modern democratic states is the division of functions and the separation of powers – and the role of civil society in this. Hence, whenever communication with and among practitioners and civil society begins (which the RAN has been put in place to facilitate and service to), diplomatic maneuvering of this kind has to pause. Rather, in PVE affairs we need a paradigm shift towards post-diplomacy solutions that allow us to develop a new language and modus operandi of inter-agency cooperation, cross-partisan communication and commitment to evidence base and to commonly shared objectives.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a first practical approach to such language and modus operandi of inter-agency cooperation cf. the advocacy recommendations provided by the CEE Prevent Net working paper on “Advocacy to Prevent Intolerance, Discrimination and Group-focused Enmity of Youth in Bulgaria, Germany and the Visegrad Group”; on: [http://ceepreventnet.eu/files/Publications/Regional%20Report%20Final\\_web%20version.pdf](http://ceepreventnet.eu/files/Publications/Regional%20Report%20Final_web%20version.pdf)

### **The way forward – let's talk it through and take action to improve**

This now is the moment – after all the sobering analysis – in which I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all who were involved in the organization and implementation of the RadPol2020 webinar series – especially to the representatives of the EC and the RAN who contributed and for whom this assignment may not have been an easy one for various reasons. In fact, it only happens all too rarely that EU representatives visit H2020 and RAN events and meet researchers and practitioners. All the more thankful we are that this was made possible – and thus provided us with an important common experience and a clear vision of where inter-agency cooperation should go from here and how we can bring this on the way.

In this sense I am convinced that some years from now things will have improved significantly within the European PVE policy area. The issue of inter-agency cooperation between governmental actors and civil society workers will be taken more seriously and practiced in more circumspect ways and the relevant stakeholders will know – and be trained in – how to do what is needed to successfully work together in a whole-society and inter-agency approach to sustainably prevent violent extremism and build resilience in Europe.

Therefore, I disagree with a civil society colleague of mine who, after the webinars, spontaneously said: “Well, Harald, that’s politics. There is nothing you can do about this really! They just do what they want – and we are just the ‘puppet theater’. as you yourself said in your RAN essay”. Sure, the incident can plausibly be described as what we often refer to as “politics” and it may be not easy to sustainably avoid these things in future PVE inter-agency work. But no, there are things that can be done – and it is our obligation to try our best to support positive change in this important policy area. Moreover, as outlined above, we are set to work on a post-diplomacy paradigm shift and develop a new language and modus operandi of inter-agency cooperation and cross-partisan communication in European PVE policy making.

What then is it that can be done right now in this valuable situation – and in similar incidents which may occur at other moments?

The first necessary step has already been done: The incident as such has been recognized, noted and documented so that relevant evidence can be provided upon which we then can reflect. This is already an achievement because most often these kinds of “politics” incidents pass by quite silently and we normally do not sufficiently pay attention. Also, the second step

has been achieved in that a public exchange on the topic could now prepared; because the webinars were public and are recorded and I was able to furnish a first opinion piece here in writing on which further exchange and discussion may build. Now, the next step would then be to have this discussion, i.e., get together and talk it through and possibly – in case of agreement – take action to improve and thus make sure that harmful incidents of “politics” of this kind will not occur again in the future.

In order for this to be achieved it seems that intensified measures of mutual exchange and also training could be helpful in which inter-agency partners – as governmental actors and civil society workers – get to know each other better and commonly build skills of inter-agency cooperation.

One ultimate outcome of such process of dialogue and exchange on inter-agency cooperation – between civil society practitioners and ministerial civil servants could possibly be a European agreement on Principles of Good Practice in Inter-Agency Policy Making and Program Design in the Area of Preventing Violent Extremism and Building Resilience.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of these principles, trainings for inter-agency teams of governmental actors and civil society workers could be designed, tested and implemented in the European area of policy making and PVE program design. In fact, the above-mentioned RAN workshops for “representatives of member states” (cf. members of national ministries) in 2014/15 could serve as blueprint for such promising initiative. Without doubt, such exchange and commonly engaged training on inter-agency cooperation among governmental actors and civil society workers would provide true added European value for the quality assurance of the future European prevention and resilience building.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Weilnböck, Harald (2021 forthcoming): „The Policy Brief of the EXIT Europe Project“ und: „The EXIT Europe final evaluation report“; <https://cultures-interactive.de/en/exit-europe.html>  
Harald Weilnböck/ Robert Örell at al. (2015): “RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice – Principles of Sustainable Interventions in Disengagement and Rehabilitation (Deradicalisation) from Involvement in Violent Extremism and Group Hatred.” <https://cultures-interactive.de/en/exit-europe.html>

As Buckminster Fuller said, "There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes."<sup>12</sup> He might have added that the real failure is the inability to learn from experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Buckminster Fuller (2010): A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation. Edited by Elizabeth Dozois, Marc Langlois, and Natasha Blanchet-Cohen. Published by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (2010).