

**RAN
THEMATIC EVENT**

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CONCLUSION PAPER*RAN Thematic Event**22 March 2024, The Hague, The Netherlands*

Thematic event on the prison-exit continuum: How to create a smooth rehabilitation process from pre- to post- release?

Key outcomes

This thematic event brought together perspectives of practitioners with vast knowledge and experience on deradicalisation, disengagement and rehabilitation (DDR) work with violent extremist or terrorist offenders (VETOs) in the prison and post-release societal contexts. It aimed to collect practitioners' reflections on the challenges and lessons learnt from the past few years in relation to ensuring a smooth rehabilitation process from pre- to post-release, through discussing real-life case studies and looking into the current relevant rehabilitation processes under the scope of the prison-exit continuum. The goals were to identify and assess new trends, determine what works and understand what needs to be adapted within the predominant approaches and tools used in DDR work. Practitioners examined the RAN Rehabilitation Manual which was published in 2020 to assess its current relevance and formulate recommendations based on new and ongoing challenges and lessons.

- Although communities are often mentioned in the context of rehabilitation, they are not yet as involved as VETOs and their family. How can we help communities to be more inclusive, how can we benefit more from their healing capacity? The negative image of VETOs poses a challenge. Furthermore "the community" is not an entity and therefore harder to handle compared to formal institutions which align more effectively in a multi-agency approach.
- Some of the VETOs will need to leave the country after their release. The uncertainty about their future makes it difficult to determine how they should be rehabilitated or reintegrated. Considering this, VETOs may lack incentive to comply with rules or cooperate. This makes it a hard target group for practitioners (particularly concerning safety). Additionally, some VETOs who initially expected to be deported, may ultimately remain in the country and integrate into society.
- The need for multi-agency/stakeholder collaboration is undisputed. However, there is still room for optimisation in its execution, especially when it comes to legal frameworks for information exchange and connectivity of networks pre- and post-release.
- Practitioners are mostly convinced that a change for good, through rehabilitation, is possible. However, the perspective held in public debate is often more negative. This complicates trust building and reintegration.

- New ideologies can be covered in current working methods that approach violence and address ideology and biographical work. The most important factor is the personal relationship with the client. Ideology, in a way, is an external factor.
- Mental health issues are prominent among many, if not most, of imprisoned VETOs. This requires more attention and treatment, as well as having the suitable mental health professionals in multi-agency work. It is also important that the relevant information is exchanged between the different agencies in the prison-exit continuum.
- Generally, flexibility and agility are key components, also when working with new target groups. Practitioners need some room to manoeuvre when aligning with the needs and intrinsic motivation of VETOs to be rehabilitated.
- There is a need for an ongoing exchange among practitioners in the field of rehabilitation. Since the topic is dynamic and challenging, it is beneficial to learn from the successes and failures of colleagues.

Highlights of the discussion

Taking stock of lessons and challenges to DDR work along the prison-exit continuum

Thousands of violent extremist or terrorist offenders (VETOs) are imprisoned across the European Union. In 2022 alone, 380 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offences, 388 in 2021 and 449 in 2020. Many of them were convicted, while others are still standing trial. ⁽¹⁾ The average duration of imprisonment varies among the EU Member States, from 4 years in Denmark to 16 years in Greece. While these are average numbers in these states, prison sentences of much shorter time were recorded, with the lowest in 2022 of 35 days. ⁽²⁾ The RAN Rehabilitation Manual was published almost 5 years ago. Meanwhile, a significant part of convicted VETOs has been released from prison after serving their time or their imprisonment time was shortened when they were put on probation. Many were involved in different DDR programmes and interventions during their time in prison and post-release.

While practitioners get involved at different points in this process, the only ones who go through all of it are the VETOs themselves. Practitioners often face ethical and professional dilemmas as they strive to balance the subjective realities of VETOs with the need to build trust, while navigating the judicial and institutional frameworks that impose numerous requirements on practice, including the reporting of certain risk indicators. Balancing voluntary compliance with interventions and the mandatory aspects of DDR programmes is also a challenge for practitioners. Including them in decision-making is key for integrating these realities into policies, legal frameworks and rehabilitation programming.

Given the accumulated experience over the past years, it is crucial to continuously adapt practices and approaches to align with new realities. A future update of the Rehabilitation Manual could focus on the following aspects:

- How can **ethical dilemmas** be dealt with when working with VETOs in prison and on probation? How can **false compliance** be recognised and addressed across different groups of VETOs? ⁽³⁾
- More attention should be given **on disengagement strategies** – most DDR programmes focus on disengagement from violence and not deradicalisation. New insights from recent systematic reviews and evaluations of programmes should be disseminated and integrated in the Manual. ⁽⁴⁾

⁽¹⁾ Europol (2023). [EU TE-SAT report, 2023](#).

⁽²⁾ RAN (2021). [Returning to Extremism: An Overview on Terrorist Reoffending and Current Challenges](#).

⁽³⁾ See also: RAN PRISONS Working group meeting (2023). [Dealing with false or non-compliance in prison – intervention strategies to mitigate risks](#).

