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## Countering extremism(s): Differences in local prevention of left-wing, right-wing and Islamist extremism

Jan Jämte<sup>a1</sup>, Rune Ellefsen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden, <sup>b</sup>Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department for Criminology and Sociology of Law, Oslo University, Norway

### Abstract

Policies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism (PRVE) frequently target a number of social movements seen as threats to national security. Often, this includes militant Islamist, right-wing and left-wing extremist milieus. In this article, we ask what distinguishes the ways in which local practitioners perceive and respond to these three milieus. Based on in-depth interviews with public servants in Sweden, we show how the milieus are seen to represent different types of threats, hold core values that resonate differently with dominant values in mainstream society and require responses that challenge public servants in diverging ways. Building on our analysis, we introduce a multidimensional model that clarifies why practitioners relate differently to each milieu. By including the rarely examined left-wing milieu, we are able to showcase the complexity of local PRVE work. Our study sheds new light on the challenges experienced by practitioners who are tasked to implement PRVE policy and demonstrates the problems of approaching “violent extremism” as a uniform phenomenon.

### Article History

Received Aug 21, 2020

Accepted Sept 21, 2020

Published Sept 25, 2020

**Keywords:** Countering Violent Extremism, Deradicalization, Policy Implementation, Local Prevention, Islamist Extremism, Right-Wing Extremism, Left-Wing Extremism

### Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005), as well as similar critical events, a plethora of measures have been introduced in many Western democracies to *prevent radicalization and violent extremism* (PRVE). This has led to the emergence of a new field of policy and practices, which we refer to as the PRVE arena (Ellefsen & Jämte, forthcoming; Lindekilde, 2012a). Even if there are dissimilarities among

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author Contact: Jan Jämte, Email: [Jan.Jamte@oru.se](mailto:Jan.Jamte@oru.se), School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden

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countries, the PRVE arena shares three interlocking characteristics: 1) a *pre-emptive logic* oriented towards forestalling extremist acts by identifying risk indicators and signs of radicalization in individuals or groups, 2) an *outsourcing of state-based social control* in that PRVE measures involve a wide range of actors in cross-sectoral collaboration, from the police and security services to civil society actors, schools, social services and public health institutions and 3) a *pluralization of social control*, evident in the expansion of the available repertoires used for PRVE, ranging from hard forms of repression, such as coercive control and incapacitation through imprisonment, to soft responses from actors outside the criminal justice system.

While initially developed to counteract international Islamist terrorism, contemporary PRVE measures have gradually come to impact a wide range of activists and social movements (Joyce, 2016). This is particularly evident for activist groups that are depicted as extremists and those that employ illegal or violent forms of action. The targeted milieus differ among countries but usually include militant Islamist extremism (MIE) and right-wing extremism (RWE), and in many cases left-wing extremism (LWE), as well as milieus and single-issue movements related to separatism, animal rights or environmentalism. In the PRVE policies of Western democracies, these milieus are often bundled together and referred to as “violent extremists.” Several national policy documents from European countries show that the concept of violent extremism is often used by policymakers to emphasize commonalities and downplay differences among the targeted milieus. The alleged commonalities often include aspects such as the activists’ opposition to democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty; the use of violence and illegal actions to further their goals; a “black-and-white” and intolerant worldview; an “avant-guardian” self-image and an antagonistic stance towards the police, media and representatives of institutionalized politics (Danish Government, 2014; HM Government, 2011; Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2014; Ministry of the Interior, 2012; SOU, 2013:81; UN, 2015; Zeitbild Stiftung, 2012).

The tendency to generalize about different milieus and bundle them as violent extremists has attracted scholarly criticism (Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly, & Jarvis, 2015).

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Researchers have argued that the targeted milieus and groups are essentially different in regard to their internal dynamics, ideologies and practices. Research has also shown that commonly used indicators of radicalization are inadequate and misleading (Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling & Hoggan, 2017). According to critics, the measures needed to detect, prevent and counter different forms of extremism vary across milieus and socio-political contexts; there are no “one size fits all” or “off-the-shelf” methods in PRVE (Andersson Malmros & Mattsson, 2017; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Lööw, Poohl, & Mattsson, 2013; Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019).

Research and critical debate have, however, primarily attended to the global and national policy levels and the discourses surrounding radicalization and violent extremism (Andersson Malmros, 2019; Hardy, 2018; Schmid, 2013). The ways in which PRVE policy and concepts translate into local practice among frontline practitioners tasked with preventing extremism still remain an “ambitious, yet fundamentally important, empirical task for research in this field” (Andersson Malmros, 2019, p. 65; see also Johansson & Arvidsson, 2016; Vermuelen, 2014). In this article, we present the results of a case study of how public servants in Sweden experience different types of extremism. In contrast to the uniform understanding of violent extremism often conveyed in policy documents, we seek to answer two questions: 1) What distinguishes the ways in which public servants perceive and respond to right-wing, left-wing and Islamist extremist milieus? 2) How can these differences be conceptualized, in order to clarify why practitioners relate differently to each milieu?

Our findings shed new light on the complexity of the local implementation of PRVE policy. We show how the three milieus are seen to differ in crucial respects: they represent different types of threats, hold core values that resonate differently with dominant values in mainstream society and require responses that challenge public servants in diverging ways. The results clearly illustrate how the enactment of PRVE policies depends on how they are interpreted, adapted and implemented by practitioners, and that a simplistic presentation in policy of the problem (i.e., radicalization and violent extremism) is unhelpful and misleading for practitioners tasked with local implementation.

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This article proceeds with a brief review of the literature on PRVE policies and their implementation, followed by a presentation of the Swedish case. Thereafter we describe our data, methods and analytical approach. We then present our analysis, structured around differences in how local public servants perceive and respond to the three extremist milieus singled out in Swedish PRVE policy. In conclusion, we present a multidimensional model in order to clarify why practitioners relate differently to each milieu.

### **PRVE: From National Policy to the Frontlines**

How we are to understand the root causes of radicalization and manifestations of violent extremism has been an issue of intense debate and divergent understandings within the scholarly literature on PRVE and counter-terrorism in the last fifteen years (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010). Scholars have failed to provide generalizable explanatory models and uniform answers to the question of why and how some individuals radicalize, enter and remain in (or leave) extremist milieus (Hardy, 2018), leading some to question the utility of radicalization research and PRVE policy altogether (Patel & German, 2015). This ambiguity is largely due to the fact that local variations and conditions have been shown to be decisive for the specific pathways through which people radicalize, which decreases the transferability of explanations across individuals, groups and localities (Christmann, 2012; Schmid, 2013).

