

***Prevention of radicalisation in the context of prison and
probation - insights from the
Radicalisation Awareness Network***

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From: Claudia Heinzemann and Erich Marks (Eds.):
International Perspectives of Crime Prevention 11
Contributions from the 12th Annual International Forum 2018
within the German Congress on Crime Prevention
Forum Verlag Godesberg GmbH 2020

978-3-96410-002-3 (Printausgabe)

978-3-96410-003-0 (eBook)

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Prevention of radicalisation in the context of prison and probation - insights from the Radicalisation Awareness Network

On 29 May 2018, three persons are killed in Liège (Belgium) by Benjamin Herman, a criminal on temporary leave from prison. Herman is said to be radicalised in prison. The attack is claimed by Islamic State a day after the attack. Above a broader analysis the Washington Post puts the headline ‘Europe’s prisons breed terrorism. Can anything be done?’¹ Indeed, also some other profiled European terrorist spent time in prison before for other crimes and have either radicalised there or met other prisoners that became partners in extremist activities. For example, Amedy Coulibaly who killed four hostages during the attack on the Hypercacher Kosher Supermarket met Chérif Kouachi, one of the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attack in prison.

Although prison is not the only place in society where individuals radicalise (further), it does provide opportunities that should be mitigated. Apart from being a perceived breeding ground or incubator prison and probation are also expected to play a major role in the prevention of radicalisation, to keep society safe and reintegrate people in society. Within the Radicalisation Awareness Network there has been a working group of Prison and Probation that has dealt with this issue. Main findings can be found in the RAN P&P Practitioners Working Paper ‘Approaches to countering radicalisation and dealing with violent extremist and terrorist offenders in prisons and probation’.²

This article will provide some insights on how this prevention can be shaped. After setting the scene by linking prison and probation to prevention or radicalisation we will focus on some important aspects of working on prevention: multi-agency, NGO’s and municipalities, families, and formers. To end, some of the current and future challenges will be presented.

¹ Amanda Erickson, Europe’s prisons breed terrorism. Can anything be done? (Washington Post 26 July 2018).

² Torben Adams, RAN P&P Practitioners Working Paper ‘Approaches to countering radicalisation and dealing with violent extremist and terrorist offenders in prisons and probation’.

Prison and probation and radicalisation

Prison and probation are linked in four ways with radicalisation:

- Individuals who are sentenced for extremist or terrorist acts will spend time in prison and might receive further conditions that will connect her/him to probation;
- Prison is a place where persons make plans to change their life (for good or bad). If you want to break with your past a radical ideology can offer new purposes and recognition;
- Apart from punitive measures, prisons and probation are supposed to work restorative, to provide an environment that contributes to rehabilitation, also for those who are radicalised;
- Part of the regular offenders that end up in prison or under probation are vulnerable to radicalisation or use the ideology to legitimize their criminal behaviour.

These four ways pose several challenges. For example, the presence of radicalised individuals in an environment where others are looking for a new meaning of life might result in favorable conditions for recruitment. Extremists of different ideologies can cause tensions among prison populations. Furthermore, extremist ideologies do not accept the state as it is and therefore question the legitimacy of institutions like prison and probation and their employees. Meanwhile there are high societal expectations on one hand asking for being firm to radicalised individuals on the other hand working on rehabilitation them to safeguard society.

Prevention of radicalisation in the context of prison and probation is multi-layered. For those vulnerable to radicalisation primary or secondary prevention is needed, e.g. by organising meetings with religious leaders to provide some guidance in spiritual matters (as alternative for extremist supply) or to work on critical thinking. For those who have committed extremist/terrorist offenses tertiary prevention is most suitable. This demands for more in-depth and tailormade interventions in the domain of disengagement (leaving an extremist environment) or deradicalisation (abstaining from the extremist ideology). Processes like these can take a long time, exceeding prison or even probation time.

In order to implement interventions in an adequate way it is key to have a good system to recognize signs of radicalisation in the behaviour and verbal expressions of the prisoner or client and to make clear risk and needs assessments in a structured way. If the assessment shows worrisome results, action is not obvious yet, especially if the individual is not breaking the rules or conditions imposed to him/her. Compulsory participation to interventions for deradicalisation is not considered effective. For a sustainable change, an intrinsic drive is required which is often not present initially. By building trust or at least a working relation windows of opportunities open. A safe prison environment is a prerequisite for offenders to change. When they experience the pressure of other prisoners and/or do not trust the prison staff opportunities for change are smaller because of fear for repercussions. In the meantime, the safe prison environment also serves as prevention for those vulnerable to radicalisation. In a well-kept prison the need for joining a group decreases as personal safety is already secured by the system. When well organised and not overcrowded it is also easier to signal.

One way of preventing recruitment is keeping terrorist offenders apart from the general prison population by placing them on separate wings. Some Member States have this system. Apart from safeguarding other prisoners from extremist influences this approach also allows for a better trained staff, dedicated facilities, and higher security measures. Others will argue this way of confinement is complicating reintegration as they will meet only likeminded individuals which makes it difficult to disengage.

