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**Trends in the Disengagement-, Rehabilitation-,
and Risk-Assessment-Process of extremist
and terrorist offenders**

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Context

The genuine reintegration of terrorist and extremist offenders is one of the biggest challenges of our times. Because in many cases, only an alleged reintegration into society takes place (u.a. Cherney, 2021; Jawaid, 2017). This mistake can cost lives as we have sadly seen in Vienna 2020. The Vienna attacker was in fact a terrorism recidivist, as he had already been convicted on terrorism counts (Lehberger et al. 2020). This is not just a problem specific to Austria, but it impacts a number of countries within and outside of Europe.

Introduction:

Generally, terrorist and extremist offenders are not seen as a special type of inmate. They are seen as displaying similar types of challenges and problems that ought to be solved, to which additional ones manifest as a consequence of their terrorist or extremist lives. There are only few specific practices for this group and they usually **revolve around mentorship, schemes and different approaches of working with the ideology**. The staff further mentioned certain specificities for this group in interviews for the [EUTEx](#) project, such as additional methods, conducting (a certain type of) risk assessment, or addressing particular aspects more intensively. It is also estimated that such cases need a longer and more intensive care and supervision.

While changing ideas might be difficult or even impossible in a short amount of time,

the focus in prison and probation should be on **changing behaviour, decrease aggression and committing to pro-social activities**.

In their concrete applications, these practices present a number of parallels across European countries, but also some specificities. To provide some examples, innovative methods such as **schema therapy, holistic systems of working with the biography, reframing, and mirroring** were mentioned. Some other methods focus on working with emotions, identifying the so-called '**lure moments**' and **environmental influencers**, creating alternative life narratives outside ideological scripts, enhancing social skills, acting on personal and social deficits, working on cognitive distortions, or on family structures. Also establishing trust and a relationship are crucial and something that the professional would primarily have to achieve.

While single initiatives addressing disengagement work with right-wing extremists already existed in some countries, the big boost to disengagement work in Europe came with the focus on Islamist extremism. Initially, much of the work involved counselling services, followed later by other secondary and tertiary prevention measures and increasingly also reintegration work. The latter was given particular attention due to the relatively large numbers of returnees from the Syrian conflict and considering the new situation of women and children returnees. In recent years, the rise in violent right-wing extremism has indicated

the need to also advance disengagement and reintegration efforts beyond Islamist extremism in a more systematic manner (EUTEx, 2022b).

Disengagement and Reintegration

As of right now there are several types of specific approaches, as well as various concrete methods in the field of disengagement and reintegration work, which are currently used (EUTEx, 2022a):

- the **classic social work approach** focusses on support in aspects related to daily and practical problems: housing, work, finances, relationships, social networking, the organisation of leisure time, and others. In its **socio-spatial approach**, the focus is especially on the social network and the community for the reintegration process;
- the **systemic approach** is also focused on the client's social environment and how it needs to be re-structured. The work here is with the families, personal and professional relationships
- the **counselling approach for others** offers information and advice to family members and people close to the radicalised person;
- the **counselling approach for individuals** works on ideological aspects and offers counter- and alternative narratives;

- the **cognitive-behavioural approach** focuses on changing attitudes, cognitions, and values and thus a shift in their behaviour;
- the **mentoring approach** is based on the presence of a mentor who participates in the reintegration process. Their relationship with the offender must be based on mutual trust.

Prison and probation

Both prison and probation have a crucial role in disengagement and reintegration efforts. Practices which showed positive results towards disengagement and rehabilitation during the time of prison and probation are:

- **positive social contacts**, establishing trust, relationships and contact building; these are also a basis for recognising early doubts, building up initial competences and showing alternatives;
- support in search for **orientation**;
- **educational and entertainment offers**;
- facilitating **religious practices**;
- **good organisation** of everyday life and a good social climate among inmates and between inmates and staff;
- **transition management** is crucial.

In order to increase the possibility of success, an **individual tailor-made approach, multi-agency cooperation and the involvement of civil society** are needed (EUTEx, 2022a).

Risk assessment

Apart from risk assessment tools designed specifically for extremist and terrorist offenders, practitioners also use other existing, in part actuarial tools, if deemed relevant. A perceived advantage of structured professional judgement tools is that they structure the biographical work and facilitate cooperation with others in the team.

However, the use of current risk assessment tools alone is insufficient for the purposes of the concrete rehabilitation and reintegration work. Beyond risk assessment, additional tools are needed to address aspects like needs, opportunities, and resources for rehabilitation and reintegration. Risk assessment should be followed by the creation of an individual plan that should contain relevant interventions and programs, and which should be assumed by the inmate. Ideally, there ought to be continuity of the implementation of this plan after imprisonment.

The importance of information exchange and continuity of care is recognised throughout the whole **transition management** process. It is not just about security considerations, but also about making sure that the individuals' needs are correctly identified during the inmates' stay in the correctional institution and that they will continue to be met after the prison period (EUTEx, 2022b).

Need for further research:

There are training needs also with regards to updated knowledge on extremist scenes,

radicalization, and disengagement for prison staff. Ideal would be a tailored, systematic, and sequenced methodology that allows to monitor progress over time and adapt interventions accordingly.

Gender aspects remain underdeveloped in disengagement and reintegration approaches. In the EU, female clients present specific and/or additional challenges, while approaches outside the EU usually avoid the criminalisation of female returnees. At the same time, approaches outside the EU display partly more elaborated reintegration programmes for returning children, which are focused on "normalization" and non-discrimination (EUTEx, 2022b).

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