Extended summary:

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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When Harald was asked to write a description and critical assessment of the RAN, he felt that not having proper resources for an evidence-based assessment, he could only write an essay – of which this is an extended summary since the essay grew and grew. (Harald Weilnböck served as steering group member and working group chair in the RAN from 2011-2015). Harald's feeling was that noting some of his and colleagues' personal experiences and thoughts when assisting to build up the RAN in its first years as voluntary helpers, and inviting his colleagues and readers to add their own observations and views in the commentary section, could serve a good purpose – in view of how to best help supporting the RAN's future work.

Hence, Harald's essay is confined to subjective views and informal discussions with colleagues, not the least of whom is John A. Cranky who is somewhat radical, sometimes even cynical, crass, unfair – but who Harald likes very much personally, albeit he has to argue with him all the time.

In fact, the only thing that Harald and Cranky could ever agree on wholeheartedly is that the RAN is the best thing of its kind, thus far. For it has brought many relevant first-line practitioners of prevention and derad work together in a European spirit, who had not known of each other before. One of the especially exciting aspects of RAN was its promise that policy making will learn – bottom-up – from first-line practitioners and thus create a truly European civil society-ed PVE network.

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Evaluation issues – a "first-line practitioner network"

Hence, all a "critical assessment" of the RAN could do is ask: Can the RAN do even better in the future? – aside from the most evident thing, which is: evaluation. Since it seems peculiar that the RAN with over 30 million spending in over eight years has not been evaluated – and that in year seven customer satisfaction surveys of some RAN workshops are conducted, producing flattering results. Some deeper reflection could be more helpful.

But Harald is the first to admit that an evaluation of the RAN would not be easy, methodologically. Yet, Harald suggests taking as an evaluation guideline the very moment when the RAN's mission was expressed in the very first preparation meeting in which DG Home frankly said: "The thing is, we here at the EC, we are bureaucrats – we don't know anything about it really … and we need and want to learn from you practitioners."

Therefore, Harald's essay plainly asks: how effective and valuable is the RAN as a first-line practitioners' network for inspiring bottom-up learning for policy makers? This is by no means self-evident as an evaluation question, given the yet unrecognised self-contradiction within the RAN discourse that has always wavered between wanting to be a "network for first-line practitioners" on the one hand and a "network of networks" on the other. The fact that this doesn't go together very easily may be seen by the more idiosyncratic and irritable practitioner colleagues like John Cranky who simply believe: "This network of networks business is a total betrayal of the RAN as a bottom-up practitioner network".

The unheard grievances of Practitioners – and "the RAN's biggest selling point"

What also seems to irritate practitioners like Cranky a lot is when RAN calls them "the RAN's biggest selling point" as was done at the RAN Plenary of 2016, claiming some 2000 and since then even 3000 practitioners to be part of the RAN. Here, Cranky just dryly remarked: "Hey, I wonder where RadarGroup sold all the practitioners who you don't see around anymore" (Radar is a Dutch consultancy firm, providing the RAN secretariat). This refers to the general observations that quite a few people of the first RAN years no longer seemed to be there. Others say things like: "Honestly, nowadays I am only here to show my face and get some information".

Harald considers such utterances unfair and inappropriate, because any RAN attendant and steering group member may pick up and communicate sentiments and grievances like this openly. But Harald also wished that some mechanism of network quality management was in place – a kind of RAN-Info-House which could proactively invite and process critical views and have a procedure for formative RAN (self)research and evaluation attached to it. This had been suggested to the RAN early on but wasn't followed up on. However, in hindsight such tools of

network quality management could have prevented important but irritable colleagues like Cranky from exclaiming in panic: "RAN, DG Home, Radar (RAN secretariat) … they all couldn't care less about any quality and formative evaluation tool".

