



Flexibility of MAW approaches towards new emerging challenges

Ceren Özkan
Malon Peeters

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I. Introduction: the changing landscape in radicalisation and violent extremism

Radicalisation and violent extremism are phenomena that have mostly been visible as organised international terrorism such as Islamist jihadism by Daesh. While the threat from this group remains high, the occurrence of jihadi terrorist attacks has been lowered. The landscape of violent extremism is currently undergoing rapid change and is moving away from international organised groups. The emergence of newer ideologies and forms of extremism, like lone actors and the incel movement, make the landscape more shattered and diversified. These new challenges and variations are often less organised and more online, and occur more on an individual level (e.g. a lone actor) or peer group level. While these new phenomena and ideologies may be present in different countries, the manifestations are more local, with radicalisation hotbeds and lone actors, which makes it harder to grasp for local actors (TESAT, 2021).

In a local context, the involved actors will always face changing trends in (violent) extremism. This could be either large or small changes in the phenomena. This topical paper provides key information on how multi-agency approaches can deal with the ever-changing landscape of extremism. How can the multi-agency approach find a systematic answer to these changes? This paper is for first-line practitioners and policy makers involved in multi-agency work, especially those working in the local context in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

II. New emerging challenges in violent extremism

We are currently seeing new types of extremism on the rise, such as lone actors and online extremist communities. We are also seeing emerging trends in terms of ideology, such as the rise of right-wing extremism, accelerationism, incels and anti-government extremism. This section will shortly touch upon these new emerging types and trends.

Right-wing extremist ideologies are spreading through international networks and mostly attract young people via online platforms. The Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security, the German domestic intelligence services and the Belgian Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis reported on the growth of right-wing extremism and that the likelihood of right-wing terrorism is conceivable based on the growth of youth engagement in online international right-wing networks (NCTV, 26 October 2021; OCAD, 2020; Verfassungsschutz, 2020). Many of these youngsters seem to have mental health issues and to lack social support (NCTV, 2021). However, connecting violent right-wing extremism with mental disorders risks oversimplification. In most cases, mental health is one of several underlying factors impacting individuals' radicalisation processes (Duits & Kempes, December 2020). One of the main ideas spread by right-wing networks is accelerationism. **Accelerationism** is a right-extremist

ideology spreading via international social media platforms in which the followers justify and glorify race war. The following chaos from the race war is assumed to create a political vacuum in which a white ethno-state can be installed (NCTV, 26 October 2021; OCAD, 2020).

Lone actors are socially isolated extremists who radicalize through newspapers, magazines, social media and other propaganda. In most cases, lone actors can plan, prepare and carry out attacks without the direction of an organisation. This can be either a jihadist attack carried out alone or right-wing leaderless aggression. Moreover, it can also be on one single issue such as an internet-based conspiracy theory or environmentalism. While some lone actors also show mental health disorders, this does not seem to be the case for every profile. Although it may be impossible to identify one single, comprehensive profile for the lone actor, it is important to recognise the lone actor profile/type and that the lone character is often embedded in active online communities, which tend to migrate to offline spaces (Lloyd and Pauwels, 2021).

Another challenge is the emergence of **new online extremist communities**, such as the incel movement, anti-government movement and anti-vaxxers. There is some overlap between these communities, which can lead to lone actor attacks. **Incels** are 'involuntary celibates', who feel frustration over the absence of sexual relationships in their life and blame women for this. They post on online forums threatening women and society in general. The incel movement is not merely anti-feminist and urging targeted violence, it also advocates societal change by promoting a society with absolute male supremacy. This has resulted in extremist attacks in the USA and Canada, and the movement is now growing in Europe (Moonshot, 2021). Another form is the **COVID-19 related extremism**, which is a result of uncertainty, disinformation, mistrust, polarised narratives and conspiracy theories spreading through various online channels. People are more active than ever online as a result of social isolation during the pandemic (Wansink & Timmer, September 2021). Their aim is to undermine the credibility of official approaches and policies on Covid-19. The sensitivities of this new group overlap considerably with those of existing classic ideologically inspired networks and movements (e.g. left-wing and right-wing extremism). Supporters of the new protest movement of anti-government extremism also form an important reservoir from which existing classic extremist ideologies try to win souls (OCAD, 2020).

III. What does multi-agency cooperation need?

Flexibility towards new challenges means that the multi-agency structure needs to work on the following objectives:

1. Have a strong basis in your multi-agency cooperation for the long-term.

In order to be flexible towards emerging challenges, the multi-agency grouping should have a solid basis in their cooperation on individual cases. This solid basis has to remain vivid in the long-term as well. Some key elements to keep your multi-agency cooperation strong are:

- Identify existing local networks and create partnerships.
- Work on a structure for (early) signals, in which local partners know how, where and when to report on certain signals of radicalisation. Furthermore, invest in the knowledge of and trust from various communities in order to keep them sharing signals and information (Expertise-unit Social Stability).
- Focus on a structured, comprehensive and multi-disciplinary approach when diagnosing cases.
- Decide on a case/process coordinator, who has a helicopter view of the process. Make clear-cut agreements on the processes and protocols to foster cooperation and clearly communicate on expectations towards one another. In addition, work with a systematic protocol for information-sharing and interventions (RAN LOCAL Overview Paper, 2021).

