



The policy brief of the EXIT Europe project

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(A) Good practice in deradicalisation, distancing and exit work

Interventions of deradicalisation, distancing and exit work should observe, build on and further elaborate the established “principles of good practice” as they have been laid down by the “RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice” (2015)¹ and later practitioners’ recommendations and position statements, since the experiences of the EXIT Europe project have reconfirmed and inspired further elaboration of these principles.

More specifically, building on these good practice principles – and pertaining to the direct work with the client(s), interventions of deradicalisation, distancing and exit work thus should ...

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... support a process of inter-personal relationship building and trust building between the exit work practitioner and the client; this process of relationship and trust building requires, inter alia, regular meetings and continuous time spent, mutual respect and understanding, and the readiness to engage in confrontation and conflict as far as individually possible. The envisaged relationship is by nature a personal relationship in the sense of professional relationship work (as is similarly the case in counselling, coaching and psychotherapy). It thus is a participatory and empowering relationship on eye’s level in which both – or all – participants may learn and change; yet, it must not be a private relationship.

¹ Harald Weilnböck, ed. (2016): RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice – Principles of Sustainable Interventions in Disengagement and Rehabilitation (Deradicalisation) from Involvement in Violent Extremism and Group Hatred.
https://www.cultures-interactive.de/files/publikationen/Fachartikel/2015_Draft%20RAN%20Derad%20Declaration%20of%20Good%20Practice_Summary%20in%20progress.pdf

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... be delivered by practitioners who are trained to engage in professional relationship work and receive continuous support and supervision for their case work. One of the key outcomes of this training is that the practitioners are able to interact with clients in an unbiased manner, ideologically, politically and personally, while being clear about the fact that they work within the framework of a democratic and human rights based society.

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... be implemented by a tandem of two exit facilitators who practice the triangular exit work methodology. Triangular interventions, drawing on developmental psychology, require that the client is jointly mentored by two exit practitioners who are characterized by personal differences (as sex/gender, social, ethnic and professional background, e.g. social work, psychotherapy, religious mentoring, cult-exit, gang exit, inter alia) – and interact among each other in their tandem work relationship in a transparent way before and with the client.

The triangular approach offers the client a multi-polar relational setting beyond the binary one-on-one situation and constitutes the kernel of a functional group setting and social system. Therefore, employing the triangular tandem approach has high impact on fostering the important skill of handling and benefitting from diversity, complexity, well managed dissent and relativity – which are the very opposite of extremists' black and white world views. The skill of handling triangular complexity thus constitutes the most important psychological prerequisite for living in and proactively upholding a democratic and human-rights based society.²

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... be based on a clear and shared work agreement with the client about the overall objective and the aimed for personal changes which are envisaged for her/him as a result of the intervention. This agreement should be worked out and commonly owned by the client and the practitioner. It is subject to further adaptations in the course of the collaboration; it should always reflect a need for exiting violent extremism and/or group hatred (as in "group focused enmity").

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... unfold in a setting in which maximal personal safety both of the practitioner(s) and the client is assured. In view of the client this also implies continuous attention for issues of endangerment of self and of others – and for recognizing situations of imminent danger, especially with respect to any risk of

² Cf. Harald WeInböck (2018): The approach of triangular exit work - in a tandem team process.
https://www.cultures-interactive.de/files/publikationen/Fachartikel/2018_09_WeInboeck_The%20approach%20of%20triangular%20exit%20work.pdf

committing an act of violence or terrorism. The practitioners may in some instances have to mitigate risk of retribution by violent extremist organisations. However, the practitioners will under no circumstances collaborate on risk assessments which are created by security and judicial authorities.

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... be placed in a "safe space" in the sense that full confidentiality and data protection as well as consideration of privacy impact is secured for the client. In particular in view of the trust building but also in reference to all other good practice criteria, the principle of confidentiality is essential for being able to implement successful exit work; this is also key for being able to provide a sustainable exit program which is widely recognized as being trustworthy and confidential. This also requires for exit practitioners to obtain the legal right to refuse to give witness in court about their clients (as physicians, priests and psychotherapists have it).