RAN minutes, papers – losing the bottom-up grounding

When asking more soberly how first-line practitioners actually fared at the RAN, the first thing which Harald and colleagues think about are the lively and inspiring debates. These RAN workshops – being the very place where first-line practitioners' knowledge can and must be generated – were always fun to be at; and the aforementioned RAN customer satisfaction surveys may at least attest to that.

However, when looking at how this most valuable practitioner knowledge was actually harnessed, some questions came up. For one, even in their first years, Harald and colleagues had experienced that the minutes from the meetings – in which the discussions, topics, controversies, and conclusions are put in writing – were not managed in the most welcoming and transparent way at the RAN. And secondly, in recent years it seems that minutes were not even shared with attendants anymore for collecting comments and suggested changes, although the workshops are announced as being a "highly interactive peer-to-peer setting" with experienced colleagues, promising a variety of "lessons learnt" by all participants.

As if compensating for this lack of a feedback loop, "more extensive ex-post paper(s)" are envisaged. However, the author and drafting process of these ex-post papers are often not clearly indicated and, upon enquiry, turn out to be just another Radar staff member – thus doubling up the lack of feedback loop with a lack of transparency and independence of procedure. Moreover, rumour has it that the RAN papers take quite long to come out and this is "because they sit at DG Home the whole time to be checked". Once again, Harald, unfortunately was in no position to check on and research any such rumours. Only proper evaluation could possibly clarify any such issues. Considering how important issues of transparency are particularly in democratic societies, any such evaluation seems most desirable.

The RAN steering committee – wondering about practitioners' impact

The essay then looks at the RAN steering committee (SC) and into how practitioners and first-line practice knowledge fare there. The SC was designed to steer RAN as a network led by civil society and practitioners . Its meetings are led by DG Home and RadarGroup staff and otherwise consist of selected RAN practitioners who in pairs also act as co-chairs of the RAN working

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groups. When Harald was there, the co-chairs in essence seemed to be picked by DG Home and RadarGroup which was done in a way that was not always entirely transparent to SC members. Also, since RAN's second term, one sometimes hears that "the ministries of powerful Member States take influence on who is appointed" – which, once again, is only hearsay.

Aside from this, the architecture of the RAN steering committee was quite promising, in that it was designed to consist of first-line practitioners, at least mostly, thus reflecting the inaugural mission statement that "we are bureaucrats – we don't know anything about it … and want to learn from practitioners". Other stakeholders – such as academics, policy makers, consultancies/ think tanks etc. – were referred to other forums, at least for the most part, so that the established C/PVE discourses would not overpower the practitioners' discussion of actual field experiences and lessons learnt.

Therefore, when thinking back to their years at the SC (2011-2015), Harald and colleagues have good memories of intense and lively discussions, often driven by in-depth field experiences of first-line practitioners. Yet, some of Harald's SC colleagues felt increasingly uneasy: "You just don't know and see what will come from all of this … whether it has an impact (on policy making) – or whether it's just all talk and politics". To be sure, some significant products were created along the way (memoranda, good practice declarations, issues papers, the collection of practices, formats for the consultation of policy makers etc.). But the feeling of a lack of impact somehow persisted. Cranky in particular often got all nervous during all the talking at the SC.

Various factors may have come together here. When the EU Commission's key communication on "Preventing Radicalisation" came out in 2014, the RAN practitioners at the SC had not been asked to comment or contribute beforehand. Even more disturbingly, at SC meetings it could happen that practitioners make suggestions about significant topics, both orally and in writing and neither DG Home nor RadarGroup/ RAN secretariat even acknowledged receipt – let alone discuss the suggestions seriously and take note of them in the minutes. For instance, when the question came up, in view of RAN's second term, what new additional working groups may be needed, SC practitioners proposed RAN groups on (i) sports/ football/ hooliganism, (ii) religious organisations, and (iii) the military sector/ veterans. Yet, this proposal was not acknowledged, let alone discussed seriously or taken into the minutes.

