

EX POST PAPER

Right-wing extremism on the rise?

Summary

The aim of the plenary meeting on 12-13 December in Prague, was to discuss some of the issues most relevant to the prevention of radicalisation in prison and probation settings today: returning foreign terrorist fighters, the rise of right-wing extremism and the phenomenon of social polarisation.

The meeting was organised in close cooperation with the Czech Prison and Probation Services. Practitioners and experts from several EU Member States attended to learn and share their experiences on the three topics. Given that in 2017 the RAN CoE dealt extensively with polarisation¹ and returning foreign fighters² and produced two manuals on these topics, this paper will focus on right-wing extremism.

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¹ RAN Polarisation Management Manual, 2017, available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_polarisation_management_manual_amsterdam_06072017_en.pdf

² RAN CoE (2017), Manual on Responses to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) and their families, available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf

Introduction

Right-wing extremism appears to be on the rise in several EU Member States, in part a reaction to the refugee crisis and religiously inspired extremism. According to the latest Europol TE-SAT report³, right-wing extremism lacks a solid organisational structure, and attacks are therefore mainly individual initiatives. However, the Europol Report points to the fact that right-wing attacks and incidents could be underrepresented in these figures as they are not always categorised as terrorist attacks. They are instead sometimes considered as hate crimes, or not motivated by ideology.

For many EU countries, right-wing extremism is not new for prison and probation services. However, right-wing extremism poses new challenges: new, more subtle narratives, new symbols, new tensions and conflicts between prisoners (for example those convicted for religiously-inspired terrorism and right-wing extremists) and between inmates and staff.

Only in September 2017, the United Kingdom added two right-wing extremist groups to the list of banned organisations⁴. Indeed, membership and support to Scottish Dawn and NS131 organisations are now illegal and can result in imprisonment.

Traditional right-wing extremism

Neo-Nazi groups can be considered as old school movements. Today's right-wing extremist groups are likely to follow one of three agendas:

- Anti-migration and anti-Islam groups consider migrants as a threat to national or Western values. Violence is directed towards refugee centres and mosques.
- Politicians are also increasingly a target of right-wing extremist groups, who are regarded as traitors, or naïve and having 'let it happen' (foreigners/Muslims taking over the country). The murder of the British MP Jo Cox in 2016 is a well-known example of increasing hate towards politicians.
- Some groups have developed an agenda around concerns for abandoned citizens. These groups are not only right-wing or other extremist groups – they consider themselves as keepers of national values and therefore legitimise their violent actions as protecting those that the state fails to protect. An example is the Reichsbürger (Reich citizens), a group of individuals who reject the legitimacy of the German State and only recognise the Reich's 1919 Weimar Constitution.

The shifting trend from a focus on 'traditional' grievances to current ones is recognisable in several EU Member States. Right-wing extremism is growing as a polarising social and political discourse

³ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat/2017/>

⁴ <http://www.thejournal.ie/far-right-uk-ban-3621482-Sep2017/>

that is fuelling violence by individuals and small groups against Muslims and migrants. And because politicians fail to do so, these groups believe in their role as keepers of national values and legitimise violence in this way.

According to national statistics, there was a sharp increase in right-wing extremist crimes in Germany in 2015 (by 32.5%) and again in 2016 (by 12%). The same statistics state that in 2016, there were 12 000 right-wing extremists in Germany prepared to use violence.

These figures indicate that tensions are growing within society, fuelled by the migration crisis and terrorist attacks, and facilitated by a black-and-white thinking, with each group having a firm stance against other groups. This data is also worrisome from another angle: tensions between groups are at the heart of further radicalisation in a polarised society.

New generation of the extreme right

The challenge is to recognise what is new with right-wing extremist groups. Experience in some Member States suggests that the new generation of the extreme right is less visually recognisable. While old school groups had a 'clothing style' that corresponded to their ideology (right wing) and made them immediately recognisable, this has changed. Society had started to react against the extreme right, and it is therefore no longer attractive for youngsters to stigmatise themselves by adopting a specific appearance.

This has led to the development of a new combination of style (hipster) with ideology (Nazi). On this basis, the term 'nipster' has been coined – dictated by the need to give the neo-Nazi movement a more hippy and friendly appearance.

In addition to changing style to attract more young people, some right-wing extremist groups are also seeking to develop a more subtle narrative. Because of the shift in the focus mentioned in the previous paragraph, more people are now attracted to a narrative that opposes politicians, European values, migration and asylum. Most of these people are not extremists and are not on the radar of security services. Yet they might be prone to violence. In this way, right-wing extremism is becoming more acceptable than the neo-Nazi movement of previous generations. In some EU Member States, political parties are capitalising on the same narratives to make themselves more attractive to voters.

Practitioners have noticed a diversification of agendas in the Czech Republic, for example. There is less cohesion within right-wing extremism, and greater disintegration in terms of topic. With the focus on Roma declining, other topics have come into focus, including those that were previously a concern for left-wing extremists. This tendency to converge is an interesting phenomenon in the evolving threat from extremism(s) that affects all Member States. Unlike the German nipsters, some right-wing extremists in the Czech Republic still tattoo symbols associated with right-wing extremism on their bodies, sometimes hiding them among other, innocuous symbols. In addition to

symbols, tattoos include numbers, symbolic dates, visual adoration of acts or persons, and symbolic words.

The right-wing extremism panorama has also seen the emergence of new paramilitary groups, such as the Soldiers of Odin.

