EX POST PAPER

Revisiting the notion of prison as a breeding ground for radicalisation

Introduction

Are we in control? In the last decade, the question whether prisons should be viewed as a breeding ground for radicalisation has led to a myriad of answers, ranging from the view that prisons are indeed hotbeds where radicalisation can prosper, to the belief that prison time can also provide structure and support in the lives of prisoners. Countries that employ a dispersal method do so in the belief that radicalised prisoners can deradicalise when living together with "normal" prisoners or further radicalisation can at least be prevented. There has not yet been enough research providing a definitive answer to these questions.

Do our experiences as practitioners from different Member States concur with research results? Which risks and what opportunities seem to exist with regard to maintaining security and promoting rehabilitation and reintegration into society? The RAN Prison and Probation (P&P) Working Group meeting on 25 and 26 October in Budapest, where prison and probation practitioners from almost all Member States came together, focused on finding answers to these questions.

Overall, there was optimism about the progress that has been made in the prison and probation sector with regard to dealing with extremist and terrorist offenders. Of course this was not a new phenomenon, but the scale and ideological nature have been posing challenges for these sectors and the professionals working with these offenders. Increasing investments in training and the quality of training have contributed to raising awareness, detecting radicalisation and understanding how to give an appropriate response. The first steps have been taken to prepare practitioners for dealing with this target group and by designing policies and strategies that focus on safety, disengagement and reintegration.

There are still many issues that deserve careful consideration to decrease the possibility of prison serving as a breeding ground for radicalisation. This ex post highlights these issues and the outcomes of the meeting's discussions will also feed into enhancing the RAN P&P Practitioners' Paper, third edition (to be expected early 2019).

A practitioner view on key issues related to prisons as potential breeding grounds

End of 2017, Andrew Silke and Tinka Veldhuis published an article in Perspectives on Terrorism, 'Countering Violent Extremism in Prisons: A review of key recent research and critical research gaps'. They summarised what we know so far from research about prisons as "hotbeds" of radicalisation. They cluster five dominant themes and the outcomes of research so far. These five themes were addressed during the P&P meeting in Budapest to understand these issues from a practitioner perspective.

Religion and ideology

Silke and Veldhuis found in their review that religion is mostly perceived as having a positive effect on (the lives of) prisoners. Although the empirical basis for this finding might be thin, many practitioners acknowledged that religion or other spiritual activities at least are important for many offenders in prison to hold on to in their daily lives. When speaking of religion there should be a distinction whether it is about embedding religion in normal prison life (through, for example, chaplains, religious services, prayer rooms) or the use of religion as an aspect of exit programmes for radicalised offenders. On the former, there is agreement that this is important but there are challenges with regard to, for example, finding imams to work in prison.

On the issue of including a religious aspect in exit programmes, two perspectives were shared. The first perspective starts from the viewpoint that religion should not be part of exit programmes, because of a belief that religion has no place there or because national legislation doesn't support this.

The second perspective is from those who do believe religion could or should play a role in exit work, albeit under very strict conditions. Religious support professionals should ideally be employed as prison staff and be trained as such. If they are involved with radicalised offenders, they should also be specialised on this topic. They should not purely be involved because of their religious knowledge. When working with external organisations delivering exit services in prison, a strict screening is important. The acceptance of external religious experts might be higher because in that case they are not perceived as being part of the state system (which most radicalised offenders feel distrust towards). These cases cause for a dilemma as including external religious experts requires additional vetting and other preconditions to ensure their influence is positive.

It was highlighted that prison staff and the general public might perceive the use of religion by radicalised prisoners differently depending on their ideology. When Islamist extremists "raise the religion flag" the public believes them, whereas when far right extremists do the same this is dismissed as non-believable. In the latter case, using religion is merely perceived as a means to shock and that religion does not play a role for prisoners joining that group. However, religion does play a

very big role for Islamist extremists who have been to the caliphate, so in dealing with them religion cannot be dismissed. Especially when trying to disengage this group, one must take religion into account.

Within the PAIRS programme in France, a distinction is made between "true" religious conversion and a quick, black-and-white ideological conversion *based on* religion ([1]). Their experience is that most Islamist extremist prisoners do not truly adhere to the Islamic principles but use the religion to support their extremist views.

In addition, it was highlighted that religious behaviour in prison does not have to correspond to the offender's behaviour in society. Prisons are not a normal environment and inmates behave differently than they would outside prison. For example, prisoners visit the library or religious services solely because it is possible, however they would not do so outside.

