Small-scale meeting

24/03/2021
CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN Small-scale expert meeting
24 March 2021, Online

New offender types & appropriate measures of Exit work

Key outcomes

Recent meetings and publications within the scope of RAN and beyond have shed light on the new challenges rehabilitation practitioners are facing in light of an increasing diversification of target groups. This relates to both Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism (IE/RWE). Developments previously noted include, among others, an increasing number of middle-aged individuals, more persons from financially stable backgrounds, a growing blurriness of ideological bounds (especially regarding RWE) and a move away from Salafi-jihadism towards Islamist ideologies that easily navigate the fine line between legality and extremism. Despite the fact that many experts from research and practice have noted these developments, ideas on how to overcome these new challenges remain scarce. As a result, a small-scale expert meeting was convened to discuss which changes can actually be observed, how they affect practical work and which consequences these insights should entail for practical approaches. In short, the meeting explored this very pertinent question: Are current approaches in the fields of Exit, deradicalisation, and rehabilitation work still impactful enough?

Key findings from the meeting:

- Practitioners observe a stark growth in the number of persons exhibiting mental health issues. As such, rehabilitation measures and mental health support need to be better integrated. Be mindful not to stigmatise mental health issues when doing so, but rather promote their positive role and value.

- The fast-paced fluidity of extremist scenes and ideologies will likely persist. This fluidity is partially fuelled by the internet-led globalisation of extremist scenes and ideologies. This means it is necessary to apply flexible methodologies in practical approaches, ideally fuelled by constant monitoring and analysis, instead of narrow approaches bound to one specific notion of radicalisation.

- While flexibility within the overarching programmes is necessary to capture recent developments, specific approaches aimed at radicalised military and police personnel need to be integrated into these programmes.

- Both IE and RWE scenes improve their capabilities to avoid bans by navigating the fine line between their legal right to freedom of expression and extremist speech and actions. This results in a controversial debate over what constitutes extremism, i.e. when should P/CVE and rehabilitation work begin.

This paper will first describe the challenges discussed by experts during the meeting. Based on this, first ideas and recommendation for practitioners, policymakers and research are presented.

Highlights of the discussion

The following key challenges were identified by experts.

- **Mental health support and rehabilitation work need to be better integrated.** In previous decades, public debates often showed a flawed understanding of the connection of (violent) extremism and mental health issues. Recent developments and practical experiences, however, suggest this might be changing. An increasing number of persons in rehabilitation (or Exit and deradicalisation) programmes show signs of mental health problems. While challenges around the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members who have returned from war and detention camps, and who often display signs of trauma and PTSD, have prompted some work on this topic in the scope of IE, additional efforts are necessary regarding RWE.

- **Extremist scenes become more and more fluid and subject to globalised developments (often fuelled by online communities).** Recent months and years have shown that both the ideological and the follower profiles of extremist scenes are increasingly diversified and blurry. While previous IE rehabilitation efforts were mainly focused on Salafi-jihadism and RWE rehabilitation efforts still centred around "classic" neo-Nazis or similar forms of RWE, additional ideological strains and types of followers are now observed. This development is likely related to the continuing, internet-fuelled globalisation of extremist scenes and ideologies, leading to fast-paced changes and developments that are not being captured adequately by existing programmes. Current programmes are not designed to be methodologically flexible and quick enough to be able to respond to this challenge.

- **An increasing number of persons in extremist scenes stems from financially and socially stable, middle- to upper middle-class backgrounds.** Standard measures of rehabilitation and deradicalisation work, such as activities to support the social and functional (re-)integration of individuals, are proving ineffective when working with this target group. Nevertheless, many programmes and approaches still rely mainly on these measures. There is a need to further explore what P/CVE can offer these persons in general, and how they can be motivated and persuaded to take part in deradicalisation and Exit work in the first place (if they show neither intrinsic, nor external motivation for change).

- **Extremist actors are increasingly disguising and framing their ideas as legitimate political opinions and expressions.** Observed in RWE for some years already, this trend is increasingly being appropriated by IE. Actors have become very skilled in navigating the thin line between freedom of expression and extremist beliefs. However, closer analysis of the underlying ideas and concepts often cloaked in new, supposedly inconspicuous wording, reveal the same extremist core as before. Simultaneously, former members of hardened and openly extremist groups are often involved in these new scenes as well, providing further indication that these scenes are merely new iterations of known extremist beliefs and persons.

- **Research, policy, and practice are not connected well enough – despite growing efforts to improve this connection.** Especially in the wake of increasing diversification and more complex target groups, it has become clear that exchange between research, policy, and practice is often still too slow and many times poorly established. To respond to fast-paced developments in extremist scenes and ideologies, a better connection of these three areas is necessary.