2. **Stay up to date on knowledge of the most recent and relevant trends in radicalisation that lead to violent extremism:** *raising awareness on new trends and keeping the sense of urgency about these new trends among local partners in P/CVE.*

One of the key points in your action plan is to recognise the type of extremism and radicalisation in particular case(s). In order to keep up to date on emerging challenges, to improve knowledge on radicalisation and violent extremism in general and to select the right interventions, there is a continuous need to invest in **local training programmes**. The deliverers should be experts in the field. In addition, work with reliable people who have been part of these 'extremist' networks in the past, because they can be a great asset and source of information. Additionally, an added value is to organise a **strategic table** alongside the operational table to discuss new phenomena and work out an appropriate approach.

In addition, make sure that your local partners stay up to date **beyond your organisation**. Local partners do not always have enough expertise, time or resources to recognise for example right-wing extremist ideology in schools and in other social networks such as sports clubs. In cooperation with the multi-agency actors, the coordinator should work on the alertness of local partners and communities to right-wing extremism and others extremist ideologies, in order to receive signals. This is an ongoing process, but involve these local partners and communities in the training sessions (EMMA P2P Exchange, 2021).

In addition, **invite mental health professionals** to your multi-disciplinary case meetings to discuss the mental health dynamics of radicalisation leading to violent extremism. An increasing number of studies discuss possible connections between radicalisation and mental health disorders. For example, recent research on terrorism convicts who have been diagnosed with at least one psychiatric disorder shows that in more than half of these cases the mental health problems could be linked to the terrorist offence (NIFP, 2020). The municipality of Eindhoven, one of the EMMA participants, has developed

cooperation with a mental health professional, who is present at multi-disciplinary case meetings. This has led to an improved sense of urgency for all partners involved regarding the theme of radicalisation to violent extremism and its interplay with mental health issues. It has also improved case management for individuals that do indeed have mental health issues, especially for lone actors (EMMA P2P Exchange, 2021).

To keep up to date on phenomena, some municipalities in the Netherlands organise '**Living Labs**'. A variety of local professionals are informed during these periodical meetings by experts with a specialisation in different types of radicalisation and violent extremism. Sometimes these meetings are also intended to further explore a specific topic or trend, to gain more knowledge and expertise (EMMA P2P Exchange, 2021).

It is also important to **involve citizens** from the local communities in order to stay up to date as a multi-agency cooperation, and to raise awareness among them on preventing and signalling radicalisation. Host dialogue sessions among citizens to understand their worries and ways of thinking. Let people with different opinions hold a dialogue to confront one another's ideas on fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, polarisation and online and offline extremism.

Since these new challenges entail a large online component (right-wing extremism and incels for example), your case 'investigation' and approach should **combine online and offline working**:

- Assign 'online responsibilities' within your multi-agency cooperation: who should do what online and how should different organisations work together on online matters? (RAN LOCAL Conclusion paper, June 2021)
- Work with social media police officers: they can have a strong role in prevention via the most popular social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Discord. This is also an important tool to keep up to date with the fast-changing landscape of online platforms (RAN POL Conclusion Paper, 2018).
- Keep up to date and active on online gaming platforms: Youngsters use platforms such as Discord to communicate while gaming. Discord is a platform gamers use to talk with peer gamers without visually seeing one another. With the possibility of gaming and communicating with various gamers over the world, right-wing extremist networks are also spreading via this platform. More gamers are exposed to right-wing extremist ideologies in this way. Initiatives like gaming with police or youth workers make youngsters more alert to the signals of extremism and radicalisation among peers and to signs of recruitment efforts (RAN Collection, 2021; RAN LOCAL Conclusion paper, June 2021).
- Learn from other good case practices: Belgian municipalities are starting to experiment with screening open sources via a special software tool.

This project and the use of this tool help to map problems around disinformation and online polarisation. In addition, it helps to track the evolution of these challenges (RAN LOCAL Conclusion paper, June 2021).

- Try to cooperate with tech companies and the social media industry in order to signal extremist content, to remove it and to protect people from radicalisation through algorithms. (Ibidem).

3. **Continuously re-evaluate your multi-agency cooperation.**

It is important to continuously evaluate your multi-agency cooperation. Do the involved actors have enough expertise to handle new cases? Is everyone still up to date on the most recent trends? And does a certain standardized approach still work for a new phenomenon? Or do we need to add new or different expertise to the table, for example? To aid MAW in its evaluation efforts, the EMMA project has published a topical paper on evaluation and the University of Ghent has designed an evaluation tool. This topical paper on monitoring and evaluation provides further information on why evaluation is essential in multi-agency working. The evaluation tool is a practical, hands-on tool that helps MAW groups evaluate their own work. The paper and tool can be found.