Probation is taking over responsibility on a difficult point of the rehabilitation process. Release from prison comes with less restrictions and therefore more opportunities to contact or to be contacted by the old radicalised environment. It is also the period of the reality check. Does freedom bring what people had hoped for whilst in prison? For example, are they welcome in their family, do they find a job? Negative experiences and disillusion can contribute to relapse or further radicalisation.

How to set up multi-agency cooperation with regards to prevention and deradicalisation in prison, probation, and release?

During the process from trial to being fully (re-)integrated in society a lot of stakeholders are involved. Apart from the radicalised individual (and perhaps their family and some good friends) none of the stakeholders will be present during the whole process. The RAN Rehabilitation Manual distinguishes 7 phases in the process with 13 different actors, varying from institutions like prison and probation to social worker, exit interventionists and psychologists.³ This results in several multi-agency settings that have to be connected to each other for transfer of information or continuation of interventions. This transfer can be realized by handing over files but also by involving some key partners who will be responsible in the next phase of the process. For example, probation is often involved in the release plan of a prisoner.

Given the nature of exit work multi-agency work is almost inevitable. Deradicalisation and disengagement processes encompass a broad range of activities roughly to be divided in working on the mindset (like coaching, psychological support, post-trauma support, anger management and religious counseling) and practical matters (like education, work, and housing). For delivering this task more actor will need to be involved and the different actions will have to be coordinated. When working in multi-agency cooperation it is important to have one practitioner appointed who is responsible for a specific case and who is the central point of contact for the radicalised person. Multi-agency cooperation also needs coordination to make the system run smoothly. In their parts of the process prison and probation will play a key role as the verdict of the judge puts them in the position to take decisions. In the prison setting multi-agency does not always imply involvement of other institutions and can refer to different types of actors working for the prison service (for example wardens, psychologists, social workers and security staff).

Apart from delivering interventions multi-agency cooperation can also be beneficial for early detection of signs of (further) radicalisation and assessment of this information. Often signs are not explanatory on their own and it is rather the pattern of more signs that indicate possible radicalisation. To gather the signs and the expertise to understand them, multi-agency cooperation is key.

³ Dennis Walkenhorst et al, RAN Rehabilitation Manual. Rehabilitation of radicalised and terrorist offenders for first-line practitioners (2020).

Both for the intervention as for the signaling function of multi-agency cooperation solid agreements on data exchange are a prerequisite. This sometimes poses a challenge due to professional secrecy or GDPR in general. Good protocols giving the participants clear instruction on what they can share and how can be helpful. There is also a cultural dimension to this. If the multi-agency cooperation partners trust each other's judgement less exchange of information is needed. Finally, in most Member States there are exceptions when it is legitimate to break secrecy in case of emergency that can be used under that given circumstances.⁴

What roles can NGOs and municipalities play?

The involvement of NGOs differs from member state to member state. One of the main reasons for choosing to work with them is their independence from the state. This can lower the threshold for radicalised individuals to engage with them as they often deny the legitimacy of the state. The independent position is not always noticed by radical offenders. To a certain extent they may be right as a lot of the NGOs are state funded. Other reasons can be that practitioners working for an NGO have to report less, can be representatives of the same communities, have less bureaucratic procedures and can work with religious counseling without getting in conflict with the division between faith and state. Counter-indications mentioned are the fact that NGOs have less or limited access to confidential information and that working with a dangerous target group should not be outsourced. In practice we see that solutions are found to mitigate the objections for both positions. For example, some state-run exit programmes have clear arrangements on what information is to be considered as confidential information between participant and exit worker and what should be reported. Some NGOs receive confidential information (after the necessary security checks).

Municipalities are generally the ones who become the conductors of the multi-agency cooperation after release or probation time. They are well positioned to do so as they are commissioning main actors like social work, education, job centers and so on. On top of this they mostly have close contacts to communities living in their constituency. This is also marking the point that radicalised individuals are gradually again becoming ordinary reintegrated persons.⁵

⁴ Kiran Sarma, RAN Issue Paper. Multi-agency working and preventing violent extremism I (2018).

⁵ Magnus Ranstorp, RAN Policy Paper. Developing a local prevent framework and guiding principles - Part

What is the role of families in reintegration and how can they be supported?

Family members are often one of the few people left who will stand with a radicalised person outside the extremist scene. When making plans for post-release and rehabilitation therefore families play a pivotal role. Some precaution is needed here. Some families (or members) can be radicalised themselves as well and not feeling at ease within the family setting could have been one of the triggers for radicalisation in the first place.

