

# EX-POST PAPER

## RAN Polarisation Management Manual

### Summary

Hate crimes, growing intolerance, xenophobia, closed ideologies and communities, street violence by the extreme left and right – all are manifestations of polarisation, and are threats to Europe’s fundamental values.

Underlining their own regional problems with polarisation – and looking for a way to understand it – RAN practitioners from across Europe gathered in Amsterdam on 6 July 2017. They were in particular seeking actions – a way to *do* something, to manage the situation.

This large group of practitioners, reflecting the focuses of different working groups, worked on the draft Polarisation Management Manual. The text introduces Bart Brandsma’s model, which explains the mechanisms of polarisation, as well as chapters offering practical guidance for different sectors.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the RAN Centre of Excellence, the European Commission, any other institution, or participants of the RAN working groups.

## Introduction to polarisation, RAN and practitioners

The thematic event in Amsterdam (6 July 2017) kicked off with a group of RAN practitioners painting a compelling and worrisome picture of a Europe in which polarisation is raising its ugly head. Polarisation is perceived from north to south, and from east to west. Within the RAN community of practitioners, there is growing concern about polarisation between different groups in society. Austerity and economic reform have caused a great deal of uncertainty and anger all over Europe. This uncertainty is being exploited by actors to mobilise support on the basis of an *'us and them' narrative*. This results in increased tension. The refugee and migrant crisis also provide fuel for polarisation, as did recent terrorist attacks and incidents. These attacks, in turn, led to an increase in hate crime incidents; some small scale, others more serious. Polarisation fertilises the breeding ground for radicalisation.

Polarisation has been the focus of several RAN meetings and papers. They all fit within a 2017 roadmap that culminates in the writing and dissemination of the RAN Polarisation Management Manual as a tangible tool. The Manual takes stock of:

- RAN PREVENT, 'How to prevent future violence in post-conflict areas', Zagreb (19-20 November 2012);
- RAN POL 'Successful and effective engaging with communities', Oslo (6-7 April 2016)<sup>1</sup>;
- Thematic event on refugees and polarisation (14 April 2016)<sup>2</sup>;
- A series of four Member State workshops on polarisation and the migrant and refugee crisis (11, 12, 13 May and 16 September 2016);
- Issue Paper on 'Tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society', (November 2016)<sup>3</sup>;
- Study visit Northern Ireland (24-25 April 2017);
- 'Working on the polarisation manual', joint meeting RAN EDU and POL meeting in Stockholm (10-11 May 2017);
- 'Strengthening community resilience', RAN YF&C<sup>4</sup>, London (29-30 June 2017);

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran\\_pol\\_ex\\_post\\_paper\\_oslo\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran_pol_ex_post_paper_oslo_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/ran\\_ex\\_post\\_paper\\_the\\_refugee\\_and\\_migrant\\_crisis\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_ex_post_paper_the_refugee_and_migrant_crisis_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/tackling\\_challenges\\_prevention\\_policies\\_in\\_increasingly\\_polarised\\_society\\_112016\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/tackling_challenges_prevention_policies_in_increasingly_polarised_society_112016_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> YFC is the working group for professionals working with Youth, Families and Communities

- ‘Multi- or cross cultural approaches to preventing polarisation and radicalisation’, RAN H&SC<sup>5</sup> meeting, 4-5 July 2017<sup>6</sup>.

These activities were synthesised at the thematic event in July, when a draft version of the Polarisation Manual was shared as an ex ante paper. The topic of polarisation has been discussed with particular frequency by RAN POL and RAN EDU, which led to intense breakout sessions at the thematic event during which the working group leaders and their constituencies were able to take their manual chapter to the next level.

## **Polarisation: what are we talking about?**

Polarisation can be seen as a thought construct, based on assumptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ identities. In a process of polarisation, the dominant and active narrative is about the perceived (and often exaggerated) differences and simplistic narratives about the others. There is a neglect of what the ‘us’ and ‘them’ might have in common. Polarisation therefore shows itself in negative thoughts and attitudes towards other groups, which could result in growing hostility and segregation. Ultimately this could lead to situations in which intolerance slips into hate speech and even hate crime. In such an environment, some (parts) of groups or individuals can radicalise towards violent extremism and terrorism. Recruiting for an extremist ideology is much more successful if there are susceptible groups who feel their group and identity is being insulted and even threatened.

J.M. Berger recently published a research paper for the ICCT under the title ‘Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics’<sup>7</sup>. Berger defines a ‘ladder of identity construction’.

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<sup>5</sup> H&SC is the working group for Health and Social Care

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran\\_hsc\\_multi\\_cross\\_cultural\\_approaches\\_dublin\\_04-05\\_07\\_2017\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-h-and-sc/docs/ran_hsc_multi_cross_cultural_approaches_dublin_04-05_07_2017_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://icct.nl/publication/extremist-construction-of-identity-how-escalating-demands-for-legitimacy-shape-and-define-in-group-and-out-group-dynamics/>

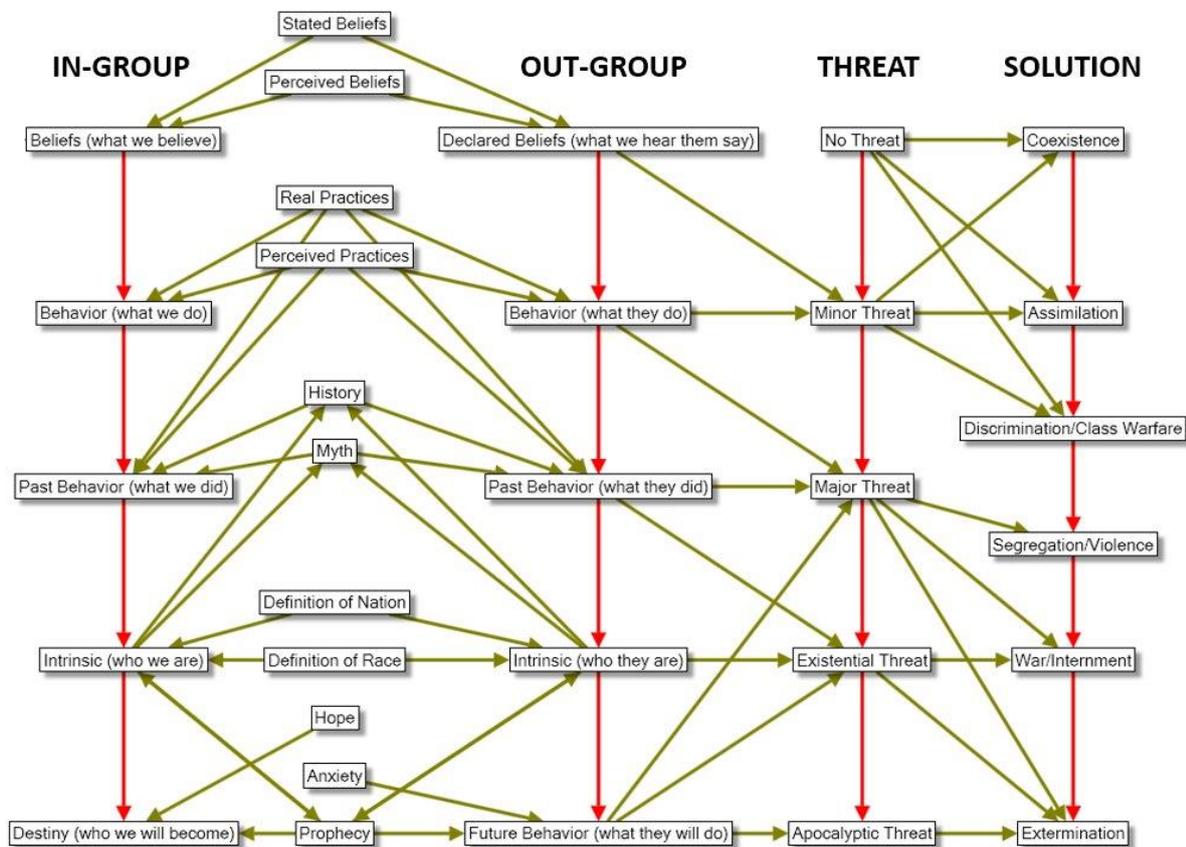


Figure 1 Identity groups evolving into extremism (Berger 2017)

Even though Berger does not use the word polarisation, the process taking place at the top of this figure is clearly akin to polarisation, and represents the first steps on the ladder to identity construction. Berger, looking at the processes that make identity groups morph into extremist groups, draws the following conclusions:

- Identity movements are oriented towards establishing the legitimacy of a collective group (organised on the basis of geography, religion, ethnicity or other *prima facie* commonalities);
- Movements become extreme when the in-group’s demand for legitimacy escalates to the point that it can only be satisfied at the expense of an out-group.