Causes and dynamics of prisoner radicalisation

There are two main causes for radicalisation in prisons: overcrowded prisons and charismatic leaders who influence other prisoners, according to Silke and Veldhuis' review. There is agreement amongst practitioners that bad prison conditions and management can increase vulnerability to radicalisation.

As regards charismatic leaders, there are several ways to deal with this. Belgium, for instance, places "preachers" – charismatic and "enthusiastic" leaders – in separate wings, where they are reviewed every 3 months for whether they can go (back) to the general population.

With regard to the prison conditions, a less tangible element of the prison environment was also discussed: the extent to which **polarisation** has found its way into prison. Polarisation may emerge in response to certain events. This means that polarisation arises around different topics, depending on which events have taken place in a region or country. If a country has experienced multiple terrorist attacks, naturally this will be a topic sparking discussion in society and also in prisons. Most practitioners did not see increased tensions due to polarisation, however it was recognised that the level of awareness of these dynamics has risen as has the amount of attention that goes towards extremist groups. This may result in other prisoners feeling like they are unjustly treated differently.

Management of radicalised and terrorist offenders

When it comes to the management of radicalised and terrorist offenders one can choose to disperse them among the general population or to concentrate them in dedicated wings or prisons. Different

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([1]) Individualised support programme for social reaffiliation (PAIRS) – France. Individualised multidisciplinary programme for radicalised or radicalising people. Reintegrating individuals into the community through the development of independent living skills and building effective support networks.

Member States employ different methods; in 2012 only the Netherlands had a clear concentration regime, but over the last 5 years Belgium, France and the United Kingdom have also implemented this model in one way or another. Other Member States, such as Germany and Spain, which have had experiences with concentration regimes in the past, now very consciously have a dispersal strategy. Again, not enough empirical research has been done that concludes which method – concentration or dispersal – has more benefits. RAN P&P will organise an in-depth meeting on this topic in 2019.

From the start, terrorist offenders were viewed as high-risk, even if they were only charged for minor offences. The acceptance of risk in regard to this group is generally very low, both with prison staff and the public. Although prison staff have now largely changed their view on this, the public has not. In some cases, a concentration regime choice is also influenced by this low level of risk acceptance and high demand for a visible response.

Evaluation and effectiveness of deradicalisation programmes

The question whether current prison deradicalisation and disengagement programmes are effective was raised both at the RAN P&P meeting in Budapest and by Silke and Veldhuis. Participants at the P&P meeting also posed the question whether we can even talk about deradicalisation; does it even exist? Or, can we only talk about *disengagement*? All agreed that research results in this area are still lacking and we would benefit from more extensive (empirical) research.

Reintegration of VETOs into society

Although empirical research is obviously lagging behind, experience teaches us that there are several factors that very much influence the success of a disengagement and rehabilitation programme. First off, the level of success is largely based on the level of staff training. Although this still differs greatly between the Member States, the awareness that well-trained staff is paramount in detecting and combating radicalisation is growing. This leads to better and more extensive training.

Second of all, the importance of a multi-agency approach was stressed several times during the meeting. A programme can only be successful if all parties are on board and there is veritable trust between everyone involved. From Norway the example was given that for each prisoner following such a programme there is one dedicated member of staff who is present at all meetings regarding the offender. This ensures there is someone who can connect the dots between the information and activities of different services.

Lastly, there was agreement that although the ideological bases of extremist groups vary, disengagement programmes can be similar when taking into account root causes of radicalisation at an individual level.

Developing the RAN P&P Practitioners' Paper, third edition

A large part of the meeting in Budapest was spent on gathering feedback on a draft version of the RAN P&P Practitioners' Paper, third edition. This method allowed for the input of all 28 participants from prison and probation services, and related areas of expertise, from different Member States, to be addressed and included in the paper. It also helped to **highlight the needs, questions and good practices** that exist in the prison and probation community related to the topic of radicalisation.

General considerations

One of the key needs that was raised was to specifically address **radicalisation amongst the general population**. Those charged with or convicted of terrorist offenses are a clear target group, and most countries have procedures and cooperation structures in place to deal with this group. Those who come into prison based on other criminal offenses, who might be radicalised, or who might be recruited to an extremist group during prison time are a much more difficult group to categorise and develop effective working procedures around.

It is of great importance that the ideological background does not only include Islam-related extremist ideology but also **addresses far right and left-wing extremism** – especially as these are groups that are usually not charged with terrorist crimes.

