

24/09/2020

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Rehabilitation WG Meeting – An Update of VRWE Rehabilitation Programmes

16-17 September 2020

Online

The Diversification of VRWE as Challenges for Rehabilitation

Summary

Violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) today is not necessarily tied to some form of clearly organised movement or organisation anymore. Instead, much of it is now characterised by increasing fragmentation of scenes and movements and a diversification of the underlying ideological fragments — a development furthered by the social media-fuelled globalisation of VRWE. This diversification entails a number of challenges for rehabilitation work conducted in the scope of probation and/or exit support. Besides the fact that many of these new developments and the related challenges could potentially be covered by updating and adapting existing programmes, two main challenges remain:

- 1) The target groups for VRWE rehabilitation increasingly exist of older people, in contrast to the past focus on young adults. New programmes need to be designed taking into consideration the needs and resources of this additional target group.
- 2) An increasing number of these people come from financially and socially stable backgrounds, which negatively influences their motivation to participate in rehabilitation programmes.

Introduction

The type of rehabilitation work with VRWE that is known today was to a large extent developed and created with the second-to-last wave of VRWE in mind: from the 1980s onwards, the well-known form of subcultural VRWE, for example in the form of skinheads and neo-Nazis, became the most prominent type of VRWE. While some attempts at violent revolt or even revolution grew from these scenes, this new era of VRWE was mainly characterised by smaller-scale and more spontaneous acts of violence, often in confrontation with political opponents or in the form of attacks against minorities. From approximately 2010 onwards, a new type of VRWE can be identified. Terrorist perpetrators from this new generation are often well connected globally via the internet and very often portrayed as “lone actors”. They have been responsible for some of the worst acts of extremist and terrorist violence in recent history. Interestingly, contemporary VRWE and their wider supporting scenes seem to have moved from the fringes of society and now include an increasing number of older individuals from the middle class or even societal elites, in contrast to the predominantly youth- and counterculture-oriented VRWE scenes from the past. Additionally, right-wing extremist esotericism and conspiracy theory-focused movements, such as the “German Reichsbürger”, or the “Anastasia” movements have begun taking a more prominent place within the scene.

While VRWE has a long and complex history of change and evolution, rehabilitation programmes for individuals from these scenes have a much shorter past. So-called Exit programmes, first developed in Norway by Tore Bjørgo, aiming at supporting the disengagement (and sometimes deradicalisation) of individuals from VRWE groups or movements, have only been around since the mid-1990s. And until today, much of what is currently being implemented in the scope of VRWE rehabilitation work is still largely based on this work. Yet, if the VRWE scene has changed so significantly over the past 10 years, the question arises as to whether current approaches are still up to the task, whether they have adapted along with their target groups and where challenges can still be identified. This paper will collect the persisting challenges and identify first ideas and attempts at overcoming them.

Context

Challenges in a changing field

Both practitioners and researchers working on the topic have realised that, within the past decade, much has changed with regard to VRWE. This affects not only practitioners directly involved in rehabilitation (e.g. in the scope of exit or probation work), but also professionals active within the contexts of local authorities, police and community work. These groups of practitioners often play a pivotal role in the long-term reintegration efforts of former extremists, for example by building trust and willingness to accept the individual among local communities, or by supporting the process by finding solutions related to housing or employment. Interestingly, all of these very different groups of practitioners agreed on similar challenges that affect their daily work. The most relevant points are summarised below.

Challenges as identified by P/CVE practitioners working on rehabilitation in the context of VRWE:

- 1) **The age range has become larger, thus older target groups are increasingly relevant for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).** In light of this new development, the traditional focus on social and functional (re)integration of young adults is not sufficient anymore. In light of their older age, the needs, objectives and realistic opportunities for the additional target groups need to be carefully assessed.
- 2) **Increasing fragmentation of VRWE scenes and ideologies.** A larger number of subgroups and strands of ideological orientations can be observed. However, many of these fragmented groups exhibit stronger links to violence than the larger movements from the past. Additionally, crossover from larger conspiracy theory-focused movements can be observed (recently, QAnon and COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, but also the myth of the “great replacement”).
- 3) **Increasing blurriness between seemingly legitimate right-wing political opinions and right-wing extremism.** The rise of populist far-right to right-wing extremist parties in EU Member States poses an additional challenge for P/CVE. Programmes working on P/CVE in the context of VRWE have been coming under increasing political pressure. Additionally, from a democratic-pluralistic perspective, the reintegration of former VRWE into societies that increasingly accept right-wing extremist narratives is highly challenging and problematic.