In processes of polarisation and radicalisation to violent extremism, these developments are intertwined and even reciprocal. So the out-group will see itself as an in-group. Trigger events can prompt an acceleration in polarisation, catalysed and facilitated by mass media channels and social media. Fake news, framing incidents and so-called information bubbles enforce the polarisation process. And reciprocally, the notion that the out-group is as a matter of fact the in-group followers. The other is defined as the out-group.

### **Polarisation – radicalisation**

The *Radicalisation* Awareness Network is not the *Polarisation* Awareness Network. Polarisation is not the key focus for practitioners preventing radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism. However, the RAN community of practitioners is concerned. We seek to *prevent* radicalisation, and by preventing and decreasing polarisation, we are creating the conditions that contribute to preventing individuals from being lured towards intolerant ‘us and them’ ideologies.

Moreover, in a polarised situation in which hate speech is being used, as well as speech referring to violence, there is the risk of lone actors or small groups turning to violence. This has been witnessed recently: the individual who killed UK Member of Parliament Jo Cox; the shooting of Republican politicians in the USA; and the fire bomb attacks with ‘terrorist intent’ on a Dutch mosque and on refugee facilities. These attacks are taking place from Europe’s deep south to the north. From west to the east we see polarisation leading to hostility, exclusion and violence. A polarised Europe, in which strong, hateful ‘us and them’ feelings are rife, is the swamp in which extremist recruiters thrive, and where self-radicalisers turn to violence.

It is important to highlight the distinctions and connections between polarisation and radicalisation. Within the context of RAN, radicalisation refers to the process through which an individual comes to adopt extremist political, social, or religious ideas and aspirations which then serve to reject diversity, tolerance and freedom of choice, and legitimise breaking the rule of law and using violence towards property and people. This process may culminate in terrorist offences which “*are defined as acts committed with the aim of ‘seriously intimidating a population’, ‘unduly compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act’, or ‘seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation’.*”<sup>8</sup>

Berger’s definition of radicalisation is interesting, and might be helpful outside of the polarisation discourse:

***Radicalisation is the process of adoption of increasingly negative ideas about an out-group and increasing harsh action against the out-group that are justifiable.***

As explained in the RAN issue paper ‘Tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society’: “Polarisation does not necessarily lead to radicalisation and radicalisation does not have to result in growing polarisation. The answer lays in the concepts of factors that make people vulnerable to extremist propaganda and recruitment.” RAN wrote about a kaleidoscope of factors.<sup>9</sup> Being affected by a process of polarisation amplifies many of the psychological and social factors that make people vulnerable. A heavily divided community with hostilities between groups and strong ‘us and them’ thinking is the ideal

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/571320/EPRS\\_ATA\(2015\)571320\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/571320/EPRS_ATA(2015)571320_EN.pdf)

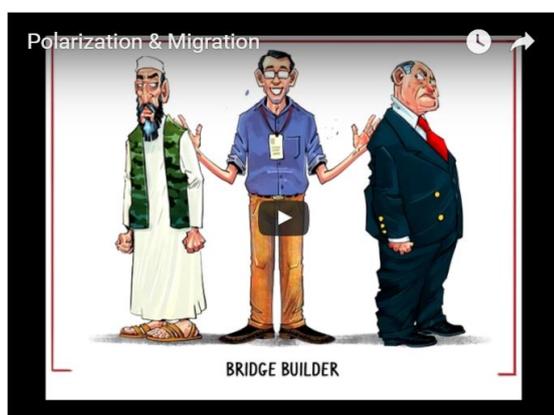
<sup>9</sup> RAN Issue Paper The Root Causes of Violent Extremism, Magnus Ranstorp

breeding ground for recruiters and radicalisers for extremist ideologies, exploiting feelings of fear, distrust and rejection of ‘them’.

## Understanding and managing polarisation - by Bart Brandsma

At the joint EDU and POL meeting in Stockholm, participants discussed Bart Brandsma’s Polarisation Management model<sup>10</sup>. For a short introduction watch the four-minute video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R3gzMONDUI>



The polarisation model, as described by Bart Brandsma, had also been presented at earlier meetings, such as the RAN POL meeting on communities<sup>11</sup> and the Thematic Event on the refugee crisis and challenges for prevention policies. The model is becoming popular in several countries and is being used by the Dutch police, and, for instance, at the Royal Athenaeum of Antwerp, Belgium, the school of which RAN EDU co-chair Karin Heremans is director.

To allow the RAN community of practitioners to read more about Brandsma’s model, the RAN Centre of Excellence translated a substantial preview of his book into English. It can be downloaded at: <https://www.polarisatie.nl/eng-home/>. The approach outlined in the book is summarised here.

Brandsma argues that polarisation is built upon *three rules* and *five roles*:

### Three rules:

1. Polarisation is a *thought construct*, ‘us-and-them’ thinking, based on identities and groups. Polarisation is the spin, the story exploiting an incident or conflict.
2. Polarisation *needs fuel*; it thrives on talking about identities in combination with judgment. If there is no communication, no energy put into the polarisation, it will die out.
3. Polarisation is about *feelings and emotions*. Facts and figures won’t get the job done in managing polarisation.

### The five roles

1. The *Pushers*, *positioning themselves at two opposing poles*, are trying to create polarisation, they are the instigators acting from the poles. They claim 100% truth and are more in the ‘send mode’ than the ‘listen mode’. They don’t want a real dialogue.

<sup>10</sup> Bart Brandsma <https://www.polarisatie.nl/eng-home-1/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran\\_pol\\_ex\\_post\\_paper\\_oslo\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-pol/docs/ran_pol_ex_post_paper_oslo_en.pdf)

2. The *Joiners* have chosen sides and moved towards the pushers; this is polarisation unfolding.
3. The *Middle ground*, the nuanced, have not chosen sides, and not taking part in polarisation. They could be neutral, scared or indifferent. They are targeted by the pushers; the game of polarisation is won or lost in the middle ground.
4. The *Bridge-builder* is trying to bring peace and moderation by reaching out to both opposing poles. But, by doing so, he or she underlines the existence of the two poles, and as a result might even be adding fuel to the polarisation.
5. The *Scapegoats* are being blamed or attacked, these could be the non-polarised ‘in the middle ground’ or the bridge-builders.

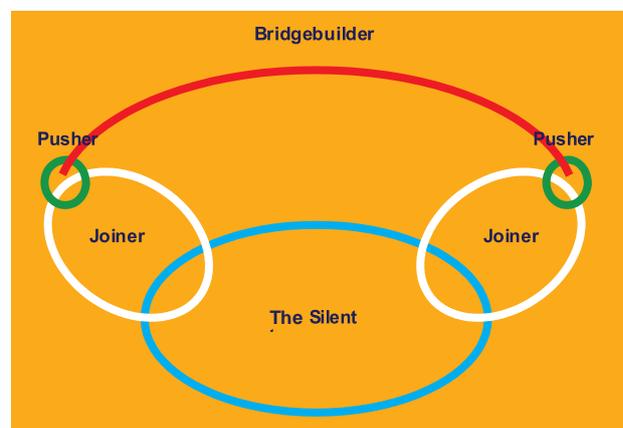
#### Four game changers:

1. Change *the target audience*. Pushers portray an enemy in the other pusher but target the middle ground, that is where the actual is taking place. So, target the middle ground for depolarisation.
2. Change *the topic*. Move away from the identity construct chosen by the pushers and start a conversation on the common concerns and interests of those in the middle ground.
3. Change *position*. Don't act above the parties, but move towards the middle ground;
4. Change *the tone*; this is not a question of facts being right or wrong. Use mediating speech, try to engage and connect with the diverse middle ground.

#### Polarisation – conflict

Brandsma stresses the importance of making a distinction between polarisation and conflict. Polarisation is an artificial construction of identities. For conflict, there must have been an incident, perpetrators and victims. Something has been broken or stolen, or there are people wounded. People are directly involved and are fighting over something. They are problem owners.

Polarisation is about people who are being targeted by narrow identity communication and pressured to choose sides. Pushers try to lure them into polarisation. The definition of the problem and problem ownership is not very clear. Are all Muslims part of a conflict if an attack takes place that was claimed by Daesh? Or are some actors trying to pull people into a ‘black and white identity construct’? When conflict occurs, we can rely on a long tradition of mediation and peace building. The dynamics of polarisation are however different. Familiar elements from conflict mediation, like *mediating speech* and *mediating behaviour*, are helpful, but polarisation also needs other approaches. This is where the above mentioned three rules, five roles and four game-changers come into play.