- **Specific approaches for prevention and rehabilitation work within the police and armed forces remain scarce and need to be expanded.** In many Member States, public debates have revealed a problem that has thus far often been neglected in P/CVE debates. It concerns radicalised members of law enforcement and the military (or individuals showing sympathies for extremist and anti-democratic ideas). While staff trainings have become commonplace in the scope of P/CVE in the prison system (this is not to say that improvements cannot and should not be made), this is not yet a widely established procedure for police officers and even less so when it comes to the armed forces. Given their exposed and exceptional position within democratic societies (e.g. by exerting the monopoly on legitimate use of force), these target groups should ideally be especially rooted in counter-extremist and democratic values. However, reality has shown that significant backlog demand persists. So far, only screening measures and disciplinary procedures are established practice.

- **New sect- and cult-like groups seem to be forming in some Member States** fuelled by a combination of Christian religious extremism and right-wing extremist ideologies. However, not many Member States have put in place effective mechanisms to deal with religious extremism in a Christian context as well as sects and cults in general (especially when compared to measures against IE).

Recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners:

➔ **Establish networks with mental health professionals. Engage in mutual training and learning exercises** in which mental health professionals acquire knowledge on topics related to extremism, radicalisation and rehabilitation, while rehabilitation practitioners receive training on basic knowledge of mental health problems and the identification of the warning signs. This should strengthen the professional action ability of both professional groups. Be mindful of the gender balance among practitioners, as an imbalance might complicate access to the target group. Additionally, engage in mapping exercises to find the organisations or experts closest to you and identify key partners.

➔ **Invest in continuous monitoring and training regarding extremist scenes** (combining digital and "offline" means) to stay up to date and simultaneously equip your staff to work with new follower profiles and new ideological currents quickly.

➔ **Do not treat the digital and "offline" worlds as separate.** They have long become entwined in the lifeworld of most people, including your target groups. Purely digital P/CVE measures are not the solution, neither are offline measures that are neglecting the digital elements of contemporary life. Invest in developing intertwined approaches and pay close attention to what happens online – and how this affects offline behaviours and developments, and vice versa.

➔ **Build networks together with law enforcement and the military to gain access to the often walled-off environments in order to implement prevention measures**. Additionally, good networks with these institutions may enable direct access to work with radicalised members who are undergoing a disciplinary procedure or who have been let go, to not lose sight of them and eventually engage them in Exit, deradicalisation, and rehabilitation work.

➔ **Hold discussions on what your work can offer people who do not yet show any motivation for positive change**. How can you support them and improve their lives? How would they benefit from leaving behind the extremist environments?

Recommendations for how policymakers can best support practice:

➔ **Provide/enable the systemic structures (time and financial capacities) to allow for mutual exchange and training** between different groups of professionals. The aim is to enhance their abilities for collaboration. Currently, many practitioners simply do not have the resources to incorporate this as a voluntary add-on to their regular work. Translations of existing guiding documents and training materials into a larger variety of languages may be a good first step to support practitioners.

➔ **Provide funding to monitoring and research efforts**, aiming at producing quick, easily accessible insights into extremist scenes and their (international) developments. Practitioners should be able to draw on these insights to be able to react to new changes quickly and to identify, maybe even anticipate new trends.

➔ **Create additional forums for mutual exchange with research and practice.** These forums should be easily accessible, as little bureaucratic as possible and formats as well as topics should be defined by the participants from all professional groups in a bottom-up approach.

Follow up

Numerous elements were discussed in relation to the question of how target groups have been changing and the resulting consequences for Exit, deradicalisation and rehabilitation work. Future events and papers should take a closer look at individual challenges to adequately capture their needs and to assist practitioners in dealing with them. As such, the better integration of mental health support and rehabilitation work is the topic that requires the most urgent follow-up (and was featured as the most prominent topic of discussion during this meeting). This could be a starting point, especially for the REHAB and HEALTH working groups in RAN.

Further reading

This section highlights various papers produced within the scope of RAN and that touched upon some the topics discussed in these conclusions. The suggestions directly below are specialised papers published in 2021. Meeting conclusions are at the bottom.

- **Ethical guidelines for working on P/CVE in mental health care**

- **Rehabilitation work with convicted offenders outside of prison**

- **The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE**

- **Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE**

- **The role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE**

RAN Meeting Conclusions:

- **RAN HEALTH Conclusions, 10-11 March 2021: Rehabilitation and reintegration of extremist offenders from a mental health perspective**

- **Small-scale meeting, 24 February 2021: Digital terrorists and 'lone actors'**

- **Small-scale meeting, 16 December 2020: Radicalised police, military and prison staff**

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network **(RAN)**,
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