- 4) **Mental health problems are rising amongst the target groups.** While in the past mental health issues were not the focus of attention for many practitioners working on rehabilitation, an increase in diagnosed mental health problems can be identified amongst the target group.
- 5) **Changes in the online/offline relationships affect the scene and violent behaviour.** In the past, offline actions were posted and advertised online to gain traction and followers after the fact. Nowadays, online actions and relationships facilitate offline action — and vice versa.
- 6) **Increasing interconnectivity of VRWE groups and organisations across Europe,** including paramilitary trainings of extremists from Western Europe in some Eastern European countries.
- 7) **More lone actor-style attacks being carried out.** Practitioners link this trend to the increasing fragmentation of VRWE scenes and larger globalised networks of VRWE online. While the attacks themselves may be carried out by lone actors, these individuals are often embedded within lively digital hate communities encouraging and observing attacks.
- 8) **Increasing awareness of VRWE individuals and/or groups with a background in law enforcement or security forces such as the military.** This concerns both active personnel and former members of security authorities and is of special concern due to their access to sensitive and classified information that might be used to attack or intimidate political enemies, as well as their access to weaponry and training.

Key outcomes

- **Motivational work** is affected by the changing make-up of VRWE scenes: In the fast-paced environments of online VRWE, rewards are offered to followers quickly and in an easily accessible manner. At the same time, rehabilitation work is often not able to offer similar rewards quickly and easily, which decreases an individual's interest in partaking in the long run. Additionally, and similar to before, large parts of EU societies remain hesitant when facing former VRWE individuals, even if they have undergone rehabilitation programmes and processes, creating an additional barrier for those who already began to engage in rehabilitation efforts. Therefore, additional awareness raising and outreach activities aimed at fostering understanding and support for rehabilitation work within local communities are necessary. Gender-based differences in needs and aspirations also influence motivational work, which is not yet reflected in current programming. Women-specific approaches need to be created and implemented on a larger scale. The current focus on efforts to support the social and functional (re)integration of young adults' neglects the needs of an ageing target group — and most importantly the question of what their participation in rehabilitation programmes can offer them. Standard offers and measures like educational and vocational trainings are not adequately capturing their needs.
- **Alliance building** is particularly vulnerable in light of increasing fragmentation of VRWE scenes. Many doubts remain regarding the question of who should be and who can be partners in alliances intended to support rehabilitation. There is an increasing awareness that state actors and institutions are unable to carry out rehabilitation programmes themselves and need to involve civil society actors and NGOs in a larger fashion than before. However, a lack of coordinating structures and partnership framework still impedes these efforts. This remains true for both local and national levels. However, especially local actors might have more room for flexibility and to more quickly develop new frameworks and partnerships. Additionally, the composition of current networks aimed at working on rehabilitation and reintegration is often not wide enough. In a post-digital world, new alliances — e.g. involving social media companies — need to be created.
- **Trust building** has remained the key pillar of rehabilitation work over the past 1.5 decades, but also the key challenge. Especially when an increasing number of state and civil society actors are active in the field, unclear routes of case referral can pose a threat to trust-building attempts with individuals. This is directly linked to the issue of transparency. All actors working with individuals need to be transparent about their modes of information and data sharing from the start, to avoid misunderstandings and foster long and stable relationships. Additionally, respectful attitudes and a general appreciation of the person are pivotal. It needs to be made clear that it is not the person themselves who is the enemy, but rather their destructive, or even violent and criminal behaviour, that is where the work needs to be focused on.

- **Evaluation** is the overarching theme of all efforts aimed at rehabilitation and when the work field is changing, evaluation efforts need to reflect that. Unfortunately, the evidence base remains fragmented in this working field and, as a result, impact evaluations remain notoriously challenging endeavours — if they are to be done in a meaningful way. However, the topic is present today as hardly ever before. As a result of a broader and more comprehensive understanding of evaluation, many programmes have moved to process-oriented and formative evaluations in recent years, paving the way for a better evidence base on rehabilitation in general. As a general rule of thumb, any evaluation effort — and ideally any programme — should be very clear about its exact objectives and regarding the question of what constitutes “success” from its point of view. Also, evaluations that are imposed on programmes at a late stage and without knowing the detailed circumstances under which the programme operates are less likely to produce relevant results (and gain the support from the involved practitioners) than evaluation approaches that are designed alongside the development of the programme and are able to capture the complexities adequately (also by involving practitioners early on).