## A RAN Polarisation Management Manual for first-line practitioners

Brandsma describes how some actors have a sanitising role to play. Teachers, police officers, school principals and social workers, in their professional role and ethos, feel the need to prevent further polarisation. In many cities and towns, the mayor also has this preventative role, although in the battle for votes, politicians may also fuel and exploit polarisation to mobilise their electorate. All of the above-mentioned actors have a leadership role to fulfil. But there is a risk that, in trying to do so, they unintentionally add new fuel to polarisation. If their communication and interventions feed the dichotomy – the black and white ‘us and them’ construct – they may end up helping the pushers. They may be fuelling polarisation for instance by playing the role of the neutral bridge-builder and starting a dialogue between the polarising pushers. By acting within the frame and the game of the pushers, they make the existence of the two constructed poles more visible.

Polarisation is not like the weather. Actors *can* make a difference. That is why RAN is presenting this manual as a tangible tool with a focus on *doing* – and on *doing the right thing*.

The manual is built around six thematic chapters

- Communication
- Local government
- Police
- Education
- Communities, families and youth
- Prison and probation

Each chapter highlights sector-specific interventions and actions. Some practical principals that might however be relevant for all.

### ***Practical guidelines for all***

#### *Do no harm, understand the dynamics of polarisation*

Whatever your profession, it is wise to invest in understanding the unique nature of polarisation to make sure that your actions and communications do not unintentionally serve polarisation and its pushers. This is why it makes sense to organise training courses on the rules, roles and game-changers.

#### *Don't be belatedly surprised. Be prepared!*

Try to build up a sense – or procedures – for noticing and responding to the first signs of potentially problematic polarisation. Through internal assessments, checking with partners or data, try to identify polarisation when it is still at a stage that is easy to manage.

#### *Polarisation management needs multi-agency cooperation*

Because polarisation is a societal process, many societal actors can influence it in a positive or negative way. Multi-agency cooperation is therefore needed for polarisation management. All relevant actors must

be involved in coordinating information and actions – especially when polarisation reaches a concerning level.

*Protect vulnerable practitioners with backgrounds relevant to the situation*

Colleagues with a background linked to a polarisation construction could help others understand and the relevant emotions, actors and factors. However, there is also a serious risk that they could be confronted with questions or even accusations about their position. This could make them vulnerable. In these situations, it can be wise to keep these colleagues out of the spotlight.

## Communication and polarisation management

### Why is communication relevant for polarisation?

Polarisation is all about communication. No communication means no polarisation. All actors operating in the midst of polarising forces should therefore be aware of how they are communicating or how they are portrayed in both the mainstream media and social media.

In this chapter we focus on three aspects:

- Strategic communication in seven steps
- Campaigns to empower the middle ground and increase resilience
- Mass media, the press and media organisations

### How to understand polarisation and how to use strategic communication

The seven practical steps below are an adapted from the steps described in the RAN Manual on responses to returnees and their families.<sup>12</sup>

#### *How to communicate strategically to manage polarisation*

1. Clearly **define the local polarising issue** through research and understanding communities, media and wider stakeholder sentiment. Who are the pushers and joiners on both sides? Who is in the middle ground? Who are the bridge-builders? How is polarisation framed by the pushers? In addition, ensure the communication strategy is coordinated with other communication strategies. Polarisation will likely impact on other communications, and can also be influenced by them. What are the objectives of your strategy?
2. **Understand who you want to speak to**, how to speak to them clearly, and in a way that makes sense to them. Who are the credible voices that resonate with the target audiences? What messages need to be conveyed, and how are these going to be received by the target audience? Use a mediative attitude and speech when possible.
3. Work creatively on campaigns and **work in partnership** with others, particularly between government (in the local multi-agency cooperation team), community and other NGO partners, and with the support of agencies (communications, design, media etc.), and where possible social media companies. Can potential creative partners be identified?
4. **Who are the community voices** and partners with whom to work? Can they share stories that will help change the topic, change the audience and “tone of voice”? Clear, concise campaigns are needed to put forward the facts, but wider campaigns will be needed that address the emotions that this issue is likely to raise. Try to use mediatorial language – language supporting mediation – by showing empathy and building trust in the process. Language should not feed polarisation.
5. **How to engage with different audiences** will depend on who they are, but the mainstream media are not neither the most effective nor trusted. Community partners might be able to use social media to reach those most ‘engaged’ with the issue. Will this be organic reach or will it need to be supported by paid-for advertising through social media platforms? Will local community events help explain the issue? Initial research and analysis should have already answered these questions.

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<sup>12</sup> RAN MANUAL ‘Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families’ July 2017  
[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran\\_br\\_a4\\_m10\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf)

6. **Monitor responses** to any communication carefully. This is the primary feedback and can be used iteratively to inform work and adjust accordingly. Responses will also feed into an evaluation of the activity's overall success and provide insights into shortcomings.
7. **Report and discuss communications efforts** and success with other stakeholders. This work will help inform future preventative communications and policy development. Ensure results are made available and put in place further communications planning to build on the success.

### How can campaigns boost the middle ground and build resilience?

Polarisation starts with pushers shouting at each other, but both poles are actually targeting the middle ground. Pushers try to convince people to join them and swell their movement. Without the middle joining sides, there is no polarisation. This is also a key lesson for communication campaigns: although it is tempting to address the pushers, the middle ground should be the target group. These individuals can be indifferent to the polarising issue, but may also be nuanced or in doubt. Campaigns should assure the middle ground that having doubts can be a virtue, provide nuance, and underline complexity where possible.

#### *How to build a campaign*

- Identify your target audiences, who can be considered the middle ground.
- Apply the four game changers: change of position, topic, audience, and tone of voice. By doing so, try to reach out and engage.
- Identify what matters to your target group and address them accordingly. Sometimes an emotional message has more effect than facts and figures.<sup>13</sup>
- Be realistic and tailor the campaign by creating sub-campaigns to reach out to specific target audiences.
- During the campaign, be aware that pushers and joiners are listening in. By using mediatorial speech you minimise the risk of pushers using your messages for polarisation.
- Engaging and connective narratives can be built upon empathy, inclusion.
- Berger's theory on group identity suggests that campaigns aiming to challenge the legitimisation of a polarising group identity might in turn lead to more that the polarising group investing more effort in justifying their existence and necessity— and a more polarised position.

#### *Top-down or bottom-up?*

- Someone should take the initiative. The local or national government has the networks and often other resources needed to start a campaign.
- At the same time, can a campaign run by civil society organisations or non-governmental organisations be seen as more authentic, credible and acceptable? Governments can invite or even facilitate or support campaigns run by non-governmental organisations.

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Haidt 'The Righteous Mind' 2013

### *Learning from practices*

#### *Dare to be grey, the Netherlands*

*[Dare to be Grey](#) (DTBG) calls for recognition of the 'grey' middle ground in issues often mistakenly considered 'black and white'. The initiative seeks to promote the different views and voices of the large majority of moderate thinkers, which are too often muted by more extreme voices.*

*DTBG aims to raise awareness principally through online channels, using multiple video and photo campaigns, writing and disseminating online articles, and offering a platform to anyone with a 'grey' story to tell. Besides online activities, which form the core of the organisation, the campaign regularly organises local debates and gets involved in local events; DTBG is actively developing a series of (educational) workshops.*

### **Mass media and media organisations**

Despite the existence of echo chambers and information bubbles from which individuals gain information and confirmation, mainstream media organisations still have an effect on public debate and opinion-building. Journalists and the news media are portrayed as presenting the news, based on facts, and as being neutral. But "it's important for editors, reporters, sub-editors and photographers to realise that, when we get it wrong, people suffer directly. Sloppy, unprofessional work on these subjects always hurts the vulnerable in some way."<sup>1415</sup> This is the reason behind the Irish Union of Journalists' co-authored guide to reporting on refugees, a topic imbued with tension, concern and fear.

### *How to cooperate with the press and journalists*

- Raise awareness and increase knowledge among journalists, editors and their organisations about the dynamics of polarisation.
- Invite organisations representing chief editors or journalist to think about their role in polarisation, in specific developments.
- Provide the media and the public, with factual information. Facts can help dispel myths and false information presented by pushers

### *Learning from practices*

#### *Code of conduct: reporting on refugees, Ireland*

*The Irish National Union of Journalists (NUJ) guide, '[Reporting on refugees. Guidance by and for Journalists.](#)', was written in collaboration with the UNHCR and the Irish Refugee Council.*

*In seeking to improve standards we are not trying to stifle debate. Rather we are seeking to ensure that all of us meet our obligations through fair and honest journalism. While there is a widespread awareness of the importance of accurate reporting, some of our colleagues continue to print or*

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/reporting-on-refugees-nuj-ireland-and-unhcr/nuj-ireland-unhcr-booklet-reporting-on-refugees.pdf>

*broadcast myths and misinformation about refugees and asylum-seekers. Inaccurate terminology and commentary has increased confusion and that breeds prejudice.  
That means always: checking and cross-checking information, being aware of the veracity of sources, being mindful of the language we use and the context in which information is presented.*

## Local governments and polarisation management

### Why is polarisation relevant for local governments?

In streets, neighbourhoods, towns and cities, people with different identities and loyalties live side-by-side every day. Local or regional governments influence the conditions for peaceful coexistence, as well as resilience to polarising factors. Polarisation undermines the social fabric and eats away at resilience. The local/regional government plays a key role in decreasing polarising factors – by addressing them and by increasing social cohesion-building. The mayor is, for example, very often seen as the ideal bridge-builder. And he or she *can* be. The mayor (and his or her staff) can, however, also contribute to polarisation or become part of polarisation. Unfortunately, in some countries and political constellations, mayors turn are actually supporting radicalisation, or are even the pushers.