Scholarly disagreement also exists on the meaning of the concepts of “violent extremism” and “radicalization,” partly because the breadth of the academic literature drawing on these terms but also because there are fundamental disagreements about their definition (Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018; Sedgwick, 2010). Research has also provided little insight into the actual outcomes of PRVE measures, and there is a lack of scientific knowledge and evaluation about their intended and unintended consequences (Baker-Beall et al., 2015; Hardy, 2019; Pistone et al., 2019; Ellefsen,

forthcoming b). As Gielen (2019) argues, the scholarly community is not in a position to answer the question of “what works” in PRVE.

Despite the fundamental ambiguities in this field of research, the ways in which radicalization and violent extremism are depicted in governmental policy documents are largely uniform (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010). In policy documents, radicalization is frequently portrayed as a linear process through which individuals follow a “pathway” or climb a “staircase,” transforming from “ordinary” citizens to cognitively radicalized individuals, increasingly interacting with other extremists and thereby becoming further radicalized into a state where the individual might undertake a violent act (Lindekilde, 2012a, p. 337, 2016). Research has, however, shown that the relationship between extreme and radical attitudes and behavior is far from linear and that cognitive change does not necessarily lead to behavioral change (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009). The reason why the radicalization discourse is still at the heart of PRVE policies is, according to Heath-Kelly (2017), that the idea of radicalization enables policymakers to render a linear narrative around the production of terrorism and thereby make terrorism amenable to problem-solving approaches and governance.

According to this policy logic, the prevention of political violence is most effectively done by detecting, disrupting and reversing, or countering radicalization processes. How to detect individuals at risk of radicalization has, however, proved to be cumbersome (e.g., Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling & Hoggan, 2017). Policy documents often list a wide range of multi-causal and convergent risk factors and indicators of radicalization. This includes push and pull factors that either push individuals towards extremism (e.g., perceptions of injustice, fascination with violence, identity crisis) or pull them into extremism (e.g., sense of belonging, power and control, heroism). Another commonality is the emphasis on different risk and protective factors that either make individuals more resistant (e.g., supporting family, occupation, good health) or more vulnerable (e.g., poverty, social problems, sense of exclusion) to radicalization. Policy documents also frequently list signs and warning signals (e.g., intolerant or anti-democratic attitudes, violent behavior, subcultural

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attributes or symbols) that can be used by frontline practitioners and others as possible indicators of radicalization (RAN, 2016; UN, 2015; see also Altier, Thoroughgood, Horgan, 2014; Andersson Malmros, 2019; Horgan, 2009; Windisch et al., 2016). The wide range of indicators and risk factors are frequently described in general terms and as being similar across extremist groups.

### *The transformation of national policy into local practice*

The discrepancy between the complexity identified in a vast amount of research and the tendency to simplify and generalize on the policy level creates challenges for public servants tasked with preventing radicalization and extremism in local communities. Many practitioners feel ill-equipped or uncertain about how to interpret and carry out their PRVE work (Ponsota, Autixierb, & Madriazac, 2018, p. 25), and the lack of tested practices in the field of radicalization prevention leaves them with very few best practices to draw upon (Ponsota et al., 2018, p. 24; see also Gielen, 2019; Hardy, 2019; Vidino & Brandon, 2012).

Even though the local level is often portrayed as the “backbone” of PRVE work, it remains “highly understudied” (Vermuelen, 2014, p. 288). The research that does exist focuses mainly on local PRVE policy and shows how the uncertainty that surrounds PRVE work often translates into considerable variance across local policy documents concerning how radicalization and extremism are defined, presented and addressed (Andersson Malmros, 2019; Van Helesum & Vermeulen, 2017). In local policy, the phenomena of extremism tend to be “decontextualized” and “radicalization and its root causes are portrayed as something that is not dependent on where it happens or in what milieu” (Andersson Malmros, 2019, p. 57). Instead, the use of abstract definitions, theories, models and checklists are widespread (Andersson Malmros & Mattson, 2017; Lindekilde, 2012a).

In this article we move beyond national and local policy documents and attend to how practitioners perceive and respond to different extremist milieus in their local settings. Frontline practitioners are often regarded as “invisible cogs in a prevention machine” (Ponsot et al., 2018, p. 25), but rarely are their needs or skills vis-à-vis PRVE considered by scholars.

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Scholars have examined frontline practitioners' interpretation of central concepts (Mattsson, 2018), challenges and dilemmas of certain professional groups like teachers, social workers and police (Haugstvedt, 2019; Mattsson & Säljö, 2018; McKendrick & Finch, 2017; O'Donnell, 2016; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020; van de Weert & Eijkman, 2018) or measures taken against a specific movement, group or milieu (Dudenhoefer, 2018; Hardy, 2019; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020; Lynch, 2013; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018, 2019; Schclarek Mulinari, 2019). Our intent with this article, however, is to take a holistic approach across professions and extremist milieus in order to scrutinize how the conceptualizations found in policy are being translated into local practice and what distinguishes the ways in which practitioners perceive and respond to right-wing, left-wing and Islamist extremist milieus. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the literature on the relationship between PRVE policies and its related practices in general, and to the scholarship on local practitioners' implementation of national PRVE policies in particular.

### *The case of Sweden*

Our empirical locus in this article is Sweden, which serves as an example of the aforementioned characteristics of the PRVE arena, as well as the tendency to bundle different targeted milieus under the designation of "violent extremism." Sweden has a long history of trying to control and counteract groups seen as subversive or as a threat to state security, primarily those belonging to the far right (fascists and Nazis) and radical left (communists) (Löow, 2017; SOU, 2002, p. 91). By the late 2000s, radical Islamism was added to the list of extremist milieus in Sweden, alongside the designation "violence-affirming extremism" (SÄPO 2010). The use of the term "violence-affirming," rather than just "violent," signals preventive efforts that are directed at broader target groups, encompassing not only those



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involved in politically motivated violence but also those who express positive attitudes towards it or support it.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, the Swedish government launched a *National action plan for safeguarding democracy against violent extremism* (Skr. 2011/12:44). This was followed by an official commission of inquiry in 2013 that formulated ideas and aims to prevent extremism more efficiently (SOU, 2013:81). As a result of the commission, a “national coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism” was appointed in 2014 (Committee Directive, 2014:103) with the responsibility to develop, strengthen and coordinate national and local work against violent extremism.<sup>3</sup> Since then, a number of policy documents have been produced, inquiries set up, evaluations undertaken and legislation passed, and research shows that frontline practitioners often experience “some confusion” about what policy actually governs the field in Sweden (Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019, p. 29–30). All of Sweden’s 290 municipalities have been under institutional pressure to develop local action plans since 2015, and research shows that 134 had done so in 2017. However, the majority of these local plans (N=104) are not based on local threat assessments but reflect the general descriptions and security threat assessments issued by national actors (Andersson Malmros & Mattsson, 2017, p. 65).

