

Summary of:

Inter-agency cooperation gone wrong! –
The challenges of practicing all-society prevention of right-wing extremism
in (Central and Eastern) Europe

Summary

In this essay I describe an exemplary case of lessons learnt in which inter-agency communication/ cooperation between a high-level governmental actor and civil society workers failed entirely. The case occurred in the policy area of preventing right-wing extremism in which inter-agency cooperation between state and civil partners is especially important. The context was a series of webinars on “Radicalisation in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe” (CEE). A European Commission officer from DG Home’s unit on Prevention of Radicalisation coming from a CEE country’s government, contributed to webinars. In this webinar about the CEE region the officer put emphasis on stating that “jihadist terrorism remains to be the main threat in Europe today”, that right-wing extremism continues to evolve, yet “we are speaking here of lone actors” and that this “has been a problem in some member states” referring to incidents in Germany (and New Zealand) and later mentioning Sweden. When referring to the CEE context the EU officer said that right-wing extremism today is “sort of a global issue and not limited to cultural and historical pasts of countries” but rather pertains to global narratives in the internet, closing by saying that the Commission works on various sorts of extremism while “having a primary focus on Jihadist extremism”.

I then argue in detail why these – exemplary – statements by a high-ranking governmental representative need to be considered not only incorrect and inappropriate but also harmful to the prevention of extremism. Furthermore, not only are these statements in breach of what has been drafted as the principles of good practice in PVE policy making – they are likely to even support right-wing extremism in the CEE region, involuntarily. Particular harm is to be expected for first-line practitioners of prevent work and with regard to the important goal of developing inter-agency cooperation.

In addition I put this in context of a misguided strand within the European Commission’s prevent discourses during the whole last decade which had largely fallen prey to a harmful bias on so-called Islamism. This bias helped obfuscating right-wing extremism/ terrorism, neo-Nazism, white supremacism i.a. and disregarded the fact that right-wing

extremist political elites, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe, welcomed the EU's Islamism bias because it could be used to strengthen their defamatory anti-refugee and Islamophobic populism in CEE countries.

Next in line as speaker in the webinar – and generally when developing good practice in inter-agency cooperation of governmental and civil actors on European level – is the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). The RAN has been put in place by the European Commission in 2011 to support first-line practitioners issues in EC prevention policy making – and reduce the notorious policy practice gap. Yet, the representative of the RAN secretariat (provided by the consulting firm Radar Group Inc. since 2011) who spoke right after the EC representative in this webinar did neither correct nor mitigate the harm which had occurred. He rather doubled up the damage by reinforcing the statements about so-called lone actors, presenting a somewhat aged trend report on “Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe” as well as unhelpful Europol numbers and concluded that knowledge on radicalisation in CEE countries was not yet available within the RAN – which is counterfactual.

Yet, while thus failing to fulfill the important function of confronting and correcting a EC policy makers' misleading and harmful statements, the RAN secretariat staff member seemed to also employ some diplomacy, for instance when speaking of “lone actors in a swarm” and murmuring about “taboo and denial” around all these “confusing” issues of right-wing extremism. But he then animated local practitioners in CEE countries “to step forward more” with respect to right-wing extremism, thus entirely disregarding the evident personal risks attached for the colleagues in Eastern Europe, while he and the RAN being situated in safer Western Europe were evidently not ready to do so at this point in time. This once again underlined how non-functional these procedures of inter-agency cooperation were. It, however, also made visible how unavoidable this kind of stalemate was since the EC – instead of building a truly independent practitioner and civil society network – hired a dependent consulting firm as secretariat for the RAN which simply is not in the position to speak up.

By looking at instances of recent German history, e.g. the Munich Oktoberfest attack, I then stress how much denying right-wing extremism may be in-built in what we falsely view as appropriate diplomacy. The essay concludes that, given the high stakes in PVE, a post-diplomacy paradigm shift is needed which allows for developing a new modus operandi of inter-agency cooperation and communication. For, in short, the risk is that the RAN and similar networks, while having been designed or at least announced 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 ever more difficult.

Seriously striving for the build-up of inter-agency cooperation therefore first implies more dialogue and exchange on inter-agency cooperation – between civil society practitioners and ministerial civil servants. Secondly, it requires training and consultancy on how to successfully implement such inter-agency cooperation. As a matter of course, the main prerequisite for this is that all involved actors get to the point that they truly want inter-agency cooperation to happen in a full-fledged modus operandi. For this to happen a clear political decision and a specific action plan is required. If consultancy and a formative evaluation process are then attached to this action plan which assure the quality of the procedures, inter-agency cooperation on eyes level between civil society practitioners and ministerial civil servants can be highly successful and productive.