IV. **Three inspiring practices from the EMMA Network**

The Netherlands: staying up to date on emerging challenges

The process coordinator in this Dutch example tries to have a diverse working week with creative initiatives to gain more knowledge on emerging challenges. The coordinator works on the usual tasks, such as leading the multi-disciplinary case meetings and checking in with the local partners. It is a continuous process of network building and being recognisable for partners to signal cases of radicalisation.

The coordinator's work continues in the neighbourhood outside. Together with multi-agency cooperation, the process coordinator plans field activities. These field explorations are a way of actively trying to keep up with new phenomena and challenges. The coordinator and the multi-agency partners will visit a certain neighbourhood for a 'sticker safari'. In their walks, everyone searches for the newest additions of stickers in the neighbourhood, then they identify these stickers. What message do they see? How frequently is the sticker seen? To which group or idea does the sticker belong? What does it say about local structures? This field research is perfect to get out of the office bubble and learn more about current trends together.

With sticker-safaris and living labs, the process coordinator and the multi-agency partners try to search for visible expressions in different neighbourhoods of these new

challenges and changed sentiments. In this way, the multi-agency cooperation gains new knowledge and stays up to date with new challenges.

Germany: building trust through online intervention by U-Turn

U-Turn is a Dortmund-based NGO focusing on prevention and exit work in the field of right-wing extremism. Their online intervention approach focuses on reaching out to members in online groups that spread conspiracy theories or antidemocratic propaganda (these groups must include known members of extremist groups trying to recruit). The specific target group consists of members who are not leading members of extremist organisations, but share content that suggests an affinity for conspiracy theories or authoritarian methods (their ideology remains vague and is not fully developed). Since this group is relatively easy to reach and often willing to challenge their beliefs, intervention efforts with these individuals take place first online. Having created a relationship of trust with these members, interventions continue offline in order to challenge their views and provide them with support to deal with difficult situations and mental health problems. U-Turn aims to identify underlying personal problems among the targeted group members and build a relationship that offers support but also challenges their world views.

The goals are:

1. Understanding (conspiracy theories, how they work, why they are attractive and how they affect believers and society alike, and prove their contradictions);
2. Empowerment (support regarding mental health issues, integration in social groups beyond the online restrictions, support dealing with ambiguity and insecurity);
3. Media literacy (trustworthy sources, who is an expert, understanding conflicts of interest).

Belgium: Online youth work and detection of online signals

The challenge that various Flemish cities and municipalities are currently facing is to transform the offline methodologies and operation into an online context. That is why various projects are currently being initiated to start up or further develop online prevention work. In this way, municipalities can also capture signals of radicalisation online and get to work on them. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced several municipalities to take some first steps in this direction, but this operation needs to be

reinforced further to be able to apply the current prevention operation appropriately to a broad spectrum of toxic polarising tendencies and radical threats that can proliferate in the online reality.

In this respect, municipalities are committed to developing methodologies for online outreach work within the contours of current prevention work. This can be done by using online youth work to create a bond with young people online and through innovative projects that focus on capturing online signals. Online youth work is based on finding preventive answers to social problems of loneliness, exclusion and alienation, whereas online detection responds to curative person-oriented approaches in which intervention and reconnection with social institutions are crucial.

“Press to Pause” is an initiative in Genk in Belgium that focuses on online outreach work to reduce young people's distance to the world. The focus is on detecting frustration and radicalisation, in an online safe space for youngsters between the ages of 12 and 25. In a first session, young people and police officers play a game together on Discord. This creates a sense of connection. This gamification method seeks subsequently to provide accessible online support. In a following session, an interaction will be organized between first-line care providers and young people on the topic of addiction. The focus in these sessions is always on building something together.

V. Conclusion

This topical paper is intended to give information and practical ideas on how your multi-agency cooperation can work on and anticipate to the ever changing landscape of radicalisation and violent extremism. Three main objectives are important in cooperation:

1. Have a strong basis in your multi-agency cooperation for the long-term.
2. Stay up to date on knowledge of the most recent and relevant trends in radicalisation leading to violent extremism.
3. Continuously re-evaluate your multi-agency cooperation.

Besides the practical tips in this paper, it is also valuable to exchange best practice and lessons learned with colleagues in different municipalities. It is even better to broaden this exchange with colleagues in municipalities in other countries, such as Belgium and Germany, as was the goal of the EMMA project.

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For more information about the project look at our webpage or contact:

Maarten De Waele & Katrien Van Mele
Coordinators EMMA project
maarten.dewaele@vvsg.be
katrien.vanmele@vvsg.be

Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG vzw)
Bischoffsheimlaan 1-8
1000 Brussels
Tel 02-211 55 00

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