The national and local action plans reflect the *pre-emptive logic* of the PRVE arena as it seeks to identify and intervene early against individuals at risk, preventing them from becoming radicalized. Further, the action plans mirror the tendency to *outsource state-based social control* in its instruction to a wide range of local professions, such as police, educators, social service, youth workers and actors within civil society, to collaborate in efforts to recognize and deter radicalization, counteract extremism and encourage disengagement from targeted movement milieus (Committee Directive, 2014:103; Sivenbring & Andersson, 2019;

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<sup>2</sup> Although sporadically used in parliamentary documents and debates since 1996, the designation “violence-affirming extremism” did not reach broad salience before 2010, following several (failed) terrorist attacks in Sweden by militant Islamists (Wahlström, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the task of coordinating these efforts nationally was overtaken by The Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE), placed under the governance of BRÅ (the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention).



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Skr, 2014/15:144). This has led to a *pluralization of social control*, ranging from coercive tactics that push people out of their engagement, to soft and pull-oriented forms of control, including the labeling of certain groups as violent extremists (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020). In government publications and those of the national coordinator in Sweden, three distinct movement milieus are singled out, what is often referred to as “Islamist extremism” (militant Islamist extremism, MIE) “the autonomous milieu” (left-wing extremism, LWE) and the “white supremacist milieu” (right-wing extremism, RWE) in Sweden (Brå & Säpo, 2009; Skr. 2011/12:44; SOU, 2016:92). These are the three milieus we investigate with regard to practitioners’ local efforts. Like that of other European countries, Swedish policy and governmental reports emphasize the commonalities of different extremist milieus across ideologies and groupings and lay out a joint strategy to counteract them (Andersson, 2018, p. 155; Johansson & Arvidsson, 2016).

### Methods, Data and Analysis

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 26 public servants involved in preventing radicalization and violent extremism.<sup>4</sup> The interviewees are primarily frontline practitioners: teachers/educators (N=8), social workers (N=6), police (N=4), as well as coordinators of the local activities countering violent extremism (N=4). We also interviewed national representatives from each profession working at the strategic level (N=4). All 26 public servants have in different ways interpreted or implemented policy in their given context. Interviews were carried out in four cities. All four cities have documented challenges

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<sup>4</sup> The interviews were carried out as part of two research projects: “Radicalization and De-radicalization”, supported by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, and the project “Collaboration and conflict in prevention of violent extremism in Sweden”, funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare. Several researchers have been involved in doing interviews, and we would like to thank Magnus Wennerhag and Mattias Wahlström for their contributions. We would also like to thank Kalle Eriksson for the initial coding of the dataset and Måns Lundstedt for making an overview of national and international PRVE policy documents.

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with violent extremism<sup>5</sup>, and have worked to develop distinct internal structures to implement PRVE measures.

The interviewees were chosen using two factors; 1) their key position in relation to PRVE work (i.e., they were local coordinators of work countering violent extremism or a national or regional representative of a profession tasked to interpret PRVE policy) or 2) their role as a frontline practitioner (i.e., tasked with the responsibility of implementing PRVE policy). Most interviewees were approached through national or local structures for PRVE work. Some were approached through a chain sampling technique, where one person pointed to others, while some were accessed using the researchers' existing professional networks. Most interviews were carried out individually (N=18) and lasted from one and a half to three hours. Two interviews were organized as focus groups, in which a total of seven teachers took part to reflect on how they implemented their work in the prevention of radicalization and extremism. Prior to the interviews, respondents received information about the purpose of the research projects, that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw, after which we asked for oral consent for their participation in the research project. To ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees, names, localities and specificities regarding their work position have been anonymized. The interviews focused on several broad themes concerning PRVE work, and in relation to this article we have focused on the data concerning 1) their perception of the different milieus, 2) the measures they took, and 3) the challenges and possibilities they experienced in preventive work vis-a-vis the different milieus. Research on local Swedish PRVE work indicates that different professions (e.g., social workers, teachers and police) can have different experiences and perceptions of the three milieus, dependent on their available measures to counteract extremism and entry points into the milieus (Johansson & Arvidsson, 2016). Our aim in this article, however, is to seek out patterns concerning how practitioners perceive and respond to each of the three extremist milieus, independently of practitioners' profession.

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<sup>5</sup> According to regional surveys (Nationella Samordnaren mot våldsbejakande extremism, 2016)

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The interviews were carried out between 2016 and 2018, and the empirical data reflects the practitioners' perceptions of the milieus at the time of the interviews. In this period, violent extremism was vigorously debated in Swedish society, especially in relation to foreign fighters and Islamist extremism. This is reflected in the interview material, as many practitioners tried to make sense of these developments. The local prevalence and long history of measures taken against the far-right was also a repeated reference point for many interviewees. To make comparisons across the three targeted milieus possible, we paid special attention in the interviews to the practitioners' views of PRVE work in relation to the radical left. This is a neglected topic in research on PRVE (see Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020; Jämte & Wennerhag, 2019; Wennerhag & Eriksson, 2018; Windisch, Ligon & Simi, 2017 for notable exceptions), and by focusing on this milieu we highlighted an important point against which the other two milieus could be compared.

The transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed using Nvivo, following the principle of inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) found in empirical data, which can be applied across theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 78). Our application of this method involved identifying the parts of the interview transcripts germane to our main empirical questions concerning practitioners' perceptions of and responses to the different milieus. In relation to these two broad areas, codes were created, refined and combined, resulting in the gradual identification of subthemes. With regard to differences in *perception*, we focused the analysis on the practitioners' understanding of each milieu, scrutinizing if and how the milieus were perceived as threats, and if so, to what or whom, and why. With regard to differences in *responses*, we focused the analysis on the type of measures used, the practitioners' aims and the challenges they encountered. We used the resulting structure of themes and subthemes as a guide for reporting our findings below.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The quotes used in this article have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors. We have made consistent efforts to stay true to the original wording, but minor adjustments have been made to enhance readability.

## **Differing Perceptions and Responses to Right-Wing, Left-Wing and Islamist Extremism**

Our analysis provides an aggregated picture of how practitioners experience differences between the three extremist milieus. First, we lay out two sections on the practitioners' perceptions of the milieus, as they are seen to differ in the threats they represent, and their core values. This is followed by a section on differences in practitioners' responses, in particular the challenges they experienced in relation to each milieu.