Dealing with the extreme right in prisons and probation

Dealing with the extreme right in prison is not a novelty for many Member States. Both right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism surge periodically. Tensions from society are reflected in prisons and probation, both between offenders, and between offenders and staff.

How should practitioners deal with extreme right individuals in prison? Many believe the answer to be, 'in the same way as any other violent extremists are dealt with'. This is the line taken by some EU Member States, for example Sweden. Extremist offenders are kept apart and integrated with the rest of the prison population; particular attention is paid to keeping followers separate from leaders. In keeping with the characteristics of these second-generation groups, right-wing extremist offenders also tend to keep a lower profile than previous-generation right-wing extremists when in prison.

Staff training should cover violent extremism in general, while increasing awareness and reducing stigmatisation of offenders. The risk assessment tools used are the same as those used for all other offenders, and for disengagement and exit strategies. The presence of right-wing ideologies that attract ordinary citizens, as explained above, can lead to prison staff siding with or supporting similar ideas. In order to mitigate this risk, some countries have started carrying out risk assessments of staff; these provide indicators of the risk of officers siding with offenders.

A study carried out at a juvenile German prison with a right-wing population⁵ found the same distinction between leaders and followers that is normally observed in religiously-inspired violent extremist offenders. On the one side, there are violent offenders with long criminal records, not necessarily limited to right-wing offences (*followers*); on the other side are ideological offenders, who hold a deep ideological belief that their violent offence is justified (*hard-core leaders*).

The same study also found that the behaviour and attitude of right-wing extremist offenders in prison vary according to the inmate culture within the prison itself. A fear of victimisation is particularly evident when the right-wing subculture is not dominant within the prison. A right-wing sub-culture would fulfil a desire for self-affirmation and ensure that the individuals are appreciated by others. In turn, these tensions within the prison fuel additional resentment and hatred towards those inmates that represent the 'enemy group'. Conversely, in prisons where right-wing ideology

⁵ http://www.cep-probation.org/wp-content/uploads/Figen-%C3%96zs%C3%B6z_Experiences-with-Right-wing-Extremist-Violent-Offenders-in-German-Juvenile-Prisons.pdf

is the dominant subculture, prisoners tend to develop stronger in-group loyalty, which leads to refusal to participate in rehabilitation programmes.

The study also found that right-wing extremists disengage rather than de-radicalise: indeed, they maintain the same ideology but tend to turn away from violence. They tend to interpret their sentence as being the result of violence, rather than the ideology it. Research supports managing right-wing extremists in small groups so as to avoid the rise of strong and influential subcultures.

In a small number of countries, specific exit support for right-wing offenders has been introduced. In Germany, for example, exit support is a collaborative effort bringing together the Ministry of Justice, the prison and probation service, the police and NGOs. Support options include a confidential hotline, help finding employment and accommodation, the removal of tattoos, and protection if at risk. Research indicates that the interventions are more likely to be successful for violent offenders than for ideologically motivated offenders, including in right-wing extremist groups. The majority of the countries do not have specific interventions for right-wing extremist offenders on probation, and offenders are dealt with on the basis of interventions available for other offenders.

Right-wing offenders who have been sentenced continue to receive support from external members of their networks, even when they are in prison. Offenders might receive unpermitted items from outside, such as mobile phones or CDs. In line with the findings referenced above, Czech practitioners have also noticed a disrespectful attitude towards prison staff.

Staff training

For those dealing with people who have undergone any form of radicalisation, education and training for staff is important. Staff include pedagogists, psychologists and educators, prison guards and other staff such as kitchen employees. Education can be basic and specific. Basic education is delivered to all staff, and in particular to new recruits. But subjects might vary according which staff members are the target audience. Because of the strong focus on religiously inspired extremism in recent years, most prisons appear to focus specific training on Jihadi-inspired extremism and the radicalisation process inside prisons. **The RAN CoE would recommend that Member States develop general courses on extremism and the radicalisation process, accompanied by specific modules on specific types of extremism, such as right-wing and left-wing extremism.**

Member States with previous experience of extreme-right terrorism might have old training materials; **a second recommendation is that Member States and practitioners update training materials on right-wing extremism to align them with new developments in relation to this specific type of extremism**, such as their subtler narratives and less identifiable physical appearance. The aim of the training should be to educate prison staff on extremism, but also teach them how to use analytical tools that allow early identification of the radicalisation process in prisons.

Finally, it would be interesting to bring together experts on religiously inspired extremism with experts on right-wing extremism in its current forms. While Imams or academic scholars are involved in prison settings for religiously driven extremism, other law enforcement or academic scholars could be used to address the threat coming from right-wing extremism. The aim would be twofold: to prevent further radicalisation and to facilitate the rehabilitation of the offender, as much as possible.

Conclusions

The experiences of first-line practitioners, together with research findings, show that right-wing extremism is a current and evolving challenge. While attention should be paid to the shifts and novelties behind which the threat can be hidden, it is also useful to observe the similarities shared between right-wing extremist groups and religiously-inspired extremist groups in prison and probation settings. As discussed in this paper, these similarities include a distinction between ideologues and followers, the importance of small groups, the role of in-group dynamics and the influence of prison subcultures on inmates' attitudes and behaviours.

Finally, on terminology and in particular the words 'de-radicalisation' and 'disengagement', research shows that right-wing extremists do not seem to distance themselves from the ideology itself, but can disengage by giving up on violence.