⁽⁴⁾ Morrison, J. F. et al (2021). [A Systematic Review of Post-2017 Research on Disengagement and Deradicalisation](#).

- More specific and practical guidance on **trauma-informed care** in the work with VETOs for all practitioners involved (not only psychologists).
- The **importance of voluntarism** working alliances should be explored more in-depth and how to establish and maintain them along the prison-exit continuum.
- **Online engagement** of young VETOs needs to be better understood by DDR practitioners, even if interventions are provided offline in prison and probation settings. In multi-agency formats, sharing such information on online activity is also important and there is a need to develop new methods to facilitate this.
- It is **important to address a sense of safety** for VETOs (including their fear of reprisals) while also ensuring the **safety of practitioners** working with the offenders across the continuum.
- The Manual needs to integrate more practical guidance, such as **how to set up multi-agency cooperation agreements and how to manage information sharing**. More examples are needed of specific protocols, agreements and operating procedures to serve as inspiration for others.

New trends and their impact on rehabilitation work

The landscape of violent extremism and radicalisation have changed over the last few years and so have the profiles and background of offenders. While the majority of P/CVE work in recent years has targeted violent right-wing extremism, religiously motivated or Islamist extremism and to some extent left-wing extremism, points of convergence have already been observed among terrorist and violent extremist actors across the entire ideological spectrum. ⁽⁹⁾ Potential new forms of violent extremism are emerging across Europe, such as violent anti-system/government extremism, not attributable to specific ideologies and often stemming from conspiracy narratives. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Another key aspect to consider is the shorter duration of imprisonment and/or probation for VETOs, due to the generally short sentences given across the EU on average.

- Practitioners witness a **widening spectrum of ideologies and narratives** in their DDR work with VETOs, but **common denominators** are antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, racism and resistance theories.
- There is a rise of **violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) cases, in hybrid or mixed ideologies as well**, especially among young men. For this latter group, fascination with violence is central and various ideological traits are combined to support this fascination. Insights from Denmark indicate that an increasing share of young individuals need **psychiatric care**.
- Offenders with **anti-authority and anti-state extremist views** present a new challenge to prison and probation practitioners. Experiences from the Netherlands, for example, show that these offenders are mostly non-violent, and very communicative and charismatic, even to prison staff. The key questions are, how to provide meaning and significance for these offenders and how to incentivise them to engage with government programmes and support services, as they do not face significant social problems and have a solid support system.
- **DDR programmes that focus on anti-violence and put emphasis on individualised approaches including biographical work** and building a trusted relationship with the inmate during the entire prison-exit continuum, should be flexible enough to adapt to different ideologies and lengths of prison sentences. CSO practitioners delivering such exit work in Germany reported that the evolving ideological landscape or new offender profiles do not change the core principles of their distancing and rehabilitation work significantly.

- There has been a growing understanding of the **role of women in extremism** and in some Member States, there are more tailored approaches to working with convicted extremist female offenders in prison, such as establishing radicalisation assessment units for female inmates in France. ⁽⁵⁾

Multi-agency and multi-stakeholder work and ensuring continuity between pre- and post-release

- Often the **DDR process is still divided between prison, probation and the community**, and only probation shares in all three domains, to different degrees. There is a need for better integration among these and a more systematic “handover” between the different professional roles involved. Joint cross-professional trainings and “job shadowing” is an approach used increasingly to align these different perspectives and establish common ground.
- **Probation** plays a vital role as a connecting factor between pre- and post-release. Practitioners in some Member States (e.g. France) find that probation is becoming increasingly complex with difficult cases that combine prison sentences and probation. Integrating probation with other practitioners and settings is important to strengthen the prevention of recidivism.
- **Continuity between prison and probation** can be achieved in many ways – for example, in Germany the same CSO practitioners providing disengagement programmes will “walk” with the client along this continuum, making the relationship of trust over longer periods a central stabilising and connecting factor along the different phases of rehabilitation.
- **Communities need to have a more central role in the prison-exit continuum** and the reintegration process post-release. A mapping of the community affected can be a starting point, including supportive and opposing forces within it. The “community” is not a homogenous stakeholder, but includes many different voices, actors and organisations. What do they need to receive the VETO upon release? The notion of healing together and the community of the victims and their perspectives should be considered carefully.
- **VETOs without legal residency status** present specific challenges, as in many Member States they are not allowed to stay in the country and reintegration into the community is not possible. Furthermore, many returned FTFs have lost the link to communities due to their longer stay abroad. How can this link be reestablished?

Recommendations

- **Involve VETOs in their DDR programming.** Involving clients in their own DDR programme planning and to some extent in the multi-agency case-conferences will improve their compliance. Moreover, they are the only ones who will be present along the entire prison-exit continuum.
- **Working with communities prior to VETO release** is key for a better post-release period, as they will receive the discharged VETO. As many hold negative opinions about released VETOs and minimal knowledge of the work that is being done in relation to DDR, working with them will ease the transition.
- **Involve families during the imprisonment period and thereafter.** Families experience difficulties due to their relative’s imprisonment and after their release. Moreover, families can be of support in the DDR process, and they should be involved during the prison-exit continuum.
- **Engage with media outlets to shape public opinion positively** regarding the rehabilitation of violent VETOs. Highlight successful reintegration stories and emphasise the societal benefits of these programmes. This approach can reduce stigma and garner community support for rehabilitation efforts.