Whenever exit work is delivered within statutory institution (as prisons, schools, etc.) the principle of confidentiality also requires that the intervention is provided by external, non-institutional and non-governmental practitioners since only those can assure confidentiality. These NGO practitioners should still be refunded by government since security/ prevention and protection of democracy are statutory obligations; but practitioners need to have license to act autonomously and be answerable only to their own independent quality assurance. They should also have permission to work within and across statutory institutions, as their clients change their institutions and may thus provide confidentiality and continuity of a long term intervention.

The success of the work of external practitioners delivered within statutory institutions relies on a good rapport and mutual understanding between the external practitioners and the statutory staff of the institution. Such understanding regards the very nature of the intervention and the complementary roles of the different actors in and around the intervention. It may be promoted by shared training and awareness raising sessions which will support the embedding of expertise in the institution and help to prevent professional competition as well as insider-outsider resentments which sometimes emerge when statutory and non-governmental practitioners work side by side without any integrative measures being in place. The shared training and awareness raising will thus further mutual respect between external practitioners and internal (statutory) staff which will then be noticeable in many ways to the participants themselves, signalling to them that an inside-outside border has been productively managed.

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... are based, in principle, on voluntary consent of the client. Hence, participation must be freely chosen, rather than assigned, coerced, or mandated; also dropping out of the intervention must neither be held against

the client nor go on her/his records in any way. However, it may be feasible and beneficial that potential participants are motivated beforehand through preparatory and motivational interviews (not through incentives). They may then enrol in the intervention on the basis of a minimal readiness to aim for some, yet not fully defined degree of personal change which has to do with leaving violent extremism and/or group hatred and then, ideally, embark on a process of incremental buy-in and increased commitment to and understanding of the intervention.

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... be based on a methodology of “intensive-pedagogical” intervention which constitutes a newly emerging field of academic study and practice research, developing at the interface of education/ training and clinical psychotherapy. Working on the basis of a methodology of “intensive-pedagogical” intervention requires to ...

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... proceed without any fixed curriculum or session plan – and thus work in an open-process and open-ended approach. This open-process approach has no prejudice to results and is anchored but in the shared work agreement about the overall objectives and aimed-for personal changes – as it is also based on trust and relationship building and the other aforementioned principles. This methodology is maximally client-focussed, participatory, exploratory and in essence self-directed by the participant(s). This requires a high degree of methodological flexibility on the part of the practitioners.

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... emphasize narrative communication as opposed to argumentative and debate like interaction. Narrative communication engages in personal self-expression and shares personally lived-through experiences and subjectively perceived actions with co-narrative listeners; it thus narratively recounts these experiences and actions to others. Contrarily, discussing arguments, levelling counter-arguments, and debating ideological, religious or other issues is de-emphasized in narrative communication while it is by no means excluded.

Hence, one of the key objectives of narrative interventions is to build and support the clients’ capacities and skills to narrate about individual experiences and individual actions (be they of a personal, political or other order) – and to attentively and co-narratively listen to individual narratives. This may specifically include accounts of committed and/or incurred acts of violence.

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... focus on emotional intelligence and social skills – hence facilitate emotional learning in particular with regard to conflict related emotions of anger, shame/ guilt, anxiety, stress and resultant aggression and rage which have been found as being essential drivers of violent extremism and group hatred.

Therefore, some good-practice interventions tend to also employ group settings as much as possible which constitute an extension of the triangular approach. These group settings are able to provide an even more intense level of experiencing diversity, complexity and relativity and thus enhancing social and emotional learning – while it is advisable to flank them by one-on-one sessions to buffer situations of overstrain and stress.

Moreover, group settings – which are embedded in the community, for instance in schools, youth work, correctional facilities, inter alia – have been found to be effective in identifying at-risk individuals who are in need of more intensive and prolonged interventions of psycho-social counselling or therapy. These individuals may then receive such interventions without being removed from the group setting. This is doubly valuable since if remaining strongly embedded in the group and in the community these individuals may then become a factor of societal resilience building.

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... focus on the client's biography and family history as well as on the client's social environment and community – which is a focus that will already be triggered by the emphasis on narrative communication.

In so doing, focus on real or perceived grievances of a personal, social, political and community related kind which may be contained in these biographies, family histories and social environments. Moreover, be especially attentive to experiences and/or acts of "group focused enmity" and of real or perceived victimization and violence. In all this, always be particularly observant to issues of gender and sexuality. Since gender role issues around masculinity and femininity – more specifically, sexism and homo- and trans-phobia – have proven to be at the core of all sorts violent extremism.