Similar experiences regarding the SC discussion and decision making. After the first enthusiastic year the feeling among SC practitioners was: we should take "more time to discuss key issues in-depth" and "bring in external expert's inputs" to be better equipped. Plus, "we never conclude or vote on anything here! Let's discuss and vote on issues!" Even though this was only intended for internal clarification of where the SC practitioners stand and where and why RAN/ DG Home stands on certain issues – and thus to make SC work more substantial and transparent. This proposal, too, was given orally and in writing but is was neither acknowledged nor discussed or taken into the minutes.

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Unsurprisingly, this was the moment when radical and crass John A. Cranky coined his meanwhile notorious phrase: "You practitioner guys at the SC are just a puppet theatre anyhow" and later, being even more angry and cynical, he said: "DG Home/ RadarGroup has taken you hostage for their big politics … to give an 'It's all been approved by practitioners' stamp to all they want to do!". Also, among more sober steering committee practitioners the coffee break conversations about "next week's meeting in Brussels" sometimes began sounding like: "Well yes, we will go up there, give our lectures and then leave again".

"It-briefs-wellism", industrialisation, "NPO capitalists" – and related challenges

Harald, being more patient with such complex procedures than Cranky, then proceeds to identify the key root causes behind this situation. He calls the most important of them the principle of "It-briefs-wellism", meaning a pattern in which things are said and done which "brief well to" others, i.e. are liked and welcomed by others, such as superiors, colleagues, politicians, or other audiences and relevant third parties – regardless of what practitioners on the ground are saying. Harald defines a concomitant root cause as "industrialisation of PVE", which he also describes as "a drift of focus and interest(s) within the network". By this, Harald means that whenever a network's political significance and finances increase "then there are funds and profits to be acquired, … careers to be boosted … power to be gained and professional recognition to be generated" – and all this tends to compromise the cause.

Here, Harald and Cranky agree that It-briefs-wellism, industrialisation and all related power politics are by no means restricted to policy makers, consultancy/ think tanks and academics. Especially Cranky often bitterly lashes out against what he calls "NPO capitalists", who engage in "business making, power struggling, infighting, backbiting, and you name it". This makes Cranky very angry because NPOs are where he comes from: "They talk about non-profit and ethics all day long – and then they betray us, hire business and marketing consultants, place their people in ministries, even in the RAN – and fight about funding and power!" Being more balanced in his views, Harald underlines that this is just an expectable thing to happen under these circumstances. In his view, "NPO capitalists" reflect the failure of governmental funders to provide sophisticated precautions against "industrialisation", "It-briefs-wellism" and the like – and thus to actively safeguard the diversity of approaches and equality practitioners in civil society-led PVE.

What is a practitioner anyway?

In response to all these structural ailments, this essay also underlines how important it is for a "practitioner network" like the RAN to have a clear-cut concept of what defines a "PVE practitioner" to begin with – and thus be able to safely delineate practitioners from other sorts of

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experts and stakeholders. This is why a sophisticated mechanism of "practitioner mainstreaming" had been proposed to the RAN. The proposal defined "actual practitioners" of PVE as "having worked in a direct, relationship-based manner with radicalized or vulnerable young people for an extended time of their professional biography and ideally still do so today"; and it suggested ensuring that a sufficient ratio of "actual first-line practitioners" are included and specifically empowered to contribute. Since this proposal, too, has not been registered or addressed by the RAN, it is hard to tell how RAN fares in terms of its "actual practitioner" ratio. It also remains unclear whether some recent impressions are valid or not that, over time, the "experts" and "stakeholders" have outnumbered practitioners in RAN.

Another important key question would be whether the workshop settings employed by RAN provide sufficient continuity of communication between practitioners in order to prevent RAN from becoming a mechanism of conference hopping, sort of a "travelling circus" featuring "the best horses to run" as one RAN staff member once said, adding one output after the other – but losing practitioner connectivity and field credibility. To be sure, any such questions would need to be looked into by proper evaluation, as well as the above observations which were made about minutes/ paper writing and the RAN steering committee above.