When taking a closer look at these conclusions, it becomes clear that many of them concern challenges and proposals that are already being discussed on a number of levels. Many are also recognisable from work on violent Islamist extremism, and most can likely be covered by existing rehabilitation programmes if those are ready to include some new aspects and developments and to undergo some revision and readjustments. However, two distinct and new challenges that warrant additional exploration and close attention have become apparent as well:

1) Increasing age of the target group

This poses a challenge for rehabilitation on at least two levels. The first one concerns individuals who have essentially grown up and aged within VRWE scenes and groups. These individuals have spent a large part of their adult life within extremist circles and have abandoned most of their non-extremist social environment. Their functional and social reintegration will be a major challenge for rehabilitation work in light of their past since few employers and communities are willing to (re)accept individuals with extensive histories of extremist involvement and behaviours. However, the even larger issue here will be the intense work required to convince them to take part in rehabilitation programmes in the first place; that is, to motivate them. These persons have invested most of their resources (on a material and psychological level) in their extremist involvement, so the perspective of abandoning all of what they have built and believed in in the past will not be very appealing to them.

The second level concerns the increasing number of people who only turn to right-wing extremism at an older age, which constitutes an almost completely new target group, for which entirely new approaches might need to be developed. This also relates to the second point.

2) Increasing number of individuals from middle-class backgrounds

Simultaneously with the trend of an increasing age, a growing number of adults from stable middle-class backgrounds seem to be attracted by VRWE ideas, movements and groups. As was discussed before, the main focus of many current rehabilitation programmes has been on the functional and social (re)integration of youths and young adults. For these target groups, the idea of what rehabilitation can offer to the person taking part in it is clear: support in improving educational qualifications, vocational trainings, finding employment, housing, etc. For older adults from stable financial and social backgrounds, however, the question arises: What can rehabilitation work offer them concretely?

Recommendations

Based on the challenges and key lessons detailed above, some clear **recommendations to first-line practitioners** can be derived:

- 1) Give room to the individual you are working with. Begin by letting them speak about what is important to them, what is currently going on in their lives and what they feel they need. Do not immediately start talking about ideology or potentially traumatic events. Assist them with concrete problems such as finding housing and/or employment to build trust.

- 2) Whenever possible, engage the person in the form of activities such as sports or cultural events. This will create a better personal understanding than “just sitting around a table”.
- 3) Discuss the individual’s crime(s) with them — once they are ready to do so. By observing how well-reflected they talk about the subject and their role in and responsibility for it, relevant conclusions as to their progress and change can be made.

On a different level, recommendations for those involved in **programme design** can be identified as well:

- 1) Clearly define what success means for your programme/intervention and within which timeframe, including a number of intermediary factors or steps along the way (e.g. steps to social and functional integration). This will help third parties (e.g. evaluators or multi-agency partners) to better estimate and understand your programme’s methods and progress.
- 2) Empower counsellors to understand and engage in the online sphere: provide trainings and continuously work on staying up to date on the latest developments.
- 3) Do not underestimate women any longer. Specific and targeted rehabilitation approaches are necessary to work with VRWE women. Some lessons may be learned from a comprehensive set of prior experiences with women terrorists — e.g. from Germany’s Red Army Faction, Italy’s Red Brigades, the PIRA, or more recent experiences with returnees from Iraq and Syria.
- 4) Begin to work on the two key challenges now:
 - a. How can you motivate financially and socially stable target groups from middle- to upper-middle class backgrounds to partake in rehabilitation programmes? What can rehabilitation offer them?
 - b. How can you reach and engage increasingly older target groups effectively?

Further reading

[RAN Rehabilitation Manual](#) (2020). “This manual offers guidance for practitioners working to rehabilitate radicalised and terrorist offenders, both within and outside prison. It provides a comprehensive overview of the chronological phases of rehabilitation. The various actors contributing to rehabilitation processes are offered a structured assessment of important points of attention.”

[The RTV Report 2020](#). Right-wing terrorism and violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019: “The RTV dataset documents right-wing terrorism and violence in Western Europe since 1990. Each event has been coded on a range of variables, including time and location, perpetrator and victim characteristics, organizational affiliations, weapon types, and number of casualties. The dataset includes only the most severe types of events.”

[RAN Factbook Far-right extremism](#) (2019). “This factbook presents the scope of the FRE scene, from ‘classical’ militant neo-Nazi groups to local protest groups that oppose perceived ‘Islamisation’, and to online like-minded people who consider themselves members of the alt-right fringe movement. The focus is on violent extremist groups or groups that promote or condone violence.”

[RAN Ex Post Paper: Minimum methodological requirements for exit interventions](#), RAN EXIT (2016). Outline based on experiences of exit workers captured during RAN meetings in the period 2012-2015.