Local and regional governments can also operate as the linking pin between citizens and the national government for addressing country-wide polarising and societal challenges

We focus on three challenges for local governments:

1. being prepared; see the problem coming and prepare actions for the day after an attack in your region or country;
2. community, identity and leadership;
3. difficult decisions, triggers for polarisation

### Be prepared

Local governments are well positioned and equipped to manage polarisation. They have many eyes and ears for signals of mood swings within communities, heated temperatures and growing tensions and hostilities. Individuals employed by the local or regional government, local politicians, and the many (civil society) partners and contacts they have, can recognise growing polarisation.

#### *How to raise awareness and build polarisation management capacity*

- Raise awareness on the processes of polarisation and the fact polarisation can be influenced and addressed.
- Train key persons within the local community who engage with pushers, joiners and the middle ground in understanding the dynamics of polarisation and conflict.
- Build a polarisation network bringing together organisations in the region. Meet up and consider organising a table-top exercise to assess dynamics, as well as each organisation's role in managing polarisation.

*How to set up a monitoring and polarisation management system. What to look for and how to recognise the signs of polarisation.*

- The local police can be an excellent partner in setting up a monitoring system. Monitoring can be carried out using data from police and the municipality, or research on attitudes. In Rinkeby, Sweden, a traffic light system is used to indicate tension levels.
- Build your own monitoring system for social cohesion and tension.
  - Local/regional governments, or partners such as community workers, social workers and housing associations can – if needed (because of the likelihood of tension within the local community – carry out a survey assessing perceptions of safety, belonging and the greatest problems, as well as contact with other groups and perceptions and feelings with regard to these other groups.
  - Housing associations and community police can supply data on registered complaints and incidents.
  - Prepare reports on discrimination and hate crimes. These could be official complaints filed with the police, but sometimes an NGO or neutral partner is considered more approachable by marginalised groups wanting to report discrimination or hate speech.
  - Monitor social media and look for online manifestations of polarisation. This is often carried out by police, but can be done by municipalities too. Online matters, and municipalities should know what goes on, just as they do for the ‘off-line’;
- Ensure that monitoring is linked to national or international events that might impact local communities.
- The local/regional government can invite groups of citizens, parents and other organisations to design their own ‘societal barometer’, measuring developments in social cohesion and tensions. What do they think are signs of increasing or decreasing polarisation? This can create engagement and even ownership among individuals and groups in the middle ground.

*How to build a network of allies and key persons*

- The core of the network should comprise key persons from local/regional government. They maintain their own local networks, which they will bring to the larger network.
- Their trusted contacts form the circle around them. These can be informal and formal leaders from sub-communities within the local community, such as a local shop owner, a mother who knows a lot of other mothers or a youth worker. More formal leaders, such as a spokesperson for a community, can also be included.
- These informal leaders within the sub-communities can be a source of information, but equally, they can be partners in when ensuring the right approach to manage polarisation.

*How to be prepared for polarisation the day after an attack and how to build resilience*

- Organise. Have your procedures, lines of command, crisis management communication ready for when it is needed.

- Engage. 'Repair the roof in summertime', be prepared. The people and organisations that you engage with, based on their sense of responsibility for peaceful coexistence, throughout the year and in the monitoring, can also provide the most support after an incident.
- Serve. Make sure you have a network within the local/regional community that can reach all those who might need support, information and guidance. This includes e-mail lists for schools, youth workers, social workers, housing associations, faith groups and other groups and organisations. These channels can be used to serve those needing support with practical information that is updated overnight and provides teachers and others with practical tips on what to do and how to communicate.

### Community, identity and leadership

Polarisation is a battle fought with false, malice stories about the identities of us and them. It is not about what people have in common, but about things that make 'them' different, and a problem or even threat. Division.

#### *How to build the 'common', the middle ground for the communities*

For local government, there are three options for creating the conditions for a healthy middle ground, where individuals and both formal and informal groups can live

- Policy. Inclusive policy-making processes, diverse and inclusive policies and services, fostering active citizenship and citizen participation.
- Structure. Work with the whole of the community and sub communities. Do not work only with existing, official organisations and their chairpersons and spokespersons - they may operate from an identity perspective and have their own interests.
- Culture and identity. Build on civic pride and shared identity and citizenship. Do the people share a history, culture and identity? Shared identity or feelings of it are organic and should not be controlled or managed. But a local community and its government can start a programme or campaign to facilitate debate about shared identity. The nature of this kind of campaign/programme should be inviting, inspiring and inclusive.

#### *The mayor and leadership*

- Manage the mayor's bridge-builder role. He or she is often pictured as neutral and above all parties, supposedly a bridge-builder. Doing this based on facts and being normative in communication will not help bolster the middle ground. In his or her neutral position above all parties, and by addressing both the poles, mayors run the risk of being criticised by all parties. If they focus their actions on polarising pushers, they run the risk of stepping into their polarisation frame and fuelling polarisation. The neutral bridge-builder often ends up becoming the scape goat in polarised situations.
- The mayor should be acceptable for all concerned communities and groups. He or she could be seen as neutral, but would be more effective if regarded as the mayor of all citizens. This is about applying a mediator style in behaviour and communication, from a position in the middle ground, among the citizens.

### Difficult decisions and triggers for polarisation

Polarisation is a vicious process in which people play the identity card to divide groups in society. Often there is some trigger, like decisions about building a shelter for migrants, a policy about social housing being discussed or an incident like an attack. Pushers of polarisation will try to capitalise on these triggers. Whether it is a political decision to host asylum seekers or refugees, allowing a mosque to be built, or a decision on another sensitive topic, this decision can be used as ignition or fuel for polarisation. The way the policy making-process is designed, executed and communicated is key.

#### *How to mitigate the polarisation risk inherent in difficult dossiers and decisions*

- Be transparent about the decision-making process and the strains and limitations. Is the municipality obliged to establish the disputed facility and is how it will be built the only subject to be discussed?
- Make an assessment of the dynamics. Are concerns, anger and fears locally based or are forces from outside the local/regional community feeding the tensions?
- Be as inclusive as possible. Deal with angry and concerned citizens, even if they express their feelings in an aggressive or very direct way. If you ignore it, it will grow.

#### *How to avoid feeding polarisation with dialogue*

Lessons for holding public meetings and dialogues on local/regional events and topics:

- Beware of big public events in big halls that are open to everyone and do not put ‘important people’ behind a table. Pushers might use this stage to address the middle ground. It’s better to have lots of small tables, and welcome people personally as they arrive. If possible, engage with them in smaller settings.
- Know that the people attending meetings/debates are predominantly those already involved and unlikely to change their opinion easily. Try to get people who have not yet been involved in the debate/not heard to attend, especially if they are equally affected by the issue/event that caused or could lead to polarisation.
- Don’t ignore the online pushers, haters and other big mouths. For example, have the mayor, a community police officer or social worker address these persons during an unannounced home visit. This simply requires ringing the doorbell and asking for a conversation. People will be surprised, understand they cannot shout anonymously and they might feel listened to.

### Practices to learn from

#### *Learning from practices*

#### *Social unrest monitoring in Rinkeby, Sweden*

*The Rinkeby area was confronted with social unrest. To get a grip on what was going on, the municipality and the police built a monitoring system to provide information on a daily basis*

*about the state of social unrest. They use a traffic light metaphor: today is green, yellow or red. See the chapter on local governments for more info.*

***Learning from practices***  
***Community Seminars, Finland***

*In Finland, Community Seminars are organised at the local level. The seminars bring together different local actors from different public sectors (law enforcement, social services etc.), NGOs that specialise in working with vulnerable groups and have expertise in local prevention efforts, religious communities and community-based organisations. This opens a door to grassroots access to citizens and their trust. The seminars function as a trust-building and co-creation platform for local preventive practices and initiatives. After a seminar, the local authorities receive support from a local multi-agency team and action plan. The objective of this co-creation is to facilitate a transparent, inclusive and participatory process for all parties that also prevents stigmatisation and ‘targeting’, for example of Muslim communities. This is also important from the point of view of strategic communications, as polarisation around the topic of radicalisation, violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighter returnees reflect a narrow and misleading image of the nature of violent extremism as a phenomenon.*

## Police and polarisation management

### Why is polarisation relevant for the police?

Polarisation is of great consequence for the police, not only because it could lead to public disorder or hate crimes, but also because pushers of polarising messages often point to a ‘Them’ group in conjunction with threats, injustice, perceived double standards and safety risks. This brings the state and the police into the picture. Policing for all, police that serve and protect all, upholding the rule of law – and being seen to do so – are key. One could say that ‘delivering’ on tackling crime, protecting communities in a neutral, professional way, is the ‘hard contribution’ to polarisation management. The ‘soft contribution’ comes from community policing, working on a local and often personal level to communicate inclusion, showing empathy, and building relations and networks. These are the first lines of defence against polarisation. At the same time, police should understand that their actions and communication can be a crucial catalyst for polarisation. Unintentionally, the police can, through their actions, feed polarisation between groups in society, or between groups and the police or other authorities.

