

Expert Group meeting on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

29 March 2022, Cologne, Germany

Number of participants: 11 participants (4 female, 7 male), 6 EU jurisdictions

Background

On 29 March the 4th edition of the Expert Group meeting on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism took place in Cologne, Germany. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the latest developments in the field within the past two years – discuss on the current state of play and number of cases, if and how the Covid-19 pandemic have had an impact on the violent extremist scene, what programs are offered across Europe, what the emerging trends are and how the war in Ukraine has had/might influence these trends.

Presentations:

The expert group started with introducing as new members join the group. The programme then continued with a discussion on the current state of play in the countries represented.

Jiří Ondovčák, Head of the Service Centre, the Probation and Mediation Service, Czech Republic, informed that there are 120 clients in the database of the Service – most of them are right wing extremists as left wing is not so powerful in the Czech Republic. They are supervised by probation officers. For prison in the Czech Republic radicalization is a bigger problem than for probation. He then informed that Czech Probation Service has been a part of RAN prison and probation expert group, in 2021 a HELP tutored course was finalized (40 PO trained). The Czech Republic has a multi-disciplinary teams in place where the Police, General Attorney's Office, Prisons, immigration services and others are represented. Overall situation in Czechia is good, however, the Covid-19 Pandemic and war in Ukraine have influence on it – now there is a big wave of immigrants from Ukraine. Those people who became hostile towards the authorities during the lockdowns (usually antivaxxers) now shifted their attention to the outpour of immigrants arriving. This has already led to violent crimes and among others, Probation Service has to deal with that.

Mr. Anders Forsgren, Security Expert from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service who is responsible for coordinating work on VE informed that for Sweden radicalization and violent extremism present a complex threat with mixed ideologies. Also there are pretty clear links between mental illnesses and radicalization. There are people who do not belong to any specific organization but also links can be found in the religious communities. SPPS focused a lot in 2021 on organized crimes (one of

the reasons, among others, are cases of public shootings). The prisons face an increase in high-risk inmates and at the same time there is lacking capacity in prisons.

Daniel Wolters, Director of DBH, Fachverband für Soziale Arbeit, Strafrecht und Kriminalpolitik, Germany, informed that it has recently been very complicated with so many threats that we face. Some offenders have committed other crimes but still have the characteristics for extremism, and this is a big problem as there are probation officers who have no cognitive training and without it, it is impossible to identify and provide treatment to the offenders. There is a need to work with schools, communities, sport clubs etc and at the same time there is of course a big difference between East, West, North and South Germany. Big issue are also radicalized offenders under probation (how many of them are actually under probation?). Not everywhere there is a joint multi-agency team. In Germany NGOs are those organizations working a lot in the deradicalization process inside prison system and in probation. This is very interesting as in many countries (e.g. Bulgaria) there is not such high level of trust towards NGOs (not take as equal partners), whereas in Germany this model is quite traditional and over the years probation services and NGOs have built trust, confidence and cooperation. All federal states have such NGOs, however the cross-border cooperation among federal states does not always work well. Probation officers check what the needs of the offenders are and then contact NGOs which work with families and also help clients to get out of VE ideals. As for GDPR, it is quite difficult to share some information, yet still possible to share relevant details.

Myron Stauder and Paul Dirken from TER team, The Netherlands, informed that they have 20 officers nation-wide specialized in working with radicalized offenders. They have dealt with 400 offenders (more than ½ jihadists). Justice has struggled to prosecute them and as addition, many of them have mental health problems. In 2020-2021 the Netherlands faced an increase in conspiracy theories (as other countries). Jihadists theory was quite "clear", yet now it is more complex and fragmented: there a lot of subgroups and more different crime they commit. It is difficult to find out if the offence is related to certain ideology or not. In NL Probation Service is in charge of supervision during the pre-trial stage. With this fragmentation and the ongoing protests it is quite challenging to determine who are for the TER team and who for the regular probation service.

Nadya Radkovska, Chair of the PC-CP and Head of Department for International cooperation and professional development of staff, Ministry of Justice, Bulgaria, informed that for Bulgaria radicalization and VE is not such a big issue. There are only 2 offenders imprisoned. Many of the offenders are football hooligans (more left-wing oriented which is pretty unique). The biggest challenge is the training and

preparations of probation staff as there is a lack of experience and the topic is new for them. In Bulgaria there is a huge Roma community and they also face problems with Ukrainians who get houses and fundings while Bulgarians have to wait for these for years which then causes tensions. Conspiracy theories are also spread a lot. On European level, there are good policies and good practices, however, there is a big gap in what has been implemented compare to the theory.

Ioan Durnescu, University of Bucharest, Romania, informed that in Romania they have similar situation as in Bulgaria. However, it is important to be aware about how the situation is evolving on global level, not only local level.

Nadya Radkovska continued with a presentation/discussion on "Improving international and multi-agency cooperation to tackle radicalization and terrorism". To sum it up, multi-agency approach is crucial for tackling radicalization and VE as no single service can provide all the support that is necessary, radicalized offenders are both within the prison and probation systems and it is a big variety of people, not one and the same type in terms of age, gender, social background etc. First months after release are the most critical ones for the offenders (new situation, life and surroundings, stigmatization they or their families might face etc) and it might influence the motivation of the offenders for reintegration and rehabilitation process. What is really necessary is to have public support for rehabilitation of these offenders. There is no overarching definition of terrorism, however, there is a lot of variety in national definitions and selection criteria. The role of women in the radicalization process has changed quite significantly – women also became active in this field. We also have to take into account children who were either born or raised within the radicalized surroundings. The number of families with children returning is still quite high.

The group then discussed resilience of staff working with radicalized offenders in order to prevent a burnout, despite lower caseload the work and time spend on each case is different than with other types of clients, e.g. in the Netherlands they provide a medical check-up for officer within TER team.

As for communication – it is important to communicate this topic to the public as well, e.g. in Germany there is a promotional channel that works with professionals on that.

It is also crucial to get back to the roots and involve the communities, reach families and identify vulnerable people, cooperate with schools etc. There is nobody to work with these communities and probation officers have not done home visits during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The question also is if probation organization is the right organization to do this community work as its priority are radicalized individuals under supervision.

Taking into account the Covid-19 Pandemic and the shift and fragmentation it will be crucial to follow and approach emerging trends (e.g. antivaxxers, anti-Ukraine refugees movement and others) and to develop certain standards for working with these groups.

Conclusions:

- The scene is fragmented and more hard to read than before.
- New emerging trends – antivaxxers shifting to anti-Ukraine refugees movement, disillusion towards political authorities etc.
- No experience with working with VE offenders in some countries (Bulgaria, Romania).
- Different movements across Europe – e.g. in Czech Republic, Bulgaria radicalization is more connected to hooliganism, in Western countries they have dealt with jihadists, Sweden deals with organized crime etc.
- The need to work with communities, schools, families and everyone involved.
- Public awareness and communication crucial.
- Training of staff (not only on how to work with this type of offenders but also how to identify them in case they are under probation for the different crime).
- Staff well-being is important as well as the type of cases connected to radicalizations have often been very complex and demanding.

Before the next meeting it is requested to send out a report with bullet points and request a list of bullet points for the future meetings.