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... before the personal and social backdrop of the individual and her/his related grievances, also raise political and religious issues. Yet, do so in keeping with the open-process methodology and in applying an approach of "intensive-pedagogical civic education" (being placed at the interface of education and counselling/ therapy³) – i.e. only raise these issues after having achieved a stable work relationship with the client and when a specific occasion has merged from the dialogue with her/him.

³ Baumann.

In this way also including reference to public and media discourses on political, religious as well as social issues is important since these discourses are often used by extremist recruitment strategies as they also play a role in populist and partisan political statements.

() ... to implement the intervention in the offline domain mostly. Since exit work, being professional relationship work which is based on inter-personal trust and rapport building, generally needs to be face-to-face – it cannot be done online; while online counselling and online street work may be an element of it. In any event, other than still being suggested by some, counter narratives in the internet are largely ineffective and often detrimental for purposes of deradicalisation.

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... generally focus on the personal skills, capacities and resources of the clients and their social contexts – thus avoiding to stress deficits – and on developing solution for imminent challenges which the client may face.

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... be prepared to also work with the **social context of the client i.e. conduct family and context interventions** with family, friends, peer-groups, community and institutional caretakers of clients – especially with regard to those clients who are not directly accessible for the exit practitioner but also in order to deliver exit facilitation in a systemic way

(B) Good practice in PVE policy making and program design

Moreover, interventions of deradicalisation, distancing and exit work should also be placed in an societal and statutory environment which allows for observing, building on and further elaborating the established principles of good practice in PVE policy making and program design.⁴ Working in an environment of good practice PVE policy making and program design requires all policy making to ...

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... strictly proceed in a **cross-extremisms perspective**, i.e. in policy making, always consider all forms of violent extremism, group hatred and anti-democratic attitudes in a synoptic manner as much as possible, including religious and psychological cults, gangs, sectarianism and currently emerging new forms of radicalisation. For instance, today this also means to consider the issue of disengagement from

⁴ Cf. Harald Weirnböck (2022): Doing State in a Civil Society-Based Fashion. The Standards of Exit and Rehabilitation Work and the so-called "Inter-Agency Cooperation with Security Agencies", in Germany and Europe. In: Der islamische Fundamentalismus im 21. Jahrhundert. Analyse extremistischer Gruppen in westlichen Gesellschaften. Hrsg. von Rauf Ceylan und Michael Kiefer, 383-436.

conspiracy believe systems and organisations within the policy framework preventing of violent extremism and anti-democratic attitudes.

Concretely speaking, any instances, activities and statements of policy making (and academic research) should be avoided as much as possible in which reference is made to only one form of extremism – be it in planning and communicating about a national prevention program, designing a practitioner training, organizing a conference or policy meeting etc. At all such occasions the emphasis should be put on the cross-extremisms nature of the psychological and social issues which are at the core of the phenomena of violent extremism – and of the needed measures of targeted prevention. Hence, there is the need to always speak a cross-extremisms discourse, always follow a cross-extremisms concept of policy and program design and always act in a cross-extremisms logic of implementing and communicating on this subject matter.

In order to do so, existing cross-extremisms concepts as e.g. “group-focused enmity” should be used. Moreover, in support of the cross-extremisms perspective reference may be made to the fact that the good practice principles of prevention and deradicalisation have been found to apply to prevent work with individuals across all forms of extremism. For instance, the good practice principle of narrative interaction, i.e. of de-emphasizing discussion and debate of ideological, religious or similarly abstract issues is relevant for exit work with all different forms of extremism.

Most importantly, the cross-extremism perspective requires **de-politicizing the issues** of preventing violent extremism in the sense that all segments of the political spectrum refrain from using the subject of violent extremism – and singular forms of violent extremism – for party political or partisan rhetorical ends; in particular it must be avoided that one form of extremism is pitted against the other for political reasons, claiming its allegedly higher level of security threat or greater relevance for the protection of democracy.

