

06/10/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Cross-cutting Thematic Event

06 October 2021, digital

Released violent extremist or terrorist offenders – Continuity between prison, probation and reintegration

Key outcomes

While the presence of violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs) in prison is not a new phenomenon, their numbers have been growing in recent years and are currently at a 20-year high of over 1 400 such detainees. The rate of reoffending amongst VETOs is low (2-7 %) compared to “regular” offenders (40-60 % worldwide). However, cases of recidivism amongst extremist offenders can have dramatic consequences and cause a relative uproar in the media and in society. Recent attacks such as those in London in November 2019 and in Vienna in November 2020, carried out in both cases by recently released terrorist convicts, have revealed possible challenges and knowledge gaps.

The RAN cross-cutting thematic event that took place on 6 October 2021 brought together policymakers, researchers and practitioners from different EU Member States (MSs) to assess the potential threats posed by released VETOs, develop targeted recommendations on how to improve continuity between prison, probation and reintegration, and identify follow-up actions to prevent recidivism and re-engagement.

Key outcomes from the meeting indicate the need to:

- find a **balance** between the rehabilitation of VETOs and the aim of public safety;
- consider the detention period an **opportunity** in the rehabilitation and reintegration of VETOs;
- conduct **risk management** instead of risk assessment, as part of a broader long-term perspective model;
- enhance the adequacy and appropriateness of **information sharing** amongst key stakeholders (government and non-government), while avoiding issues of client mistrust;
- intensify **training** programmes for professionals, as well as efforts to share **lessons learned** and **best practices** from real-case scenarios;
- strengthen policy and practice relating to interventions for **female** offenders;
- establish criteria that define the **duration** of the rehabilitation process and its **success**;
- **communicate** intervention successes to the public.

Highlights of the discussion

The rehabilitation and reintegration of VETOs remain a paramount challenge for frontline practitioners, policymakers and society as a whole. This is due both to the increased number of these individuals and to the complexity of managing their cases. With many of their sentences coming due, the need for effective and sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration has become crucial, including to ensure that societies are protected from future harm.

The specific challenges of working with VETOs along the **prison–exit continuum** were discussed in this meeting from different perspectives (those of practitioners, policymakers and researchers), to deepen shared understandings of the ways in which **continuity** and **sustainability** can be assured throughout offender transitions, from **prison** to **probation**, and then into the **community** without legal conditions. Central to this is the need to **balance** rehabilitation and reintegration on one hand and **protecting the public** on the other.

There was a focus on the general challenges and inadequacies of current interventions, as well as on coordination and cooperation amongst the different actors involved in the prison–exit continuum, especially on:

- **Risk and needs assessment** – The needs and risk posed by individual offenders as they move through the prison–exit continuum may evolve, and thus require dynamic reassessment involving professionals with a variety of backgrounds, skills and knowledge, and perhaps specific genders, to assess the drivers to which an individual is exposed and the changing context of their rehabilitation. Current models lack gender and youth sensitivity, primarily due to the small numbers of women and child offenders, making it challenging for professionals to appropriately or accurately assess these offenders.
- **Voluntary participation** – Involvement in deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes is voluntary, but some offenders do not wish to engage in them or do not want any contact with authorities. In such cases, an alternative **systematic approach** should include activities focused on addressing the social environment of an individual, for example through the counselling of family members and others in the offender’s close circle. Another approach is to involve “formers” who may find it easier to establish contact with released offenders, with whom they can take on a mentorship role.
- **A lack of gender-sensitive programming** – Women’s involvement in violent extremism has tripled in the last 10 years, and women and children represent the majority of those now seeking repatriation from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Many women will thus face a period of detention, and the gap in programmes specifically designed for women in both the prison context and post-prison rehabilitation is a challenge that demands a prompt and systematic response. In some European countries, it is clear that prison and probation staff continue to lean on gender stereotypes, and gender is not addressed “on the ground” ⁽¹⁾. In addition, evidence suggests that women face a double burden upon release from detention — when they face the stigma of being a terrorist offender and of being a *woman* offender — presenting additional gender-specific barriers to reintegration.
- **Information sharing** – Inadequate information sharing between agencies is a recurring problem that can limit continuity; but sharing certain forms of information without the consent of offenders can result in mistrust, and sharing too much information about an offender can also burden the relationship or create biases.
- **The role of (social) media towards VETOs** – When the identity and activities of VETOs appear in (social) media before their imprisonment, especially with details such as their full name, photograph and background information, this can significantly jeopardise their rehabilitation process and opportunities for a “normal life” after release (e.g. finding a job). Moreover, unrelated incidents of extremist violence, such as terrorist attacks, can impact the management of these offenders and can result in the withdrawal of community-level support for their rehabilitation and reintegration.