Participants wanted to exclude the word "deradicalisation" and speak of **disengagement or desistance.** Especially for prison and probation professionals who work in the criminal justice area, it is important that the focus is on prevention of crime and recidivism. Having extreme thoughts is not a crime under any law, and therefore the focus of their work is not on moving the offender away from an extremist world view, but on moving the offender away from behaviour and acts that are illegal.

It is important to highlight in the practitioners' paper that prisons and probation have a role in the process of rehabilitation and reintegration, but these roles have **boundaries and other actors also have a responsibility** in this regard. Thus, good cooperation between probation, NGOs and community actors, plus the follow-up after probation has ended, should be under the scope of the paper as well. There should be a clear procedure of who is taking over in terms of care and support.

Although everyone agreed that under certain conditions prisons may function as breeding grounds or at least places of opportunity for radicalisation and extremist groups, it should also be considered that prisons can offer an **opportunity for change and reflection**.

The importance of **inter-agency trust and cooperation** must be included in the key recommendations. By including examples of how prisons and probation play a role in several multidisciplinary structures already in use – such as the Dutch Safety Houses or the Danish Info-

house – the paper would provide relevant information on the possibilities of multi-agency cooperation.

The paper aims to be relevant mostly for practitioners working in the field of prison and probation but also to be understood by less-experienced readers. To accomplish the latter, there needs to be more **clarity as regards the use of certain terms**. The paper would be more easily legible if a glossary with the most important concepts and acronyms was included. It would benefit all readers if the paper clarified who falls under the scope of the paper and how some terms – such as "radicalised", and "offender" – are defined. Lastly, to give some more background information to less-experienced readers, a **brief historical introduction on (returning) foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)** could be included – where they come from, why they are going to fight abroad, etc.

Considerations with regard to prison

When talking about management of extremist and terrorist prisoners the term "regime" is quickly mentioned, especially regarding the choice between dispersal and concentrated regimes (putting these offenders together in a separate wing or structure). However, it is important to explain what is **meant by regime** as this is not merely about this choice but also refers to the collection of measures taken to deal with a specific group of prisons (which can also be categorised, for example, in terms of their security risk rather than their offense). There is a clear need to **evaluate the different regime choices** and to derive lessons from this evaluation. There is also a need to better explain how prisoners may **leave special regimes** to move to a more general regime.

In relation to defining the regime, defining the target group also poses challenges. Without a clear definition it is very difficult to understand the exact number of offenders you are dealing with. Definitions are also important in terms of **responsibilities**. What exactly are prisons responsible for when it comes to extremist and terrorist offenders, and where does this responsibility border with or overlap with other agencies?

When placing extremist and terrorist offenders together in a specific regime, it is important to explain the risk of **"labelling"**. This has to do with the specific attention that is put on this group, both in the eyes of the public and other prisoners and staff members. There are counterproductive effects that may come from this, such as other prisoners feeling disadvantaged, staff feeling less secure with this specific group, the public thinking there is a special treatment for these offenders that they are paying for, and so on.

Risk assessment is a key instrument in dealing with extremist and terrorist offenders in prison. It is important to highlight both the **early detection methods** (e.g. through training of staff) as well as the more elaborate **individual risk assessment tools** (e.g. VERA2R).

Considerations with regard to probation

Probation is organised quite differently across the EU. For other sectors to have a good understanding of what probation work is about, there should be a **description of what probation means** across the EU and how it is organised in different models.

There is a need to identify **pros and cons of specialised probation teams working with radicalised and terrorist offenders**. The advantage is that these specialised teams develop expertise in dealing with these kinds of offenders and probation organisations can provide sufficient additional training to the right people. However, working in such a team can lead to tunnel vision and to the members of the team having a heavy work load. Several conditions need to be met: members of the team should either have both non-radicalised and terrorist offenders as clients, or a rotation system should be in place so the composition of the team changes every now and then.

In a professional approach, it is important **to avoid exclusive relationships** between the professional (e.g. a probation officer) and the offender. When it comes to building trust between the client and the probation officer some nuance is necessary; there needs to be a relationship built on trust, but the probation officer must also be able to keep a professional distance. Getting too close to the client might lead to the officer not seeing whether the client is genuine or not.

It is important to highlight **restorative justice methods**, including a clarification of the approach and an explanation of the difficulties of working with radicalised and terrorist offenders. Experiences from Ireland, Spain and Italy can serve as guidance.

It was highlighted that when addressing **social media training**, it should include training on how to deal with clients on social media. Probation officers should also be made aware of their own behaviour on social media and the dangers that lie within the use of social media (privately) when working in this field.