### *The different milieus as different threats*

In this section we highlight differences in how local practitioners perceived the type and level of threat associated with the extremist milieus. By type of threat we refer to the forms of political violence used by each milieu, and by level of threat we mean the extent and intensity of activity. Our analysis shows that local practitioners balance two main influences when they assess the threats associated with each milieu: 1) national PRVE policy and extra-local prioritizations and 2) their own local experiences and situation. The interviewees often experienced these influences as conflicting, creating an ambivalence regarding how they should assess the threat of each milieu.

### Extra-local prioritizations

The interviewees described their efforts to prevent radicalization and violent extremism as regulated and influenced by a range of extra-local sources. Referring to national policy, interviewees described a formal mandate to address all types of extremism and to remain objective in relation to "different threats" and "challenges to democracy." At the same time, practitioners often experienced extra-local pressure to prioritize certain milieus over others, which affected the focus of their local work. According to the interviewees, their primary focus was directed at MIE, less at RWE, and almost none at LWE. This ranking was influenced by a range of sources: national and international risk assessments, educational efforts and conferences on PRVE, political debate and public interest in different types of

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extremism. An example of the different emphasis on each milieu comes from Anna, a social worker who had taken part in several educational efforts to address radicalization and violent extremism. She described an obvious imbalance in the attention given to the three milieus, both locally and nationally:

Jihadism has probably taken 90 % of the space. [...] The left, maybe 1 % ... or at least very little, I shouldn't exaggerate. I'm trying to think of the last [national] conference, how much talk was there about the left? I can't think of one single seminar [...].

The practitioners often explained the dominant focus on militant Islamists in relation to contemporary societal developments, primarily the occurrence of terrorist attacks in Sweden and internationally, as well as the phenomena of foreign fighters departing to and returning from Syria. According to the interviewees, these developments had created widespread fear of terrorism and a general emphasis on MIE, which affected what type of PRVE work was seen as most urgent. Johan, a policeman working with educational efforts on PRVE, described how the threats associated with the milieus were a reflection of national threat assessment and the current fear of terrorist attacks.

Now and then I read on our Intrapolis [internal police registry] [...]. To be honest it is only issues related to Islamism that are connected to terrorism [...]. When we talk about threat assessments it's only Islamism, never white supremacists [RWE] or the autonomous milieu [LWE]. So, in relation to each other, there is a ranking, some are ranked higher than others.

### Local experiences

In interviews with local practitioners, the extra-local priority of militant Islamists was often contrasted with the local prevalence of other types of extremism, in particular RWE. Indeed, for some municipalities, foreign fighters and recruitment of militant Muslims were

indeed described as a recurring problem. But even in these locales, RWE was often considered a more pressing and prevalent issue. For instance, Mikael, a social worker working with PRVE in one of the municipalities that have had a high number of foreign fighters, said:

The greatest concern we have in Sweden is not related to jihadism. If we are to talk about an internal democratic crisis or domestic challenges related to the violence affirming extremist milieus, then it is the right-wing extremists that constitute a much bigger threat, and a much greater problem.

The quotation above describes a situation similar to that of many local threat assessments. In a survey of the local prevalence of extremist groups in Swedish municipalities, 51 municipalities out of 290 stated that violent extremists were active in the local environment: 41 identified RWE, 30 MIE and 12 LWE (Nationella samordnaren, 2016). Similar patterns can be found in other evaluations (Andersson Malmros & Mattson, 2017; Sivenbring, 2018, Nationella samordnaren, 2017). While far-right extremism is considered a more widespread phenomenon locally, the threat of militant Islamism was primarily seen as connected to certain areas of larger cities (cf. CVE, 2020a, 2020c). In the interviews, the radical left was rarely considered an issue at all, and not seen as a prevalent threat in local settings (see also Jämte & Wennerhag, 2019; MUCF, 2017; Sivenbring, 2018). According to Linda, a municipal employee working to prevent and counter extremism, the discrepancy between the overwhelming focus on Islamist extremism and the local presence of RWE often led to a cognitive dissonance about local priorities:

It creates a rather great cognitive dissonance; that the fear is about one thing [MIE], while in practice it is the white power milieu [RWE] that is the primary concern for many [municipalities] [...]. We have public servants with protected personal data because they are being threatened by the right-wing extremist milieu. And that is a totally different type of democratic issue; it is a threat to our own democratic

institutions [...]. Compare it to a bomb exploding somewhere. That is obviously also a threat, but they work in very different ways. One [MIE] represents a very acute situation, the other [RWE] is more low-intensity terror.

### Types of threats

As expressed in several of the quotations above, the milieus were seen to represent different types of threats. MIE was primarily described as a sporadic, indiscriminate and “invisible” threat, connected to few, albeit horrific, terror attacks targeting civilians. In contrast, RWE was often seen as an ongoing, visible threat, primarily responsible for violence and hate crimes targeting specific groups, as well as challenging local democratic institutions in the form of threats and confrontational behavior against local politicians and civil servants (on- and offline). Karin, who interprets and implements PRVE policy for social workers, illustrated the different perceptions people have of the two milieus:

Right-wing extremism is perhaps more distinct [...]. They [...] want to stand in public spaces and proclaim their message. They [...] go after politicians, being threatening, pushy and unpleasant, like... aggressive. While violent Islamists, they operate in silence and just strike.

The third milieu (LWE) was primarily seen by the practitioners as being a threat described in policy, but rarely noticed or experienced as such at the local level (see also Jämte & Wennerhag, 2019). When mentioned, LWE was mainly connected to property damage, targeted actions against opponents and turbulent counter-demonstrations, primarily against the far right. Several practitioners, however, referenced higher levels and severer types of left-wing violence in the 1990s and early 2000s, and contrasted this to the current situation where they rarely observed any left-wing violence. Like the other interviewees, Anna had never had (or heard about) any PRVE case concerning LWE, which she understood as a result of the different types of threat associated with each milieu:

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I have never had one [a case or call of concern]. And I have never heard that any of the others have received calls concerning the left, actually. I don't think people believe that: “here comes a left-wing activist who is going to blow up a school”, which is what some think about a jihadist [...]. You don't think the same “terror-thoughts” [in relation to LWE], so there's not the same level of concern.

The different threats associated with each milieu also reflect in calls from the general public to the national hotline (Orostelefonen), which was established in 2017 to provide advice on issues related to extremism. Between February 2017 and May 2018, 154 calls were received. Fifty-three concerning general questions on extremism, 62 on religious extremism, 36 on RWE and three on LWE (Sivenbring, 2018, p. 26).