⁽⁵⁾ RAN (2022). [RAN Study Visit to Paris on ‘Effective management of the prison-exit continuum’](#).

- **Build on experience and expertise from adjacent fields:** adopt strategies used in the rehabilitation and community reintegration of sex offenders when working with VETOs, such as restorative justice practices. These often focus on accountability, victim empathy and community involvement, which can be crucial for the successful reintegration of VETOs.
- **Programme agility:** Enhance the agility of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes by anticipating and filling gaps quickly, particularly from an institutional perspective. Civil society organisation (CSO) practitioners often possess the flexibility needed to respond swiftly to emerging needs, making them ideal for this role.
- **Collect data, good practices and experience to disseminate among other practitioners:** Systematically gather and distribute data, best practices, and experiences related to the rehabilitation of VETOs among practitioners. Sharing this information can help improve the effectiveness of programmes and foster a community of learning.
- **Create systematic and effective communication channels with policy makers.** Develop robust communication channels between practitioners and policymakers to ensure that the needs and insights of those working directly with VETOs inform policy decisions. This can help create more effective and supportive rehabilitation frameworks.
- **Build structures that do not depend on political will.** Establish sustainable structures and secure funding for rehabilitation programmes that are insulated from political change. Long-term resources are essential for the consistent support of VETOs, regardless of shifting political landscapes.
- **Create joint training programmes.** Implement joint training programmes for prison staff, police, NGO practitioners, and other relevant stakeholders. This training can foster a shared understanding of best practices and ensure that all involved parties are equipped to support VETOs effectively.
- **A continuity liaison is recommended, to walk the client from beginning of their case through to post-release.** Introduce a continuity practitioner who supports VETOs throughout their rehabilitation journey, from initial contact through post-release. This continuous support can provide stability and enhance the chances of successful reintegration, as exemplified by practices in Germany where practitioners work with clients during the entire process.
- **Create a good post-release structure and engage VETOs prior to release.** Develop a robust post-release support structure that involves VETOs before their release. Early involvement can help address potential challenges and ensure that individuals have the resources and support needed to reintegrate smoothly into society.

Relevant practices

- The certified programme **Anti-Violence and Competence Training**[®] is applied by the exit practitioners of Violence Prevention Network (Germany) ⁽⁶⁾ with at-risk individuals and offenders. It is at the core of the organisation's deradicalisation programmes for VETOs and offers flexibility to adapt to different ideologies and needs of individual cases.
- **The Multi-Agency Approach to Rehabilitation of radicalised detainees (MAR)**⁷ in the Netherlands, led by the Dutch Custodial Service, shows that multi-agency collaboration along the prison exit continuum functions less as a mere "handover" of case information between different professionals at different phases, and more as a continuous, integrated process with sustained contact between different agencies and practitioners from the outset.

Further reading

- RAN (2020). [Rehabilitation Manual](#).
- RAN REHAB Online meeting (2020). [Motivation in rehabilitation work: How to stimulate it? Online meeting 13-14 May 2020](#).
- RAN (2021). [Rehabilitation work with convicted offenders outside of prison](#).
- RAN (2021). [Returning to Extremism: An Overview on Terrorist Reoffending and Current Challenges](#).
- RAN (2021). [Released violent extremist or terrorist offenders – Continuity between prison, probation and reintegration](#), Cross-cutting Thematic Event, 6 October 2021.
- RAN (2021). [Effective management of the prison-exit continuum, Study Visit to Paris \(online\), 7-8 December 2021](#).
- RAN Conclusion paper (2022). [RAN Study Visit to Paris on 'Effective management of the prison-exit continuum'](#), 7-8 December 2021.
- RAN PRISONS (2022). [The role of multi-agency cooperation in dealing with female returnees in prison and protecting the rights of children with imprisoned parents](#).
- RAN (2022). [The role of civil society organisations in exit work](#).
- RAN PRISONS online meeting (2023). [Information exchange between the 4 Ps – police, prosecution, prison and probation – in the prison management and reintegration of VETOs](#).
- RAN PRISONS (2023). [Dealing with false or non-compliance in prison – intervention strategies to mitigate risks](#).
- RAN (2023). [Practitioner lessons for ensuring a positive transitional phase between work in prison and after release](#).

⁽⁶⁾ <https://violence-prevention-network.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Violence-Prevention-Network-Deradicalisation-in-prison-1.pdf>

⁽⁷⁾ RAN Collection (2023). [Multi-Agency Approach to Rehabilitation of radicalized detainees \(MAR\)](#). See also: RAN study visit (2023). [The Dutch Multi-Agency Approach to Rehabilitation of Radicalised Detainees \(MAR\)](#).