However, all in all, given the above, it may seem doubtful whether the quintessential first-line practitioner knowledge, which the RAN so often and proudly refers to, can be most effectively harnessed and brought to policy level by way of the current procedures – or else whether it is not sometimes the general PVE discourses from politics, think tanks, media etc. which are recycled at RAN. In terms of developing an approach for preventing violent extremism that is truly led by civil society and practitioners, Harald thinks that an alternative and more advanced approach would be preferable.

Curiously, in 2018 it appears that an approach of this kind may be about to evolve in Austria. Since in the Austrian federal PVE network, the Home Office seems to be doing everything it possibly can to avoid taking any directive lead in methodological or procedural questions and be maximally transparent and inclusive – so that the network may truly steer itself. To be sure, quite a few Member States had PVE programs much earlier than Austria – and some of these programs are very good; but in terms of how to build up a bottom-up, civil society based inter-agency program from scratch, Austria seems quite unique.

Any "added damage"? –

the "counter-narrative machinery", RAN Young, and RAN's stumbling in Hungary

Yet at this point, Harald felt the need to confront himself with some test questions – and ask: Are first-line practitioners and civil society really so important? Does anything bad happen if you don't

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focus on them as much? More precisely: when did RAN fail to listen to practitioners – resulting in "added damage" to EU-wide PVE?

Once again realising that questions of this magnitude would need a proper evaluation setting, Harald could only supply three tentative hypotheses about where such "added damage" might have occurred.

(1)

The first hypothesis is: actual first-line practitioners have always regarded counter-narratives as an erroneous and ineffective strategy that may even support radicalisation and also has significant drawbacks in terms of societal resilience. This is what practitioners have strongly believed since the very first years of the counter-narrative discourse, Harald being one of them – and there is quite some empirical evidence supporting their stance. Yet, the RAN, and other large scale PVE policy discourses did not pay much attention to these practitioners' views and the supporting evidence. Rather, the RAN, even today, seems to increasingly equate society with the internet, for instance through its "Civil Society Empowerment Programme" (CSEP). The CSEP, in Harald's view, seems to sometimes resemble a social media programme about "credible voices" rather than a program for people to interact with, empower and moderate each other across important societal fault lines. Such initiatives sometimes seem to lose sight of the essential difference between real people, face-to-face, and cameras/screens; and they tend to gravitate towards wanting to turn civil society into a "counter-narrative machinery", as one protagonist once called it at the RAN SC. Since these developments increasingly seem to be becoming popular in policy making, Harald feels they might possibly be able to create "added damage".

(2)

Secondly, the RAN Young initiative, which aims to include young people into the RAN and CVE activities and thus automatically make them an element of RAN's communication strategy and media coverage, might be another case of "EU added damage". For, choosing a certain kind of – elite – young people to act as youth representatives and youth spokespeople for some certain RAN issues even though they cannot conceivably have any mandate from "our young people" is problematic from an ethical point of view. One RAN Young video in particular gives reason for concerns about whether "our young people" are about to be turned into what was earlier called a "counter-narrative machinery".

In ethical respects, Harald notes with great concern that the 2018 "RAN Young Issue Paper" suggests that "youth leaders and youth influencers" are chosen and trained to "engage in counter-extremism activities" even "in vulnerable communities"; they are recruited for "youth activism" and as "peer-to-peer intervention providers" in order to "target … their friends and peers" and in view of "mobilis(ing) their peer groups and influenc(ing) their attitudes and behaviour" (5); young people are also viewed as a factor in "targeted prevention", aside from being put in the usual, but no less questionable position of being "credible voices" and "messengers" vis-à-vis their "friends and peers", "creat(ing) and disseminat(ing) counter-narratives"; not to mention the recommendation

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that young people may "help their peers resolve identity crises" – and the claim that they "supported the UK government's Prevent duty" (which was one of the most controversial strategies across the EU in recent years).