Whereas the police are normally reactive, responding to incidents, polarisation management is about prevention and being pro-active in the pre-criminal phase. Polarisation can be described as a societal process that manifests itself in hate crimes and other incidents. Police therefore need to understand the symptoms, and join the dots to understand when potential polarisation is taking place. Like Plato’s cave: it’s not about the shadows on the wall, but the things that create the shadows.



For the police, there are three clusters of relevant actions in relation to polarisation:

- preventing polarisation developing between groups in society;
- knowing how to act when polarisation and conflict occur after a serious trigger incident;
- acting on polarisation within the police force.

### What can police do to prevent the escalation of polarisation between groups in society?

#### *How to be prepared, and not be belatedly surprised about polarisation*

- See polarisation coming, for instance through local or national community tension monitoring. A network of local actors feeding a centralised point that makes assessments can contribute. What is on people’s minds? Pay attention to changes in attitudes and perceptions. Combine this with data, social media monitoring and assessments of developments locally, nationally and globally, that might impact the manifestation of polarisation locally.
- Take a holistic approach, encompassing the proactive gathering of community intelligence.
- Assess a situation in terms of conflict and polarisation. The two are intertwined, but the approach required for conflict is different to that needed for polarisation. Try to identify the pushers, joiners, individuals and groups in the middle ground.

- Work on the early detection of tensions and tension fields. Monitor tensions within or between groups; monitor friction between different identity groups. Community police should, in cooperation with municipalities and NGOs, detect and address bad vibes that are potential indicators of polarisation. These can be linked to hate crimes, or arguments between neighbours.
- Employ a multi-agency approach, with a clear command structure and process, to include partner agencies such as the local authority – be clear in terms of primacy (police for investigation, local authority for community cohesion) and convene regular meetings, informed by the latest community tension assessment, to agree and monitor actions.
- Organise a table-top exercise on escalating polarisation with the key stakeholders in the area to raise awareness and make them aware of how well prepared they are.
- Engage in dialogues at different levels, such as neighbourhood, city, region, country (National Security Council). Invest in listening: what is on people’s minds?
- Have a media strategy – transparency of procedures and a ‘neutral’ police position are key. A fast response time is required – social media strategy is important – dispel myths and shut down the space in which fake news can gain any traction.

#### *How to deal with the different actors and the dynamics of polarisation*

- Police should work hard on being perceived as trustworthy and neutral so that, as guardians of the playing field, they can claim a mandate awarded by both agencies and citizens. Besides being neutral, being engaging, helpful and offering protection are key. Being seen to have an active policy on being open, and being responsive to hate crimes, can help here.
- Police should build sustainable and long-term networks around specific tension fields and related issues. At the same time, they should build relations with specific groups and in specific boroughs/areas. Network from a multitude of perspectives.
- Search, detect and connect with specific stakeholders. Engage with the different roles in different ways:
  - Carefully manage potential bridge-builders in the police network by re-focusing efforts so that they do not become scapegoats and counter-productive.
  - Keep in mind that public dialogues held with pushers can be excellent support for pushers when badly timed and in the wrong setting.
  - Establish a ‘pusher management’ strategy for pushers and active and visible joiners with bad intentions (increasing tensions, fuelling polarisation, promoting violence etc.). Search both groups, and isolate individuals if possible. Side-line/marginalise/counterbalance them and don’t add credence to their voices.
  - Engage with stakeholders from the middle ground. That means targeting influential stakeholders in relation to specific issue(s) and/or concerns – citizens with plural loyalties who could contribute in a positive way. These are credible voices and police should try to establish alliances with them. Engage with informal leaders and individuals within specific communities. This can add crucial information in addition to reactions by official spokespersons.  
 Consider re-focusing messaging towards the middle ground – what are the issues and

concerns of the silent majority and how can these be exploited to change the subject or tone?

- An active and pro-active media strategy is required – social media is key here – it is important for dispelling myths and shutting down the space in which fake news can gain traction.
- Focus media releases on the positive actions taken by the police in terms of an investigation, as well as community impact, rather than challenging the poles.

### **How to respond to public disorder or crime provoked by polarisation**

Responses are similar to those used for restoring order, or carrying out a criminal investigation and crisis management. While conflict and crime may be involved, the approach taken will influence polarisation. It is essential to keep people safe, re-establish trust and uphold the rule of law.

### *What to do when polarisation boils over into a serious incident*

- Manage the crisis and protect – the immediate response should restore order, offer reassurance and prevent further offences.
- Establish a clear command structure and process to include partner agencies such as the local authority – be clear in terms of primacy (police for investigation, municipality for community cohesion) and convene regular meetings, informed by the latest community tension summary and updated risk assessment, to agree and monitor actions. This should be dealt with before a crisis occurs.
- Evidence capture – crime scene investigation, identification of key witnesses, collection of statements, identification of suspects, suspect management – the standard policing/investigative response must continue in order to maintain confidence in police and provide care to victim(s).
- Community tension monitoring – for risk assessment. Social media monitoring is key here to ensure an accurate picture of tensions so that the police do not simply engage with long-term community contacts who may have a vested interest in one side or the other. Take a holistic approach, including the proactive gathering of community intelligence.
- In times of crisis, the close monitoring of groups and individuals on the brink of radicalisation can be very informative.
- Identify the background to the event, including any specific trigger, to anticipate further triggers.
- Have a pro-active communication strategy. Include framework, tone and message, and be sharp on your own language and words in relation to incidents and problems (stereotyping, biases). Have your own story before the media creates it for you.
- In your approach and moreover your communication, beware of feeding polarisation, think about the four game changers.
- Communicate mediating messages praising good deeds by actors on both sides; show empathy. By doing this, you invest in the groups in the middle ground.
- Consider how best to use resources: is it best to exploit officers with heritage from the affected communities, or should this be avoided on the basis that it will fuel feelings that the police are partisan? Caution is needed here, and the response will need to be selected based on the circumstances of a particular case.

### **Polarisation within the police, among colleagues**

Police officers wear a uniform. But beneath the uniform is a human being, with sometimes strong emotions, fuelled by what officers experience during their daily work. Unfortunately it is not unknown for police officers to express their personal intolerant or polarising views. A uniformed police culture comes with lots of jokes, also about race and sexuality.

The first line of defence against polarisation, and in favour of police being an effective actor in managing polarisation in the local area, is a professional police organisation. Police must act – and be perceived as acting – neutral. They must serve and protect all.

#### ***Learning from practices***

#### ***What can a team leader do when confronted with polarisation within his or her team? (Netherlands)***

*Bart Brandsma's polarisation management method suggests team leaders to follow a three-step approach when polarisation arises within a team:*

- 1. Colleagues are invited to share their views. This is about exploring and not about discussion. There is no moral judgement. Participants should neither moralise nor judge, and should instead ask colleagues questions. Asking questions draws people strongly towards the middle, while expressing judgments pushes people out towards the poles.*
- 2. A fundamental and generic discussion on the professional role for the police should make clear: "this is not about personal opinions, not about left or right. We are neutral and have to treat all citizens equally and offer security and protection to everyone". Ask colleagues what behaviour will be needed to achieve the professional norm.*
- 3. After accepting the outcomes of step 2, colleagues are invited – in a final step – to transpose these shared and agreed norms and behaviours onto their own specific situation: what does it mean in their town or city? What is going on? How should different actors be approached?*

*In the Netherlands, the Brandsma way of understanding and managing polarisation has been translated into a training approach for the police.*

#### ***How to build a professional and healthy police culture, resilient against polarisation***

Although presented within the Polarisation Management Manual, a professional culture is actually a 'must' for any police organisation wanting to act as a professional organisation protecting and serving all. Polarisation is one more reason to pay attention to:

- Leadership, which is crucial in setting professional standards, core values and integrity within the police organisation. Train the managers in polarisation.
- Dealing with stereotypes and prejudices in a training environment.
- Addressing the first signs of polarising behaviour. Have a private talk – avoiding giving public air time to pushers' positions and messages. Go on patrol with the officer and set the boundaries;
- Craftsmanship. Training on the job and dialogue within teams. How should moral dilemmas be addressed? What are the best ways to cope with frictions between an individual's identity

and the tasks of a neutral police officer? This is far from easy; sometimes it is very complicated. These issues require dialogue.