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... refrain from program strategies that **over-emphasise the online domain** and bank on counter-narratives. As noted above, practitioners’ experience overwhelmingly suggests that impactful interventions of deradicalisation and exit work primarily require direct, face-to-face, and relationship-based approaches in the offline domain. Although the internet seems to play a significant role in inciting violent extremism and group hatred, the often implied reverse assumption is misleading: The internet, for intrinsic reasons, can hardly have a very important function in an exit program (and not even for prevention in general). Good practice PVE policy making should be fully aware of this. This applies all the more, since individuals in need of targeted deradicalisation interventions generally do not respond well when exposed to media based counter messages/ counter narratives or to victim testimonials. Moreover, such initiatives seem to have even backfired in that they triggered reactions of cynicism and re-radicalisation.

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... to support and provide **community embedded exit programs** which provide their service in the local environment where clients live. The interventions would thus also be well in touch with local stakeholders and the community as such, including actors of local government. In particular, it must be avoided that intelligence services centralize and isolate individuals from local exit work interventions as is done in some member states.

Providing exit work and building up an exit program in a community embedded manner also requires to train practitioners from the local environment and build local PVE networks. Both the group work interventions (in schools, youth work, prisons) and the triangular exit work approach specifically support the aspects of community embedding and community resilience. Since, firstly, group interventions by nature have an impact of multiplication since more than one client participates – and all participants are part of the community. Secondly, the work done through diversity oriented tandem teams (being characterized by personal differences as to sex/ gender, social, ethnic and professional background) evidently enhances community awareness and resilience in matters of radicalisation and prevention. Since here representatives from different sectors of the community work together in an intensely collaborative manner when providing an intervention of professional relationship work.

This community building aspect of collaborating on a local exit program underlines the fact that exit work – being relational work done on the basis of a systemic approach – should always be a mutual three-way process in the sense that it has impact (i) on the clients who make progress towards adopting a democratic and peaceful conduct, (ii) on the practitioners who also continuously learn from and develop with their clients and (iii) on the community by becoming more aware and knowledgeable about issues of radicalisation and prevention.

Hence, community embedded exit work always considers and enhance societal resilience building within the community. It will therefor also communicate to the general public and media about what exit work is, why it is needed, how it is provided – and about which kinds of biographical, social and psychological circumstances are characteristic of the clients.

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... needs to be placed within a local **framework of universal prevention** the different actors of which should be connected through the local PVE networks in the community. This universal prevention strategy should encompass the issues of drug addiction (also social/relational addictions, cultic issues), mental health and suicide risks as well as all other sectors of youth and family welfare and counselling. The emphasis on universal prevention results from the insight that radicalised individuals have proven to be in multi-challenge situations (drugs, mental health, socioeconomic challenges .i.a.) which aggravate the risks of radicalising and committing terrorist crime. In a sense, the emphasis on universal

prevention constitutes the ultimate consequence of the cross-extremisms spectrum mentioned above. execute

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... support and develop **inter-agency collaboration** between state security and NGO derad practitioners, with clear protocols for information handling and the protection of personal data and privacy – which observe key delineations and the division of powers and functions between state and civil society. The collaboration should be trustful and regular and should also facilitate a good mutual understanding of the methods and challenges of the other partners' work sphere. Most importantly, the protocols of collaboration should make sure (a) that security and intelligence practitioners are able to refer clients and personal data of clients to NGO practitioners in deradicalisation and exit work and (b) that exit work practitioners are able to work in full independence from the security agencies and grant maximal confidentiality to their clients.

A highly important sector of inter-agency collaboration pertains to the different social services in the community who cater to the same client; here, the option of exchanging personal information may be relevant and should be feasible, provided the client has given consent.

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... to consider the **protection of personal data and privacy** and the ensuing confidentiality of exit work as having the highest priority in good practice interventions and in good practice program design – as well as for societal resilience on the whole.

Therefore, the protocols of inter-agency collaboration between NGO practitioners and security agencies/ intelligence must make sure that exit work practitioners share no information about their client work with security agencies at all.

Furthermore, no commonly attended case conferences on identifiable clients must be held among them (as unfortunately is the case in many EU countries).