This indeed sends shivers down the spine of any actual youth practitioners, leaving them to wonder how any responsible policy maker could put out such strategies for young people, considering the fact that violent extremism is a quite explosive problem; at least this is how Harald felt about it. John Cranky in his crass and impulsive way simply said: "This is pure child abuse – youth abuse! … I told you, first they turn you practitioners into a puppet theatre – and now in year six they start eating up the kids". This, of course, is Cranky at his most intense and hypercritical.

And yet, trying to enlist – in fact, 'recruit' – young people as "peer-to-peer intervention providers" who "influence (the) attitudes and behaviour" of their peers, may easily turn out to be not so different from what extremists do themselves. Therefore, Harald wonders whether this may not be another instance of "added damage"; and his hypothesis is that, had one truly asked "actual first-line practitioners" and properly evaluated the situation, the RAN Young initiative would not have been implemented. To be sure, as much as Harald could determine, the idea of RAN Young seems to not have come from the practitioners at the RAN steering committee – while it remained unclear how the idea had actually emerged.

(3)

The third potential case of "added damage" may revolve around the widespread Islamism bias in PVE, which stresses issues of Islamism, Salafism, Syrian foreign fighters a lot and tends to obfuscate right-wing extremism (by also calling it "polarisation"). This Islamism bias is harmful in many ways, but mostly in Central and Eastern Europe. For, the emphasis on Islamism awareness, being the ultimate It-briefs-wellism in PVE in the Western world, is routinely abused by Eastern European populist parties for their xeno-/Islamophobic and anti-refugee strategies. These then tend to equate refugees with Islamist terrorists and at the same time obfuscate the issues of indigenous hate crime and right-wing violent extremism. Aside from the general EU rhetoric, Harald mentions events with presentations from the Quilliam foundation in CEE countries which seemed particularly questionable.

In less dramatic ways, the RAN stumbled, too, in CEE by opting for a questionable political compromise when facing a challenging situation in Hungary. Sidestepping warnings from ground practitioners, the RAN supported a state-driven Budapest radicalisation conference, conducted by a quasi-governmental body. Consequently, a report was published which partly rang an Islamophobic tone – emphasising terms like "Muslim community", "Islam", "inmates with a foreign background in Hungarian prisons", "third countries" etc. Not surprisingly, no further activities ever evolved from RAN's Budapest initiative.

Whether this may be considered significant "added damage" or not, the example as such seems

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quite telling about what kinds of things tend to happen if one strays from the path of a network that is led by practitioners and civil society and gives way to more top-down, politically-led procedures.

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

In the end Harald discusses the latest news and rumours about a coup d'état in which "the ministries of Member States are allegedly taking over the RAN now" – after a worst-case scenario appears to have been avoided which is said to be the vision of a French/German-led EU agency on radicalisation issues. This presumed take-over seems to have been launched by a High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R) which is composed of a "large number of EU agencies and of Member States' competent authorities". Yet, the Group's tasks pretty much reflect what the RAN was originally designed to do, e.g. build "a knowledge hub for activities at EU level", "map national prevention initiatives … existing practices", "elaborate a set of principles and recommendations", inter alia – which begs the question of what went wrong with the RAN.

To be sure, the Group's structure – together with an EC "Task Force" and a "network of national prevention policy makers" – could not possibly be any more top-down, government-led and further from actual practitioners. For the Group's designated function is to "advise" and "govern", for instance, the "existing EU networks and instruments", including RAN, and set the "overall political orientation and priorities", according to "Member States' needs and requirements".

Hence, while the representatives of the Member States keep underlining: "No, this is not a coup d'état of the RAN", the new structure – consisting of "EU agencies", "Member States' competent authorities", and a ministerial "task force" etc. – can't avoid further weakening the already small voice of first-line practitioners in the RAN and further enhancing the "It-briefs-wellism" discourses on PVE. Therefore, Cranky, as harsh as ever, uttered statements like "this is just some big bureaucracy egos fighting about power and fame" – and gave Harald a smug 'I-told-you-so': "It's not about practitioners! You were just a puppet theatre!".