The discrepancy between how policy documents present the milieus as equally important, external pressure to prioritize certain milieus and the local prevalence of different extremist groups made some interviewees question the way the concept of “violence-affirming extremism” was presented in policy. Some questioned the inclusion of all three milieus under the same umbrella, while others described the inclusion of all three milieus in policy as an effort to “mask” the fact that MIE was the primary focus of Swedish PRVE measures. The other two milieus were often “downplayed” (primarily RWE) or only included to make policy “remain neutral” (primarily LWE). An example of this comes from Olof, a policeman working with PRVE measures:

Do you want me to be totally honest? When it comes to the work of the [national] coordinator, it feels like they have brought in a bit of the right, and a bit of the left as an excuse to talk about what everyone has been most afraid of [MIE]. [...] We have [worked with] the white power [RWE] and autonomous milieus [LWE] before, and there was no coordinator for that. [...] Suddenly we added a milieu [MIE] that everyone wanted to talk about, but then it became politically incorrect to do so. So they wanted to balance it all.

In sum, the three milieus were described as markedly different in the *type of threat* they represented, ranging from sporadic and indiscriminate terrorism and mass violence against civilian targets (MIE), to hate crimes and threats to local democratic institutions (RWE), to property damage, counter-demonstrations and disturbance of the public order (LWE). For many of the practitioners, the experienced *level of threat* associated with RWE often came into conflict with extra-local prioritizations and expectations of working primarily on MIE. This created discord for some practitioners, as they felt pushed into carrying out a mission in which they did not fully believe in or feel aligned with.

#### *The differing core values of the milieus*

The practitioners differed markedly in their views about the core values of LWE, RWE and MIE milieus. In this section we analyze practitioners' descriptions of to what extent these values are seen to resonate with dominant values in Swedish society, as they saw them. We also show how the degree of affinity or distance between societal norms and the milieus' values affect the social stigma attached to each milieu.

From our analysis, it is clear that the practitioners experience differences between the core values of each milieu, and that these differences affected their view of the milieu. Many practitioners were understanding and sympathetic to the values of the radical left, but condemned their use of illegal or violent protest tactics. In relation to the radical right, some interviewees understood their line of thought, but were distinctly antipathetic towards their core values. The greatest lack of understanding and antipathy was voiced about the values of Islamist extremists. A quote from Dan, a local coordinator, is illustrative of how several practitioners distinguish between the milieus' core values:

In some ways, it is the equal value of all that the left-wing movements proclaim, and it is more sympathetic than a black-and-white worldview, even if it also is in a sense, when they cross the line and use violence... To me, it's a bit different, I am not really sure why. But the hair on my back doesn't stand up when I hear an agitated left-wing

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speech like it does when I hear someone from the right... it really gives me the chills. [...] And I believe that those who are given the absolute least amount of space in society, now I am bantering a bit, but that's the Muslims [MIE].

Similar to the pattern described above, the analysis shows that the practitioners position the milieus differently in relation to what they considered to be mainstream values in Sweden. According to several interviewees, the militant Islamist milieu represented the biggest clash with mainstream values, followed by those of RWE. Numerous practitioners talked about how the core values of the LWE were more aligned with those of the wider society. The values they associated with LWE were rather described as radicalized mainstream values, and thus seen as more legitimate in a liberal democracy (see also Nationella Samordnaren, 2015). According to the practitioners, this was also why LWE was less marginalized by the general public, compared to the other milieus. As Karin, a social worker, said:

There is another type of tolerance for left-wing extremism, like: "Ok, you were young and radical and spray-painted fur shops and smashed windows". People might think that it was foolish and criminal, but the person would not be stigmatized for the rest of their life, generally in society. But, if you say: "Yeah, I traveled to Syria and joined ISIS because I liked their methods and tried to establish a Caliphate" - that would be very much stigmatized.

Our analysis makes it apparent that the difference between the experienced core values of the milieus and mainstream values was seen as decisive for the degree of social exclusion and marginalization activists faced in wider society. While the interviewees expected that members of MIE and RWE milieus would be heavily stigmatized, LWE activists were seemingly much less so. It was noted by some interviewees, however, that values previously associated mainly with RWE groups have become more widespread and normalized in

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Sweden, as well as in other European countries. According to the practitioners, this meant that people from RWE milieus did not necessarily face the same level of rejection and exclusion by the general public as they had ten to twenty years ago (c.f. Linden & Klandermans, 2006).

In sum, the analysis shows clear differences in how interviewees describe the core values of each milieu and situate them differently in relation to what is seen as dominant values in Swedish society. Regarding LWE, the use of violence was the crucial problem for participants, not the values themselves. For the other two milieus, however, both values and practices were seen as problematic and dangerous. These perceived differences, independently of how accurate the perceptions were, are important because they are likely to affect practitioners' understanding of the potential for counter-responses to the milieus, which we attend to in a subsequent section. It is also evident that the level of social stigma attached to involvement in the three milieus situates them along a continuum of closeness and distance to what are considered mainstream Swedish values. This is, however, contingent and may change over time. A milieu's position on this continuum is also likely to be indicative of the degree of challenge of reintegrating persons who seek to exit that milieu (see following section).

### *The different challenges of responding to the milieus*

In this section we attend to the challenges practitioners experienced when responding to the three milieus. We have identified three areas where the milieus clearly differ from each other: 1) the potential for exit and re-integration, 2) the entry points for preventive measures, and 3) the signs of radicalization.

#### Exit and re-integration

Practitioners pointed to three areas in regard to exit measures and assisting people to leave extremist milieus and re-integrate into mainstream society (see Hansen & Lid, 2020; Koehler, 2016; Marsden, 2017 on exit measures) that differed from milieu to milieu: the level

of internal sanctions for defecting, the degree of social stigma activists faced when exiting and the availability of exit programs.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the risk that activists faced when attempting to leave the milieus. According to the practitioners, leaving militant left groups rarely involved threats from fellow activists, and organizations seldom dictated whether or how a member could leave. The extreme right and militant Islamist groups carried out much more stringent sanctions, which often involved personal risk and major life and social changes for those wanting to leave. According to interviewees, the degree of intra-movement sanctions also affected the general public's view of each milieu. Chris, working with PRVE in local authorities and regions, elaborated on this point:

One thing that separates left-wing extremism is the degree of social acceptance the day someone wants to leave. It's not like they need to turn to Fryshuset [Swedish exit project] in order to defect. They can, rather, just stop. [...] Milieus that you are not allowed to leave [RWE and MIE]... and traditional criminal milieus as well [...], their participants cannot leave unpunished. I think that makes people perceive them as more dangerous; social acceptance is more limited for milieus that you cannot leave voluntarily.

According to the practitioners, the degree of social acceptance or stigma also affected the activists' possibilities for re-integration. Given the experience and views of practitioners, exit and re-integration were often unproblematic for activists from LWE milieus, but more difficult for RWEs and most challenging for MIEs. In line with what was said about the discrepancy between core values of the milieus and dominant societal norms, many interviewees emphasized that it was easier for LWEs, in comparison with RWEs and MIEs, to re-integrate and pursue a "normal" life after exiting, partly because the threshold for their social acceptance and inclusion by the surrounding community was lower.