It is key for families and the individual to be reintegrated to realise that welcoming back the ‘lost son/daughter’ can come with complications. The returning individual will have had experiences that have impact on their personality and wellbeing (e.g. extremist scene, war zone, prison). Meanwhile also the family life went on. So, there will be some desynchrony. This partly can be mitigated by encouraging contact during prison time. Another step that can be taken is offering support to the families on how to deal with the situation. Ideally this already takes place before release. Examples of support that can be delivered are providing information on post-traumatic behaviour or the extremist environment the family member was in, tips for communication (avoiding conflict), giving information on signs of radicalisation and – last but not least- mental assistance for the family members who are in need of it.

For families it turns out to be complicated to share their concerns if this can have negative repercussions. For example, if a mother is worried about the nationalistic websites her son is watching she perhaps feels the need to discuss to see if her concerns are right but doesn’t want the situation to escalate to starting a police investigation. Therefore, it is key to have practitioners in place that are trusted by families and do not have the obligation to report immediately (unless there is clear and present danger).

Is there a role for “formers” in all of this and, if so, what can it be?

The role of former extremists in interventions is debated throughout the EU. Those critical on involving them will point at the complexity of how to determine that somebody indeed has left a radical move-

ment or thoughts. Others will emphasize the benefit of the personal experience of the former that helps to relate to individuals that consider entering or leaving an extremists group. In prison and probation settings the “use” of formers as interventionist can prove to be complicated as they might not get clearance to enter facilities or work for these organisations because of a criminal record. Rules differ from MS to MS.

In general, it can be said that formers are not the golden bullet to work on prevention of deradicalisation. Their input and insights can be very useful both to radicalised individuals as to professionals working with this target groups. However not all formers will be able to play this role. Abstaining yourself does not automatically imply that you are a good supporter in helping others. And when working as a main interventionist the experience of being a former does not compensate for education in counseling. Formers therefore need to be trained also to create a certain professional distance to safeguard themselves. For the prisoner/client perspective the acceptance of working with a former will differ. If someone is still very attached to an extremist group or thinking pattern the former is a traitor who ‘changed sides’. Whereas a person is in doubt whether he/she will leave the environment or is having a hard time after leaving might find recognition from the former or the proof that change is possible.⁶

How can prevention and exit work be improved in the future? What is needed to be more effective?

Looking at the current state of play of prevention and exit work in prison and probation throughout the EU we see that a lot has been achieved in the last decade. Employees have been trained on awareness and signals, in an increasing number of member states dedicated risk and needs assessments are in place and exit work is being executed by prison and probations services themselves or are incorporated in the approach of rehabilitation of radicalised offenders. A few challenges remain.

First, there is the general debate on the resources spent to prevention of radicalisation and the outcome. The question “what works” is very legitimate however hard to answer. This applies both to primary pre-

⁶ RAN Centre of Excellence, Ex Post Paper Dos and don'ts of involving formers in PVE/CVE work (2017).

vention where it is hard to claim that a certain intervention was the determining factor for the target group staying out of radicalisation as to tertiary prevention where there is also the debate if everyone is changeable in the end. A complicating factor is the relatively small sample of cases involved. Nevertheless, a sense of urgency is felt among, practitioners, governments commissioning interventions and academics to have a closer look at interventions.⁷

Secondly, a bigger cohort of foreign terrorist fighters and home-grown terrorists who were involved on domestic attacks (or attempts) will leave prison in the upcoming years. By consequence, there will be a peak of this group under probation and eventually will have no further obligations. From that moment on it is up to the municipalities and communities to continue the prevention work. Only then it will become clearer what the impact of recent work prison and probation has been when it comes to relapse or reoffending in a broader sense.

Thirdly, due to large impact on European and non-European soil the emphasis in prevention of radicalisation was centered on islamist extremism. It is expected that other ideologies (rightwing, leftwing, and single-issue extremism) will become more prominent.⁸ This raises the challenge to adapt existing interventions also to new target groups. To a large extent the radicalisation and exit processes show similarities. However there also will be differences like for example the contribution of clergymen (imams).

Finally, polarisation in societies makes rehabilitation efforts more complex. Where for others with a criminal record finding a job or housing already can be difficult this tends to be more problematic for extremist offenders. Some form of acceptance is needed for integration and a motivational factor for offenders to put effort in their process of change. In the meantime, polarisation also is making it less clear which opinions are still 'normal' and acceptable and where radicalisation begins. As professionals in the field of prison and probation are also citizens of society, they are also subject to the climate of firmer opinions and will need a modus to deal with this in their work with (potentially) radicalised prisoners/clients.⁹

⁷ Maarten van de Donk, Milena Uhlmann and Fenna Keijzer, RAN Peer and Self Review Manual for Exit Work (2020) and Merel Molenkamp, Lieke Wouterse and Amy-Jane Gielen, RAN Guideline Evaluation of PCVE Programmes and Interventions (2018).

⁸ Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT) 2020

⁹ Steven Lenos, Wessel Haanstra, Marjolein Keltjens and Maarten van de Donk, RAN Polarisation Management Manual (2017).

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