However, why this Group was set up to begin with and what the problem was with the already quite top-down RAN, remains entirely unexplained by the Group's foundational report. And yet, there are many mixed signals, for instance, affirming "the value of a bottom-up approach" and stating expressly that "the RAN would continue to work as a platform for the exchange of expertise among first-line practitioners". Finally, it seems unclear why the ministries of Member States would stage a coup d'état which, in effect, runs counter not only to practitioners but also to their own ministerial peers at EU DG Home?

Hence, Harald felt unable to judge whether or not – and why – a high-level coup d'état of RAN really occurred.

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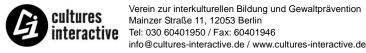**No, it was the RAN itself who messed it all up!**

Yet, still bothered by all these open questions, Harald discussed this topic with some more people and, left to his own humble and subjective devices, eventually arrived at the conclusion that the emergence of the High-Level Expert Group and its "mechanism" may have been yet another instance of "EU added damage" caused by the RAN. Because it seemed that RAN/ DG Home/ RadarGroup somehow ended up alienating policy makers from Member States over the years, so that they felt they had to do something and create the new "mechanism" (and thus spend yet more money).

The most deplorable damage from this may have been that any fledgling awareness among the ministerial representatives of Member States about how important first-line practitioners' knowledge and bottom-up procedures are, was hampered. Plus, the Member States' irritation may also have been extended to include "those first-line practitioners" because RadarGroup/ DG Home seem to have referred to "their practitioners" frequently as justification for how things were handled at the RAN. This is quite substantial damage indeed, considering that 8 years of time, effort and finances – and the most valuable idea of a bottom-up and inter-agency network of practitioners – was put on stake.

Harald is mostly clueless about how this could have happened, since he only hears bits and pieces of individual views. For instance, one of these pieces seems to indicate that the RAN was generally wary of interacting and cooperating with Member States or else protected first-line practitioners from their ministries – and therefore sometimes was less than helpful, for instance, in facilitating contact between a country's policy makers and national practitioners, which seems odd. In other instances, it seems that "random invitations" by RAN and a lack of communication with ministerial actors have caused disturbances in the national scene. At the same time, some practitioners felt their knowledge had been taken from them without it even being properly referenced.

To be sure, the picture of a RAN/ RadarGroup accumulating knowledge, amassing contacts and not sharing them, possibly claiming unfounded needs of 'practitioner protection' for "their 3000 practitioners" – any such picture can be quite irritating. Plus, it seems that RAN representatives have sometimes been perceived as showing an arrogant attitude vis-à-vis representatives of Member States. But Harald remains doubtful whether this really was what went on and whether this could have prompted the Member States to take action, which is why he felt quite in the dark about all this.

Only one thing Harald feels totally sure about: whatever went wrong and whatever mistakes may

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have been made at the RAN/ DG Home/ RadarGroup that led the policy makers of the Member States feel so alienated today – no actual first-line practitioner would ever have made these kinds of mistakes. Because actual practitioners have a totally different logic of (inter)action; they are "relational workers", mentors, facilitators, and mediators. They would not allow any alienation and polarisation to happen, especially at such a systemic fault-line like the one between NGO practitioners and ministerial actors. So, once again, Harald resumes: had first-line practitioners been asked and listened to, such "EU added damage" would not have occurred. In the end Harald lobbies for a network at 'eye level' versus a High-Level Group – which would both intensely involve actual first-line practitioners and cater to the needs and requirements of Member States.

Provisional closure – readers' commentaries

Finally, at the provisional ending point of his essay, Harald invites the readers to contribute their own observations, views and thoughts in the commentary section – and thus support the RAN and its most valuable cause, which is: providing a European response to violent extremism and building resilient societies.