The interviewees also emphasized the uneven availability of exit programs. In relation to RWE, practitioners frequently referred to the Swedish Fryshuset, a foundation that has been assisting right-wing extremists to alter their life course for more than three decades (Mattsson, 2018). With regards to MIEs, practitioners more often connected the possibility of exiting to traditional social work, by targeting individuals, their social networks and the communities they lived in (e.g., Lindekilde, 2016). The interviewees offered no examples of the far-left, and exit measures were neither described as a priority nor a necessity. Many former left-wing militants were seen to retain their values and political engagement, but adopting more conventional forms and institutional channels for protest and politics as they aged.

For some interviewees, the availability and necessity of exit programs was also connected to the type of transformation deemed necessary for a person's de-radicalization, whether this transformation involved behavior, beliefs, or both. Dan, a local coordinator:

When it comes to right-wing extremism and exit projects they usually leave their ideology behind, they cut. They don't just disengage from violent criminal behavior, but they also rethink things, they are helped to do so, or do it on their own. [...] You come to see the world in a more nuanced way. In relation to the left-wing, is it like that? What would the change be there? And with religious... [extremism]? [...] Many of those who are easily recruited to these types of movements have a really shallow understanding from the beginning, and a deepened understanding rather adds nuances. So, [...] one can leave it [religion] behind as well, but one can also make it more nuanced and deeper, maybe become even more religious than before leaving for Syria.

In sum, the necessity for exit strategies was seen to be heavily affected by internal movement characteristics, such as the degree of sanction meted out to those who sought to defect, and also societal factors, like the degree of social stigma activists faced when attempting to change their life course. Also, the need for and availability of exit programs varied. While there is a long history of specific exit programs for RWE, working with MIEs

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seems more dependent on conventional social work. In relation to LWE, exit work was not deemed necessary and the practitioners did not know of any exit programs for this milieu.

### Entry points into the milieus

The employment of preventive measures presupposes the presence of “entry points,” or “access points,” to individuals at risk of radicalization or those already engaged in extremist milieus. Our analysis shows that practitioners encountered different social characteristics and personal biographies of those engaged in each milieu, differences that affected how, why and on what grounds the practitioners came in contact with these individuals.

Interviewees described individuals engaged in RWE or MIE as often having a range of interconnected social problems, from social exclusion and mental illness, to drug abuse and criminal behaviour, to living in socially and economically deprived communities. These social problems sometimes opened avenues for personal contact, either initiated by the police or social services, or by the targeted individuals themselves in search of help or services from local agencies. Practitioners gained entry into the lives of targeted individuals through the services they provided, making it possible for them to address, directly or indirectly, the (risk of) affiliation with extremist milieus. Establishing such entry points was also important in order to obtain more information about the person and for engaging in multi-agency collaborations and measures to both monitor and assist the individual in question (Ellefsen, forthcoming a). Olof, a police officer, described the disparate social biographies and problems he observed in his work:

When we were dealing with individuals [from RWE], at least those who were the furthest out, those that weren't the real idealists, they were quite broken. They had witnessed violence, or experienced violence while growing up, perhaps even drug abuse within the family. They were often drunk when they committed certain acts [...]  
So, there was a way of working with these individuals. In the other, the Islamist milieu



[...]; it often occurs in suburban areas where drugs are close at hand; there is criminality; there are concerns for the family [...] often several public agencies are present. Usually, there is an entry-point through something; public employment programs or things like that. Regarding the autonomous milieu [LWE], lastly, it's the most challenging, because it's more socially accepted.

As hinted at in the quotation above, the interviewees rarely see entry points in relation to LWE. Persons affiliated with LWE were generally described as coming from the middle or upper class, as being more educated, socially connected, well off economically, as well as living in stable communities, which often left front-line practitioners with few or no accessible entry points (cf. Rostami et. al, 2018; CVE, 2020b). For instance, teachers we interviewed reported that they rarely had access points for PRVE work with students sympathizing with or engaging in the radical left as their views seldom contradicted the curriculum. As Henry expressed it:

Regarding [LWE] I haven't really observed that much, I would say. It is a group I have seen very little of [...], at least that I know of. And that goes for every school I have worked in. When we are discussing values that are further to the left, I often think - when there are strong opinions - it's usually [...] about solidarity; that we need more solidarity. I rarely think it ends up on an extremist level; that we need to revolt; that we need to fundamentally change things. It is, rather; this is missing in society, or we need more of this. I experience it as more challenging [with LWE], I don't know what signs [of violent extremism] to look for.

The police officers we interviewed provided more descriptions of interactions with LWE activists, in particular in relation to street protests. However, according to the officers, the leaderless and non-hierarchical nature of organizations and activists' reluctance to cooperate with the police made it difficult to identify key activists and establish contact or

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dialogue with LWE groups. Some police interviewees described the RWE milieu as easier to work with, given its tendency to have clearer structures and identifiable leaders. MIE groups were rarely seen to organize street protests in Sweden, and therefore this arena did not exist as an entry point. For those suspected of associating with MIE, however, police and other practitioners mentioned mosques and imams as entry points, as were indirect and personal contacts.

In sum, the views of practitioners underlined ways in which the social vulnerabilities of participants in the three milieus differed, more often allowing for entry points into the RWE and MIE milieus but not into LWE (cf. CVE, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). For the police, interaction with the LWE milieu mainly takes place in relation to street protests, but this arena seldom offers stable entry points into the milieu for police. For other professions, such as social workers and teachers, there seems to be an experienced lack of access points for PRVE work with LWE.

### Signs of radicalization and risk indicators

Risk indicators and signs of radicalization are frequently listed in policy documents as tools for identifying individuals that might be at risk of radicalization. Our analysis shows a general skepticism among practitioners about actively using such signs as a guide to action because that implies perceiving expression of ideas, use of symbols or behaviors that often are legal, as indicators of potential radicalization or support for violent extremism. Few practitioners referred directly to the different risk indicators that were featured in the checklists of policy documents. When practitioners did talk about how they understood extremism and signs of radicalization, many emphasized the difficulty in pinpointing when an expression or behavior should be considered extremism, except actions that were clearly illegal or violent. Many of the interviewees were also clear that people had a right to hold radical opinions without risking being the subject of political surveillance and monitoring.