### *Learning from practices*

#### *Police management of polarisation, the Netherlands*

*In the summer of 2015, with the refugee crisis at its peak, intolerance, prejudices and hate speech were widespread in social media. A lot of the language used could be perceived as insulting, or at least feeding intolerance and polarisation. In several instances, the identity of these loud voices could be determined, and community police officers paid these individuals a home visit - not to launch an investigation or other legal actions, but just to make sure individuals understood that it was not okay to hide behind a keyboard and intimidate and insult others. Online matters. The same approach has been used by mayors in certain cities. The mayor of Gouda, for instance, knocked at the door of around 10 angry and concerned citizens and had a good conversation with them. This cooled things down.*

### *Learning from practices*

#### *National Community Tension Team (NCCT, the UK)*

*In the UK, the NCTT is a national police function that uses data provided by individual police forces on a weekly basis to monitor, assess and inform an appropriate response to changes in community tensions. Community tensions are assessed locally by looking at information from four sources: 1) force intelligence 2) community engagement 3) open source (news media, blogs, academic papers etc.) 4) social media (instant response)*

*The assessment leads to a national document which is sent to all police forces and relevant government departments. The reports offer a threefold EEP assessment:*

- Experienced: how do communities feel?*
- Evidenced: what has happened or is happening?*
- Potential: what might happen or has the potential to happen?*

*In each area, a Single Point of Contact is appointed to develop the local community tension summaries, to ensure this activity is prioritised, and to encourage police and partners to feed relevant information into the process.*

## Education and polarisation management

### Why is polarisation relevant for education?

Schools are regularly confronted with polarisation. While teachers are facing polarised situations in their classrooms, or seeing their students separate into groups in the playground, school principals are having to deal with polarisation in the staffroom and the broader school community. But when does a situation become too polarised? Is it a problem if students stand in separate groups in the playground? Are playing and even provoking with regard to identity and subculture not part of development on the path to adulthood? And don't we want to empower youngsters to use their voices – even if they share extreme ideas – to have open conversations about topics that interest them? Where should we draw the line? When does the school principal become too much a mayor or police officer, instead of 'just' a school leader?

This chapter describes polarisation at classroom, school and environmental levels, and offers guidelines on how to deal with polarisation at each.

### How to prevent polarisation at classroom level

Teachers need to be prepared to deal with polarisation. They are the ones meeting their students every day and are the first to be challenged by polarising statements from students. Moreover, they are the first with an opportunity to prevent a small incident from becoming a larger problem.

Teachers are however also challenged by polarisation that might go unnoticed by some, since it happens in silence. As described in the 'RAN EDU Guide on training programmes', teachers need certain fundamental skills to ensure they are both empowered and resilient. These include: being aware of your own vision, values, strengths and limits, having interactive skills, and being able to discuss real-world problems in the classroom.

As described in Teaching controversial issues<sup>16</sup>, teachers can take on different roles in the classroom such as a neutral chairperson, the devil's advocate or an ally. In light of growing polarisation, it is especially important for a teacher to pick the right role and create a good environment for dialogue so that all students feel safe and comfortable. Teachers should listen to all students and let them share their emotions.

#### *How can teachers create the right environment to prevent or deal with polarisation?*

- Create and build upon shared values within the classroom. Students do not need to all have the same values, but it helps if there are some values in common e.g. equality. These values also reflect the mini-society that the classroom is.
- Set clear rules. If someone talks, the others should listen and vice versa. This requires facilitating skills from the teacher.
- Show empathy as a teacher, instead of continuously trying to 'win' students for your arguments. Try to figure out why students say what they say, what is behind their statement.

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<sup>16</sup> Link to Teaching controversial issues:

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806948b6>

- Be sensitive to conflicts and be prepared to address them. Provide a safe space for this. A talk on sensitive issues takes time, so do not try to squeeze it into five minutes. It might be wise to organise regular debates in your classroom.
- Make someone in each class responsible for polarisation issues. This student should represent the class and talk with the teacher if problems arise so that they can come up with solutions together.
- Actively apply school rules and common values in your lessons, especially in difficult situations.
- Use the Bart Brandsma model to discuss polarisation in your classroom. A moderated version might be needed, especially for younger students. This model will give you and the students the language needed to discuss polarisation and also spot it when it takes place.
- As a teacher you should teach a subject, and this is the main focus of your lessons. But you should never forget the relationship you have with your students, and that sometimes a 'time-out' is needed.
- The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change has provided some interesting tips on dialogue: [http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Essentials-of-Dialogue\\_0.pdf](http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Essentials-of-Dialogue_0.pdf)

#### *How to recognise polarisation as a teacher*

- If students do not listen to each other or do not want to sit next to each other physically, it might be good to have an open talk as polarisation may be at play.

#### **How to prevent polarisation at school level**

In addition to polarisation taking place in the classroom, it can also occur at school level, or even amongst school staff members or in the staffroom. In order to prevent polarisation, it is important that investments are made in the middle ground, and that inclusion and not exclusion is promoted. School staff should also work closely together as a team, following the same rules and school ethos.

#### *How to prevent polarisation at school level*

- As a school principal, you should invest in the middle ground. Invest in the school culture and ethos, for example by training the staff on these. School values should be clear to all school staff and students.
- As a school principal, you should be clear to all about the school rules.
- Be alert! Take a look at the staffroom: do teachers always sit separately in certain groups? It might be a good idea to discuss this observation with them. You could also bring in a neutral observer.
- Use case studies to discuss different levels of polarisation with your team.
- Teach all students conflict resolution skills as well as democratic values.
- Make sure you work regularly on team-building, for example by introducing team-building activities. This will ensure strong connections within the team and help the setting of common goals.

### How best to work with parents to prevent polarisation

- Make sure that parents understand the values and ethos of the school of which their child is part. As school principal, you can discuss them with parents when their child registers. You can also seek opportunities, like parents' evenings, to reinforce (awareness of) those values.
- Parents are an essential group in the middle ground. Schools can engage with them on the interest they share in ensuring the school provides a safe and inspiring community in which their children can learn: "How can we, school and parents, contribute to this together?"
- Parents who play a *pusher's role*, should be managed by applying game changers. The first is: don't give them a platform to play their polarisation game. Engage with them in a closed, private and less public setting, not offering them a public polarisation platform.

### How to prevent polarisation at schools while remaining part of a local community

Even though a school is a community in itself, it is not an island. Schools have a connection with their partners, environment and broader society. There is even a pedagogical benefit to extending school activities beyond the school gates – it ensures they are relevant to the real world, where the students' homes and neighbours are.

When dealing with problematic polarisation, schools might also need to cope and deal with their environment, especially if it is polarised and therefore affecting the school (climate). To be prepared, for polarisation both inside and outside of the school gates, schools need to proactively build a relationship of trust with their partners. This should preferably take place during peace time, before polarisation emerges.

Be prepared for unexpected rough times. Schools might have to identify the 'right' partners and to motivate them to invest in the relationship. It may also be challenging to find the right tone in communication with parents, partners and, in a broader sense, with the community. Even though schools face these challenges and cannot change society on the one hand, they can on the other hand change how they deal with society and raise awareness of how to deal with polarisation.

### How best to work in a multi-agency setting

- 'Repair the roof in summertime': be prepared!
- Build on existing contacts and multi-agency networks and reach out for instance to housing agencies, sports clubs, youth workers, the municipality and police. Present the school as a partner who is best positioned to engage with young people and their parents.
- Run a short scenario workshop with a fictitious but not unlikely scenario. Find out if people are able to reach out to other relevant actors in the area.
- Set up a multi-agency working group with a range of disciplines like local authorities, family groups and police. This will help people to see things from different perspectives. In addition to a common purpose, this group needs to develop common terminology. Using the right words and changing tone are especially important when cooling down is needed.
- Motivate different partners to join the working group.
- Search for and select the right persons and representatives, for example those practitioners who are already part of RAN.
- Focus on finding 'convincers' and 'connectors'.

- Create connections by having an informal discussion on shared topics of interest.
- Show that the working group is connected to reality and create a sense of urgency.
- Please note: not everyone needs to be involved, keep the group as small as possible.

#### *How to use social media*

- Use social media as a way of communicating with the outside world, and be sure to see the non-polarised middle ground as a target audience. A Twitter account could provide alternative narratives on events that affect the school. A Facebook account could be used as a platform to communicate the school's values, and to build an online community.

#### *How to cooperate with other schools*

- Set up twinning projects between schools in the same area; this could involve joint school projects and exchanges between pupils. These projects provide schools with an opportunity to contribute to social cohesion and mitigate the segregation that is manifest in many parts of the school. Such initiatives may also enhance students' appreciation of cultural and social diversity.