⁽¹⁾ In some countries, prison managers argue that women extremists do not “pose the same challenges” as men and are therefore not placed in high-security units. Good practice does exist; for example, in the Netherlands 15 women convicted of terrorism charges are held in a bespoke high-security wing, with a child-friendly visiting centre, and gender-appropriate skills training and rehabilitation activities on offer.

- **Awareness of public perception** – Many offenders are unaware of the extent to which media reports of their extremist activities have fostered negative public perceptions, or the extent to which such perceptions can affect their rehabilitation.
- **Legal status** – For offenders who cannot remain in the EU upon their release from prison, either because they are not EU nationals or because their citizenship has been revoked, the rehabilitation process will be different. The post-release phase will contain more uncertainties in perspective which can be of influence for the intrinsic motivation to rehabilitate.
- **The duration and success of rehabilitation programmes** – Rehabilitation, like radicalisation, is a non-linear process. As an individual moves through this process, they may waver in feelings or beliefs, face doubts and dilemmas, and make various choices to overcome difficulties. There are no concrete criteria that can define the duration of this process or the contours of its success in general terms. While police tend to consider recidivism (violating the law) the key criterion, this should not be the single metric by which success is defined.

Some common challenges that arise as offenders move from prison, to probation, to society, were highlighted in the context of each of these phases of transition. In the **prison** context, key challenges and lessons learned include:

- There is no consensus on the best of **prison management approaches**, to best support the rehabilitation of VETOs; either: (1) the **concentration** of VETOs in a limited number of prison facilities, or (2) the **dispersion** of VETOs amongst general prison populations. Both models were presented in the meeting and are comparable in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, and how they impact rehabilitation. However, it was noted that a focus on VETOs within prisons may cause tensions or result in their unequal treatment compared to other offenders.
- **Prisons need skills and capacity** – There is a need for specific knowledge on how to deal with VETOs, especially regarding changes in their behaviour that may foretell indoctrination or indicate (religious) radicalisation. Moreover, trauma-informed and gender-sensitive approaches are important. Addressing this requires solid training for prison staff and availability of modern technology.

In the **post-release phase, with legal restrictions**, the **evaluation** of offenders is key to dynamically assessing their risks, resources, engagement and ability to adjust to the situation.

- The working relationship between a VETO and their assigned probation officer, who can help an offender build resilience, is crucial and takes **time** to establish. In comparison with other prisoners **turnover** amongst probation personnel can be a bigger obstacle for the continuity of service delivery.
- **Cooperation** with non-governmental actors such as social intervention practitioners is valuable in the process of disengagement and rehabilitation; yet there are **limitations** to information sharing amongst professionals with different profiles.

In the context of reintegration into **society**, one of the main challenges is the **disappointment** offenders may feel with their everyday life after release, primarily related to:

- The ability of the **person** to build a livelihood and remake meaningful connections with family, (religious) community and others, which is beyond the scope of many programmes. While it is possible to provide contacts, make suggestions, offer advice and mediate conflicts, much of the hard work of reintegration must be done by the individuals themselves, including by overcoming frustrations that may arise.
- The **perception of the public**. If this perception is negative, it can seriously hamper the reintegration of VETOs into a community. Changing this perception is difficult, leading some offenders to relocate and/or change their identities.

Possibilities for intervention include providing help to VETOs to solve practical problems, create a new healthy network, and restore ties with family and connections to society, as well as investing in empowerment, resilience

building and specialised care (therapy). On top of this, spaces where offenders can reflect on ideology and receive counselling from mentors, experts, psychologists, imams, formers and coaches could be valuable.