When practitioners did mention possible signs of radicalization, they distinguished among the milieus. Regarding RWE, some interviewees referred to laws that forbade certain

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signs, symbols or expressions, given that they fell under the category of “hate speech” against ethnic groups. Also, there is a long tradition in Sweden of identifying RWE activists based on sub-cultural attributes and well-known symbols (e.g., swastika, certain runes or number combinations), which still lingers. This said, some interviewees recognized that it had become increasingly difficult to detect these symbols even within RWE. As Karl, a local coordinator said:

There are certain symbols, but it is so abstract. It doesn't help me. If someone walks around in that [a specific type of] extremely expensive jacket, it can mean that they are well off and likes that jacket, but it can also mean that they are ideologically affiliated with SD [The Sweden democrats, a Swedish political party]. It can't be used in that way. And one can't use runes any longer either. And the bomber jackets that everyone wears these days, that was the uniform for the skinheads in the 1990s. [...] It has lost its value as a symbol.

In comparison, it was harder for practitioners to assess whether a symbol signaled support for MIE, partially because of language barriers and limited knowledge of Islam and MIE groups in Sweden and internationally. Additionally, militant Islamists and foreign fighters were, at the time of the interviews, a relatively “new” phenomena, making the lack of knowledge even more acute. For example, interviewees described how a banner with the Arabic shahada (Muslim declaration of faith) was mistaken for support for Islamist terrorist groups. The practitioners reported even less knowledge of LWE, both regarding the milieu in general, but also specific groups. They also lacked the knowledge to recognize signs that would indicate the need for intervention. According to interviewees, even the four far-left groups that have been singled out specifically by the national coordinator as violent extremists were often unknown to front-line personnel. Karl again:

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The autonomous left [LWE] [...], is the group that is hardest to make sense of [to others]; what it's about and why it's included amongst the three milieus. I mean, most people can connect right-wing extremists and Nazis to the Second World War, and Islamist extremists with Paris or Brussels [terrorist attacks]. [...] But, the autonomous left is more challenging to make sensible. Maybe that is also because I think it's hard to understand myself. It sprawls in many directions and involves very different things. Then there are groups like Rev-front [Revolutionary Front] and AFA [Anti-Fascist Action], but, if we mention AFA when we are out [meeting practitioners], almost no one knows what it stands for.

In sum, practitioners expressed varied knowledge of the three milieus, where the challenge of identifying signals connected to MIE and the lack of knowledge on LWE stand out as particularly evident.<sup>7</sup> There is also an underlying ambivalence in the way in which the practitioners monitored and assessed signs of radicalization across milieus. On one hand, they were frustrated and critical of engaging with a system where people were monitored or reported for expressing lawful, albeit controversial, opinions. On the other hand, practitioners clearly did monitor and assess people's speech and opinions as part of a broader alertness to identify potential radicalization and engagement in extremist groups. The practitioners, however, seem much more inclined to react to views, signs and indicators associated with RWE and MIE, compared to that of LWE.

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<sup>7</sup> A potential limitation in our data is raised by the lack of knowledge many practitioners voiced about MIE and LWE. Lack of knowledge can influence practitioners' ability to identify and report on extremist activities, as well as impact their general perception of the threat associated with each milieu (see e.g. Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). To balance this, we have included references to several studies and reports from the same time period that function as reference points throughout the article.

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## Discussion and Conclusion

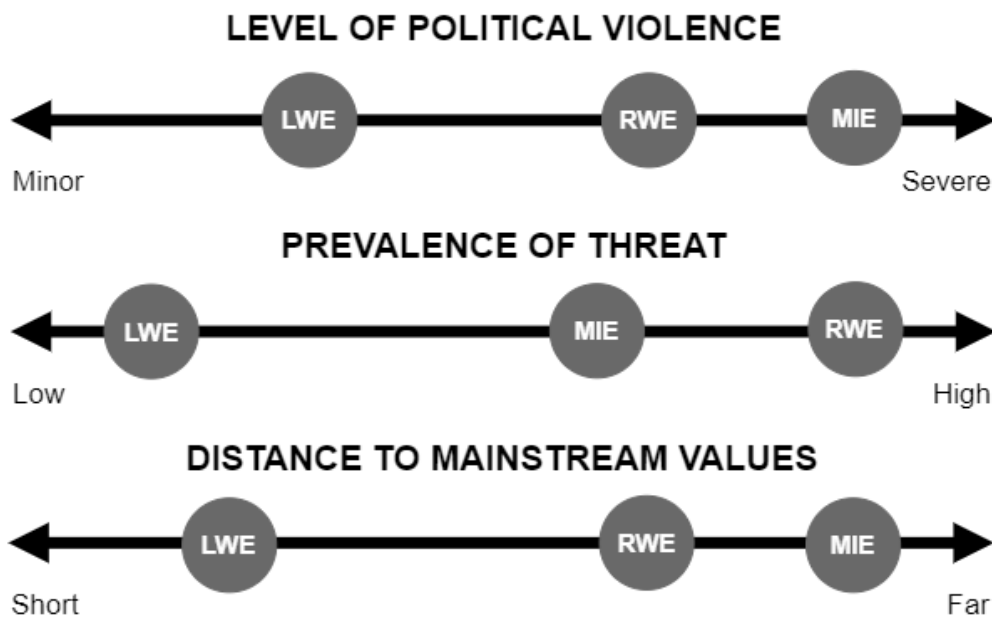
Our study presents two overarching findings. First, there is a substantial discrepancy between the static image of radicalization and violent extremism often presented in policy and the complexities practitioners experience when they address these phenomena across extremist milieus. Secondly, the three targeted milieus differ in crucial respects: the type and level of threats they represent, their core values and other internal characteristics, as well as their position vis-à-vis society at large. By focusing on perceived differences between the milieus, our analysis has also made evident some of the complex challenges that practitioners face during their PRVE work in local contexts.

While we have analyzed how public servants perceive and respond to RWE, LWE and MIE milieus, the question of how these differences can be conceptualized remains unattended. Summing up the ways in which practitioners perceive the targeted milieus enables us to draw a general model of three key continuums, or dimensions, along which extremist milieus might differ (see Figure 1 below). Each continuum ranges from high/severe or far on the right end, to low/minor or short, on the left end. Positioning the milieus on these continuums helps us to clarify why local practitioners relate and respond differently to them, while also providing an aggregated image of the experienced key differences across the milieus.<sup>8</sup> We argue that this multi-dimensional model has a broader application for understanding how practitioners (or other actors) relate and respond to extremism(s). It can, for example, be used for other milieus or groups that are labeled as violent extremists or in other spatial or temporal contexts where the placement of the milieus in question might differ substantially from the Swedish context we have examined.

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<sup>8</sup> The placement of each milieu in Figure 1 reflects the practitioners' perceptions at the time of the interviews (2016-2018). Since then, the targeted milieus and organizations might have changed, as well as the ways in which they are perceived. For recent studies and reports on each milieu, see CVE (2020a, 2020b, 2020c), Ranstorp & Ahlin (2020), Jämte, Lundstedt & Wennerhag (2020), Rostami et al. (2018) and the Swedish security service (2017, 2018, 2019).