#### *Learning from practices*

##### *Dealing with polarisation at school and class level, Belgium*

*The Royal Athenaeum of Antwerp has faced various peaks of polarisation, which have had an impact on the atmosphere within the school. To address this, the focus was changed to the middle (ground). The school has, among other initiatives, created a basic set of common values, uses intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, and focuses on active citizenship.*

*Following the failed coup attempt in Turkey, polarisation increased in a new form: those supporting Gülen versus those supporting Erdogan. The school therefore decided to invest in depolarisation training for all teachers, and introduced a new focus on history, including a special school day on the history of the Turkish empire. A group of 10 teachers/key figures attended a more in-depth training programme of two days, based on the Bart Brandsma model. At classroom level, the importance of understanding the model was emphasised to all teachers, as was the need to address polarisation without fear. There is no need for a lot of specific knowledge to address issues like this; simply applying the model and the right communication skills will help teachers.*

#### *Learning from practices*

##### *Dealing with polarisation by teaching controversial issues, a practical guide*

*To prevent polarisation, teachers need to be able to handle controversial issues in the classroom. The guide on [‘Teaching controversial issues’](#) provides practical tools and knowledge for teachers. For example, it offers guidance for teachers on how to introduce controversial issues in the classroom, on*

*teaching methods for controversial issues, and on how to reflect on and evaluate discussions. The guide also shows how investing in basic, fundamental skills can create professional effectiveness and empowered teachers.*

### ***Learning from practices***

#### ***Dealing with polarisation by cooperating with the police, Sweden***

*The Rinkeby school is located in one of the poorest parts of Stockholm city, in a neighbourhood that is home to people of diverse cultural backgrounds. The area has suffered many challenges, and is known for social unrest. The school, the police and the municipality closely cooperate to address these challenges. They communicate daily on the level of tensions in the neighbourhood by using a traffic light system: is the situation green – yellow – red?*

## Youth, Families & Communication and polarisation management

### **Why is polarisation relevant for communities, young people, and those working with them?**

The 'Us and Them' of polarisation is increasing segregation, intolerance, hostility and ultimately even hate crime and extremism *between groups in society*, between communities. The middle ground, containing those not influenced by polarisation is a collection of communities, which partly overlap. These are people with multi-faceted identities and loyalties.

Communities are a potential target group or even potential victims of polarisation, but can equally be agents of change with the power of resistance and resilience. Communities, groups of young people and practitioners may have an opportunity to empower and support communities and youth.

We focus on four different groups, each with challenges and opportunities:

1. Communities and faith groups;
2. Mothers, fathers and other potential middle-ground 'pillars';
3. Youth
4. Professionals working with communities and youth.

### **The role of communities and faith groups**

Although governments and public authorities must do their utmost to prevent polarisation, extremism and radicalisation, these issues cannot be tackled effectively without community involvement. Extremism and polarisation thrive more readily when communities themselves do not challenge those who seek to radicalise others. In some communities, there is a profound lack of trust and confidence in the government, police and public authorities. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to build the cooperation and partnerships needed for a successful approach. Investing in community engagement and community empowerment is a key factor in preventive approaches to polarisation and radicalisation. The crucial question is how to achieve this effectively.

There are several challenges to overcome to achieve effective community engagement and build community resilience<sup>17</sup>: communities may lack a safe space for establishing dialogue; can experience fear of stigmatisation or police and media involvement; may not feel recognised by their local authorities; do not have access to credible information and distrust authorities. It is also important to realise that communities are diverse and community boundaries are fluid.

These challenges can however be overcome. Community voices and talents should be harnessed to build resilience to polarisation within- and between communities by means of action groups, community organisations and community dialogue projects. It is therefore important to educate communities

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<sup>17</sup>EX POST paper RAN YF&C 'Strengthening community resilience to polarisation and radicalisation' London, 29-30 June 2017

continuously and strengthen their defences against polarising and extremist narratives. It is also essential to empower community leaders to vocalise the concerns of the middle ground. Communities and community leaders will be more open for dialogue in later phases of polarisation if a relationship has already been established. Building a trustworthy relationship requires time and effort.

#### *How to build resilient organisations, fostering the middle ground*

- Listening is very important in building engagement and trust within and between communities. Long-term relations are key. Relations which have been established in the long run and not just because of an incident are much more effective.
- Identify and invest in relationships with the true community leaders. The usual suspects such as church-leaders or imams may not always be the figures with whom the community identifies.
- Engage with the formal and more informal organisations and sub-communities. Recognise the diversity within communities and identify their core values.
- Engage with organisations with empathy and a mediating attitude. Focus on the things they care about instead of divisive topics.
- If you cannot reach a certain community, shift position or topic. For instance: although a migrant community might not identify with the state, they might identify with the neighbourhood. The same people belong to different communities, use this to your advantage.

#### *Learning from practices*

##### *Transformative Dialogue Circles, Ireland*

*Through facilitated [dialogue circles](#), people from different backgrounds (such as former members of paramilitary organisations or young people at risk of involvement in political violence) are given a space to tell their stories. They come in with no trust in each other but are encouraged through the initiative, and through the safety of the space, to place trust in the process.*

*The dialogue process encourages them to critically reflect on their own personal and community journeys through a deep listening experience. What are the reasons for their engagements and what has the impact been on their lives and others who have been affected?*

#### *Learning from practices*

##### *Community dialogues, Finland*

*Finchurcaid organises community dialogues to enhance cooperation between cities, authorities and communities on PVE, integration and support to families. Through a participatory process, police, social and youth services, the education and health sectors, religious communities and NGOs, are invited in order to prevent stigmatisation and avoid the ‘targeting’ of certain groups.*

#### **The role of mothers, fathers and other potential middle-ground ‘pillars’**

Parents care about the environment in which their children live. Although people might disagree on many topics, they share the wish for a safe and peaceful environment for themselves and their children. The

same applies to shop owners, sports clubs and others who want a safe and peaceful environment. By changing the audience, positioning yourself in the middle-ground and addressing parents and other members of the neighbourhood on those interests, the polarisation game can be surpassed.

#### *How to engage with mothers and fathers*

- Address them as inhabitants and parents who live in the area and who want the best for their children.
- When polarisation on identity is pushed, these common interests, such as managing a family, can be addressed (this is the 'change topic' game-changer).
- Make parents aware of their strengths and capabilities, the positive influence they (can) have within their own family and the wider community and how they can best use this potential. This is decisive in building self-esteem and empowering parents to take action.
- Support parents in their own actions and try not to steer and direct their initiatives. Be sensitive and show a mediating attitude and behaviour.
- Keep it small and don't be afraid of working with ethnic or otherwise homogenic groups, as long as doing so also helps engagement with groups in the middle ground. Living peacefully next to each other is enough.

#### *Learning from practices*

##### *Mothers School, Austria*

*[The MotherSchools Model](#) is a pioneering family-centred prevention programme intended to counter the rising threat of radicalisation among young people. The Model brings together concerned and affected mothers to strengthen their individual capacities and emotional literacy to respond to and deal with their children's exposure to extremist influences. Mothers' emotional connection to their children makes them well placed to reclaim the recruiters' key tools — they invest time, listen, gain trust, empathise, and provide an emotional anchor. Mothers need structural and emotional support to reconnect with their children during the challenges of adolescence.*

#### **Youth engagement**

Youngsters are especially vulnerable to polarisation, as polarisation is a thought construct based on identity. Growing up means experimenting with identities, and developing sub-cultures and counter-cultures. Being provocative, testing boundaries and being obstinate is normal and even necessary for adolescents. Creating safe-spaces in which youngsters can test their opinions, have open discussions and learn about other sub-cultures is therefore of great importance. In combination with educational programmes, safe spaces will provide young people with the greatest boost to their ability to think critically, which is ultimately the best defence against polarisation and extremism.

### How to engage with youth

- One of the oldest tricks in the book for youth workers is creating opportunities for sub-cultures to meet members of other sub-cultures. This will only be useful in the prevention phase of polarisation.
- Recognise the importance of effective youth empowerment engagement: youngsters should be challenged to develop their own voice, find out what they want and express their views, opinions and interests.
- People working with youngsters should understand their daily reality; They should have deep knowledge of the adolescent world in general, including online networks, and specifically their actual needs and interests.
- Be careful who you involve. Is it really those youngsters who are vulnerable? Is it the silent middle? Is it those who are anyway motivated and engaged?
- An acceptance-based approach is key. Persons should be accepted as they are. Their sayings and doings might be challenged, but not the person as such.