Recommendations

- 1. Diversify opportunities** within the prison context (reform, opportunity, second chances) and exhibit optimism and positivity when discussing and assessing rehabilitation options and opportunities during the transitional phases from prison to society.
- 2. Reconsider the balance between rehabilitation and public safety.** These objectives will always be in tension, but there is a strong argument for relaxing post-release conditions (e.g. limitations on movement) in certain contexts, to reduce their potential to undermine the aims of rehabilitation.
- 3. Use a multi-agency approach and tailor-made interventions.** No single approach or solution, and no single authority or actor, can address the needs of all VETOs. Tailor-made, long-term interventions supported by a multi-agency approach to rehabilitation are crucial, at all stages of the prison–exit continuum. Interventions should begin in the first month of detention, and they should be selected, along with the most suitable specialists, by using the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model. Involving key stakeholders and institutions in rehabilitation programming at an early stage is also important. Criteria should be developed and met by each actor to avoid gaps and enhance cooperation and communication (quality management); and the effectiveness of programming should be monitored and evaluated regularly.
- 4. Emphasise risk management, not risk assessment.** Risk assessment tools are often mistakenly thought of as a key means of preventing reoffending; but such assessments are reliable only in a specific moment and require constant adaptation to the different variables that appear during the prison–exit transition process. Risk *management* is a better tool, as it is broader in scope and has a long-term perspective. Additionally, the extension of a classic risk and needs assessment model into the RNR model is considered more accurate.
- 5. Manage expectations before release through a scenario testing approach, to avoid disappointment.** The expectations of offenders can be managed prior to release if they are asked to engage with various scenarios they may face after release. Practitioners can test different approaches to find the most suitable solutions for avoiding disappointments that may generate the grievances that could lead an offender back to radicalisation. Practitioners should be honest about the public perception VETOs may confront post-release, to help them develop a realistic view of the environment to which they are returning.
- 6. Involve NGOs in rehabilitation programming,** to fill gaps caused by the mistrust many VETOs feel in government authorities, which makes them unwilling to communicate and cooperate. Introducing NGOs into the rehabilitation process could reduce these gaps, but this must be coupled with a framework of cooperation agreed on between non-government and government actors that establishes continuity and builds trust amongst different stakeholders.
- 7. Enhance the flow of information.** Inadequate information sharing amongst agencies (both state and non-state) can impact the delivery of support and may mean that some offenders receive suboptimal services. Efforts must be made to improve the flow of information; and, where possible, this should be done with the consent of offenders to avoid potential mistrust.
- 8. Enhance efforts to connect offenders to communities.** Interventions directed at offenders themselves (psychological support, housing and job assistance, etc.) are often prioritised over those that aim more broadly to connect these offenders to society. Yet, there is a need to better prepare communities for the reintegration of VETOs, and efforts should be made to address this imbalance in interventions, where it applies.
- 9. Communicate the success of interventions to the public.** High-profile cases involving offenders who have previously been the beneficiaries of intervention before returning to ideologically justified violence (for instance, the above-mentioned attacks in London and Vienna) tend to provoke calls to end these interventions. However, research has shown that public awareness of the success of interventions is associated with increased public support for these initiatives. Promoting these successes also helps create a positive environment for released offenders in public spaces and increases the likelihood that their rehabilitation will also be successful.

- 10. Strengthen policy and practice relating to interventions for female offenders.** It is vital that more focus is directed at adapting interventions to the specific needs of female offenders. Because women make up such a small minority of most prison populations, prison policies and staff often lack an awareness of gender and fail to account for the unique needs of female prisoners. Communities and civil society organisations must also be prepared in advance of the release of women from prison into society, so that they can offer appropriate support. In fact, this is a key element for to the successful long-term reintegration of women, who face different challenges than male offenders.
- 11. Invest more in training and awareness raising amongst prison and probation staff,** to help them handle media requests, including guidance on what questions to answer and how. These stakeholders must be aware of the power of public perception to significantly impact the success of reintegration (positively or negatively). Vitally, prison and probation staff must also receive gender awareness training. All such trainings should help participants understand what it feels like to stand in another’s shoes.
- 12. Intensify efforts to share lessons learned and best practices.** It is not always possible to simply replicate the approaches adopted in other countries or regions, given the extent to which contexts vary. Nevertheless, it is recommended that best practices are shared, as well as failures in case management processes, nationally and internationally.
- 13. Encourage more research on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programming.** There are many weaknesses in how the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes is assessed, and these could be strengthened through evidence-based research on risk assessment tools, recidivism and the elements of rehabilitation programming itself. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners should be encouraged, to examine the challenges and trends of radicalisation from a variety of informed perspectives.

Follow-up

- 1) RAN Small-scale expert meeting on effective communications when FTFs return, 1 December 2021.
- 2) RAN Cross-cutting thematic event – Management of returning FTFs and their family members with a focus on returning women and children, 14-15 December 2021.

Further reading

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1. Khalil, J., Wallner, C. & White, J. (2021) *Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Extremist Offenders in Europe: Mapping Programmes and Reviewing Evidence of their Success (and Failure)*. Radicalisation Awareness Network Policy Support.
2. Khalil, J., Zeuthen, M. & White, J. (2021) *From Prison to Society: Enhancing Continuity Between Detention and Post-Release Programming in Cases of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Offenders*. Radicalisation Awareness Network Policy Support.
3. Ravagnani, L. (2021). *Rehabilitation work with convicted offenders outside of prison*. Radicalisation Awareness Network. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_ad-hoc_rehab_outside_of_prison_20201120_en.pdf
4. White, J. (2021). *Policy Lessons for Exit Programming: Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Female Extremist Offenders and Beyond*. Radicalisation Awareness Network Policy Support.
5. Williams, R. J. (2016). *Approaches to violent extremist offenders and countering radicalisation in prisons and probation* (second ed.). Radicalisation Awareness Network. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/ran_pp_approaches_to_violent_extremist_en.pdf