Specifically, as already said above, state security and NGO exit work practitioners must not collaborate on any commonly executed risk assessment of clients. Also NGO practitioners must not share information about the separate and independent risk and resource assessments which they employ (while security actors may do so in the sense of a one-way street), since any such sharing of information would constitute a breach of the very confidentiality without which no sustainable exit work can operate. (Also, any such data exchange would not be very helpful or reasonable in view of security needs, so no true benefit would ensue from it anyhow.) embed

As a matter of course and as stated further above, exit practitioners are constantly attentive to signals of endangerment of self or/and of others that may become visible with their clients and are trained to recognize situations of imminent danger

ahead – especially but not only with regard to risks of committing an act of violence or terrorism, in which case practitioners will alert security agencies.

Hence, data protection and confidentiality are entirely indispensable not only to safeguard individuals' rights and freedoms when embarking on exit work; they are also crucial to protect the reliability and trustworthiness of exit programs. For, quite evidently, clients would not sign up exit programs anymore once it has become known that their data are shared with security and jurisdiction.

This also underlines once more, the ultimate stake in these data protection issues is the safeguarding of the democratic and free society as such which relies on the division of powers and functions between state and civil society which are secured by data protection. More generally, it becomes evident that basic questions of ethics, human rights, democratic principles and rule of law hinge on good governance being assured in exit work and the protection of personal privacy.

In this respect, special attention needs to be given to two major risks: jurisdiction and intelligence agencies, since both have sometimes proven to be very eager to obtain sensitive and personal information about clients of exit work from practitioners for use in other purposes – and both have the state power to mandate such information to be handed out to them.

Therefore, any state-of-the-art European model of inter-agency collaboration in exit work requires, as stated above, that exit practitioners are not only able to work in full confidentiality but are also granted by law the legal right to refuse to give witness in court about their clients (as physicians, priests and psychotherapists have it).

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... facilitate effective **quality assurance** through **formative evaluation** in exit work on a national and European scale which secures that the ground principles of good practice are observed and highest quality of work is achieved. To this end, it is advisable to establish a commonly owned mechanism of capacity and expertise building among practitioner NGOs – which assures quality by mutual formative evaluation among each other. This would coincide with a process of network and coalition building among these NGOs, supporting mutual trust and good understanding of their diverse approaches and backgrounds – thus establishing a national practitioner community and eventually the establishing of a national association.

What, in turn, should be avoided is any top-down vetting of practitioner NGOs by assessing the quality of their work – and possibly even assessing their supposed “trustworthiness” – from an outside angle or from a funders perspective (as has recently been implied by the ISF-P Call 2020). Since such vetting would inevitably pit the different NGOs in the field against each other, sow conflict and divisiveness, hamper diversity, collaboration, practitioner exchange and community building and thus diminish the quality and sustainability of the work and of the professional field on the whole.

Rather, the commonly owned capacity and expertise building mechanism should be maximally inclusive and collaborative in nature and thus enhance the expertise, skill base and trust among all civil society practitioners working for NGOs in the field of derad and exit work. This mechanism should include the element of practitioner intervision, implemented by way of a cross-evaluation group practicing mutual formative evaluation in a confidential 'safe space' setting. In such groups experienced case workers from different NGOs would exchange, cross-consult and cross-evaluate their work on actual client cases and discuss the used methodology with maximal openness and commitment – and in doing so also reconfirm and further elaborate a set of commonly owned quality standards of good practice. Such national practitioner community would thus also act as a cross-evaluation community of quality assurance, consultancy and training. Evidently, this practitioner community would then also be able to become a full partner on eyes level with governmental stakeholders and other societal partners of exit work. In a second step the mechanism of practitioner intervision by way of a cross-evaluation group work should be extended onto a European level so that the different EU countries' perspectives would increase the diversity of fields and approaches of exit work in the group, as was explored within the EXIT Europe project.

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... safeguard exit work and all involved practitioner NGOs in the national field from the **risks of industrialisation**, i.e. of business and career making to the detriment of good practice prevention work. These risks regularly occur where ever an area of services suddenly receives much public/ political attention and financial investment, which has been and still is the case with PVE since a number of years. The consequences may range from unhelpful competition between NGOs, lacking cooperation, increased marketing, lobbying and business development activities, also cost cutting, potentially resulting in a dynamic of cartel formation; from there effects of brain drain, loss of good practice approaches, decrease of quality of work and eventually a loss of public trust and recognition for the field of exit work on the whole may ensue. Hence, good care for the entirety of practitioner NGOs from different backgrounds and good governance and mitigation strategies in handling the evolution of the field as such is required from the policy makers and governmental funders.