### How to deal with polarisation and pushers in a group of youngsters

- The effectiveness of youth involvement approaches is built upon the quality of the human resources available. Whether these are professional youth workers, volunteers, peer coaches or other figures, they should be able to connect with young people, understand their grievances and needs, and be able to encourage change (however small) if it seems that a young person is going down a destructive path. Authenticity and intrinsic motivation, plus training and coaching on the job, help to ensure this.
- Start working with young people early.
- When dealing with youngsters in a polarising setting, apply the four game changers:
  1. Position
  2. Topic
  3. Audience
  4. Tone of voice

### Professionals working with communities and youths

Social workers tasked with supporting and empowering groups of citizens in community-building can be very valuable. In Europe, youth work can be carried out on a professional or voluntary basis. Professional standards and the availability of resources vary significantly – both qualitatively and quantitatively – depending on the Member State. For social workers interacting with citizens, the concepts of *democratic professionalism*, as laid out by Albert Dzur<sup>(18)</sup>, can be of help. He defines how social workers can be expected to: stand up for the weak and powerless, foster inclusion and promote pluralism (interests and opinions).

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<sup>18</sup> Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008.

### *How to support communities and youngsters*

- To be effective, practitioners need to be aware of the polarisation and dynamics that drive polarisation.
- Practitioners should be able to apply mediating speech and attitudes to engage with groups in the middle ground.
- Practitioners should be trained to use the four game changers to manage any polarisation with which they are confronted.
- Practitioners should understand that their position, personal background and life experiences might create a bias that can affect their actions and attitude in polarising settings.
- Youth and community workers must be aware of the local policy and communication strategy regarding citizenship, culture and, in particular, polarising issues.
- Youth and social workers are not to be used as a megaphone for disseminating a local policy. Their role is to empower their groups to express their interests and opinions in ways that create the conditions necessary to deal with any issues, while remaining in the middle ground.
- Be aware of the language barrier. Youngsters are receptive to a different type of communication to that which is effective with adults.
- Choose topics carefully. Sometimes it is better not to address the 'bad topic' directly.
- Don't underestimate, but also don't overestimate the role of online networks and communications. Be aware of communication bubbles.
- Always check if there are others who are not actively involved but who nonetheless have an influence on both the youngster and the debate.

### *Learning from practices*

#### *Stay Human, the Netherlands*

[Stay Human](#) aims to reinforce social cohesion and counter polarisation related to the arrival, housing and integration of migrants and refugees. Stayhuman carries out research to improve understanding of different views, dilemmas and solutions regarding migrant and refugee issues, and seeks to amplify mutual understanding and connection between different communities and groups. The organisation also trains professionals and organisations so that they understand better the dynamics of polarisation, using the model of Bart Brandsma, and know how to act accordingly. Stayhuman created five personas (stereotypes) to help policy makers understand how certain dilemmas and policies are perceived by different groups.

## Prison and probation and polarisation management

### Why is polarisation relevant for prison and probation?

Prison and probation are important parts of the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system must handle limitations to individual freedom with fairness and proportionality to retain legitimacy. Both the individual prisoner, client, their family and community should experience respect, fairness, objectivity and equality in their interaction with these institutions and their representatives.

Imprisonment implies loosening or even the cutting of regular contact with the social network individuals had previously. Prisoners will look for new contacts, be they temporary (to pass time during the sentence) or longer term. This need for belonging causes group dynamics, either in favour of positive (friendships, mutual support, joint participation in activities) or negative bonding (illegal activities, status, scapegoating). The state of the prison society is of significance in how groups relate to each other. If prisoners feel safe and respected, competition between groups will be less, as will the need to bond as a survival mechanism.

Traditional group dynamics can overlap with the societal, out-of-prison developments, that can either spur on or slow down processes. The idea of being part of an out-group in society can legitimise/confirm the existence of current structures or highlight the need for new groups. Confrontations might follow. For example, some prisons saw fairly intense debates between prisoners after recent attacks in Europe and abroad. Groups also can use societal tension or sense of being excluded as an explanation for their criminal acts.

A prison is, from a prisoner's perspective, often not safe. They do not trust staff and certainly not each other. Trust, or at least trust with predictable limitations between staff and prisoners, is important. Prison management and more specifically staff are key when it comes to ensuring a prison society works and guarantees a safe environment. This involves more than just monitoring behaviour and patterns among prisoners (group). Prison staff decide what should happen in their facility, they are regarded as a group to oppose. This animosity will increase if it is perceived by one group that their members are being treated worse than others.

Staff should not however be considered a homogeneous group. Strong conflicting political opinions could play a role when it comes to mutual trust, which is a prerequisite for prison staff to fulfil their tasks.

Whereas in prison the group process in a closed environment is important when dealing with questions of polarisation, it is the atmosphere in society at large that is important for probation work. Re-socialising and finding a route back into society is more difficult when common ground in terms of values is lacking. Vulnerable people looking for clear guidelines may also be attracted to the firm stands that polarisation encompasses.

When polarisation is at play in society, it can be harmful for those re-socialising after their release. The (perceived) level of tolerance and permissive behaviour towards former prisoners will be lower, especially if someone has a clear radicalised/extremist profile or is feeling that he or she is part of a group that is not accepted by others. The key question here is: do I really have any chance of starting a new life? This is a concern both for prison and probation work.

Three clusters of actions can be used to deal with polarisation in prison and probation settings:

- prevention of polarisation developing between groups in prison society;
- staff awareness;
- work on the level of non-acceptance within society in relation to including vulnerable groups of former prisoners.

### ***How to prevent polarisation between groups in a prison environment***

The prison environment comprises the physical environment, values, relationships, procedures and policies that constitute the day-to-day functioning of a prison. These factors shape the prison experience and can provide opportunities to reduce both the risk of radicalisation and polarised thoughts during imprisonment, as well as the risk of reoffending after release. Overcrowding, a lack of staff or poor relationships between staff and prisoners increase feelings of uncertainty and a lack of security, and therefore create an environment that increases vulnerability.

#### ***What can prison staff do?***

- Work on and maintain a safe environment. This non-specific business-as-usual approach is a prerequisite for all other actions on polarisation.
- Pay attention to group processes within the system. Which groups have strong identities? Among which groups can tensions be felt. To what extent are groups also a potential threat to prison staff?

### **Staff awareness on polarisation**

Polarisation does require awareness of the phenomenon and how it can 'colour' the appreciation/understanding of behaviour and measures. In the end it is not how something is intended but the way it is perceived that raises or underlines processes of polarisation. One challenge is that a lot of prison and probation systems throughout the EU do have a staff that is quite different from the people they are working for when it comes to culture, background and so on. Not seldom staff is rather monocultural. Potential consequences of this are lack of implicit mechanism that makes the system aware on how measures can be perceived and group think towards the others.

#### ***What can prison and probation staff do?***

- Create an atmosphere in which staff can discuss non-appropriate behaviour towards each other, the prisoners or probation clients.
- Be aware of your own opinions and how they can be influenced by strong opinions. Note that sometimes your own thoughts might not be in line with your professional role.
- Keep remarks within the boundaries of what other prisoners and civil society expect from you due to your function.
- Note that during periods of low bonding/acceptation, remarks that are intended to be

funny can be perceived offensive.

- Learn to distinguish between normal, polarised and extremist behaviour.
- Talk with each other if signs of polarisation are visible among prison or probation staff.
- Report immediately any inappropriate behaviour of colleagues that might pose a safety hazard.
- Be strict on all kinds of discriminating comments from staff.
- Provide training on both radicalisation and polarisation, including points related to what is common in (sub)cultures and ideologies.
- Look for diversity in staff so as to enable more insight into prisoners' and probation clients' diverse cultures, religions, and backgrounds.

### ***How to work on societal non-acceptance of vulnerable groups released from prison***

Negative feelings about the re-socialisation of individuals with an extremist past are not uncommon among the general public. This is due in part to a legitimate that relapse/reoffence may occur, and for some because of post-traumatic disorders linked to extremist acts. But there are also those with polarised prejudices, who do not believe that people can change. Finally, some people may feel ill at ease with a former terrorist as neighbour or employee.

### ***What can the prison and probation system do?***

- Start working towards re-socialisation as early as possible, involving prison and probation from the very beginning of the prison sentence (if it is a prison sentence).
- Involve families and positive friends in the re-socialisation process as they are often the rocks that individuals can fall back on during their time in prison and after release.
- Use good risk assessment tools and be clear on risk acceptance to ensure you can respond to criticism in the aftermath of an incident. This will also show you are not acting irresponsibly.
- Follow vulnerable probation clients closely.
- Have good contacts with relevant partners to guarantee safety for society as well as the individual involved.
- Create specialised teams and interventions for working on re-socialisation for this difficult target group. Multi-agency work, skills and experiences, as well as information-sharing are important. Don't start from scratch but learn from interventions and structures for similar vulnerable groups.
- Safeguard clients and their environment in cooperation with municipalities, social services, NGOs and other relevant organisations.