Figure 1: Practitioners perceptions of violent extremism(s)



The first dimension (*level of political violence*) concerns the type of threats associated with each milieu, and thus reflects the perceived severity of the violent actions or tactics. In our case, the continuum ranges from lethal terrorist attacks and threats to national security (severe), to violence against individuals and threats to local democratic institutions (medium), to issues related to property damage and disturbance of public order (minor). The second dimension (*prevalence of threat*) encompasses the level of threat associated with different extremist milieus, and thus the extent and intensity of their activities. The placement on this dimension is often based on the public visibility of the milieus and the number of attacks, actions or public protest events they stage. The third dimension (*distance to mainstream values*) sets out the degree to which the core values of each milieu are seen to resonate with the values held in mainstream society. Our analysis shows that this dimension also

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corresponds with the level of social sanction and exclusion that those (previously) involved in each milieu face from mainstream society, where a short distance to widely shared values involves a low level of social stigmatization.

Based on what the local practitioners said, we have situated the three milieus on the continuums of each dimension (Figure 1). The LWE milieu is situated towards the left end of all three dimensions. Regarding the other two milieus, for the first (level of political violence) and third (distance to mainstream values) dimensions, the MIE milieu is positioned at the outer right end and the RWE milieu between the middle and outer right. The only variation to this pattern is the second dimension (prevalence of threat), where RWE is positioned towards the outer right end and MIE between the middle and outer right. This positioning reflects the fact that practitioners often described the prevalence and activity of RWE as representing a higher level of local threat than that of other milieus. Positioning each milieu along these three continuums is, of course, a simplification of a more complex reality, but it makes visible and helps clarify why local practitioners relate and respond differently to the milieus. While our emphasis lies on the experiences of local practitioners, our analysis also showed that those experiences may differ from those of other actors (e.g. policy makers, security services, etc.). This underlines the fact that different agents may understand and experience the milieus differently, which potentially can create friction and affect policy implementation. In our study, this is clearly reflected in the lack of attention and responses towards LWE, as well as the discord between the experienced extra-local prioritization of MIE and practitioners' expressed need for local work against RWE.

We argue that this study's unique inclusion of practitioners' experiences with LWE has contributed to making the differences between the three milieus particularly evident. This is because the LWE milieu is seen to differ in important respects from both the RWE and MIE milieus, as shown in Figure 1. Attending these contrasting types of milieus, we argue, offers important insights. The fact that people who are seen as well integrated into society and not socially vulnerable also engage in militant milieus challenges the simplistic picture of "violent extremists" as outcasts or socially marginalized, an image often conveyed through lists of



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risk-indicators or push-and-pull factors. Our analysis also illustrates the broader point that PRVE work often seems based on the basic assumption that it is possible to make a clear distinction between “normality” and what is seen to represent the “extreme”. This seems more easily done in relation to some milieus than others. When the values of members of militant milieus align more closely with that of mainstream society, it is more challenging and makes less sense to try to identify signs of cognitive radicalization, as their ideas do not necessarily stand out as much as within milieus that hold fundamentally anti-democratic or anti-egalitarian values. This said, the challenge of identifying radicalization in RWE is changing, as several values previously associated with the extreme right are seen to become more mainstream, such as hostility and negative attitudes towards migration and immigrants. These points further underline the contingency of the phenomena of radicalization and the fundamental challenge of using a simplistic understanding of it and its indicators as a guide in local PRVE work.

The values and practices associated with each milieu also affect how practitioners think and reason about the possibility and necessity of different counter-measures. In the literature on PRVE, a distinction is made between de-radicalization and disengagement (Lindekilde, 2016; Schmid, 2013), where de-radicalization involves “an ideological change and renouncement of radical beliefs and tactics,” and disengagement involves “a behavioral change away from radical activities” (Lindekilde, 2016, p. 251). This means that de-radicalization processes seek cessation to both politically motivated violence and the political or religious ideas that underlie them. Disengagement does not involve changing beliefs, but rather the detachment from individuals, groups and contexts involved in politically motivated violence. As pointed out in several studies, de-radicalization and disengagement do not necessarily coincide, as individuals can disengage without being de-radicalized (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009). In relation to these two types of approaches to PRVE, our analysis has shown that local practitioners relate differently to the three milieus and that this is further reflected in what approach they find to be the most suitable for their efforts.

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When practitioners discussed counter-measures against LWE, they focused primarily on behavioral change, not cognitive change. It was the violent practices that were considered problematic not the radical beliefs themselves. It was thus considered necessary for individuals engaged in politically motivated left-wing violence to disengage, which, according to interviewees, often took place naturally as activists grew older. Regarding RWE and MIE, both beliefs and practices were deemed problematic and dangerous. The counter-measures highlighted by practitioners thus often involved the individual disengaging from their social context as well as changing behaviors and ideational beliefs. These de-radicalization efforts were seen to take up more resources, as they often entailed helping the individual to a new life, including finding a job or housing, social care, and pursuing education. While examples of how this works in relation to MIE are scarce in our empirical material, the practitioners often referred to a long tradition of working with RWE through specific de-radicalization (so-called “exit”) programs aimed at reintegrating them into society.

While we have examined practitioners’ views of different extremist milieus and their descriptions of their responses to them, there is a substantial lack of independent scientific study that follows practitioners’ PRVE work as it plays itself out (see Johansen, 2020 for a notable exception). Examining the unfolding of this work directly by combining participant observation and interviews of local practitioners could provide valuable in-depth knowledge about how this work is practiced on the ground, including decision-making processes, initiation of measures, evaluation of and changes to ongoing prevention processes. While this type of research would involve challenges concerning ethics, confidentiality and protection of the anonymity of targeted individuals, it would make an important contribution to the knowledge gap on how PRVE policy is implemented in varied and creative ways by practitioners across contexts and professional groups. This kind of research could also provide us with deeper insights into the ways in which local practitioners creatively resist, adjust and adapt their task of implementing PRVE policy, thus also enabling a more realistic image of the relationship between policy ideals and the realities of implementation.

### Acknowledgement

The study was supported by funds from The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency to the project “Radicalization and De-radicalization”, 2016–2019 (project no. 2016-489) and the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare to the project “Collaboration and conflict in prevention of violent extremism in Sweden”, 2017-2021 (project no. 2016-00925). Funds from the Norwegian Research Council (project no. 259541) also supported parts of Rune Ellefsen’s work on this article. The authors would like to thank all researchers involved in these projects, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions, which contributed to improve our article.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

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