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CIVIL ACTORS’ ROLE
IN DERADICALISATION
AND DISENGAGEMENT
INITIATIVES

When trust is essential

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Based on ethnographic interviews with around 50 individuals who have participated in radical and/or violent right- or left-wing groups in Northern Europe (Christensen 2009, 2015, Christensen & Mørck 2017), this chapter provides insight into extremists’ experiences and frameworks of understanding and interpretation. It will illustrate why participants in radical and extreme groups represent a difficult target group to reach by initiatives aimed at disengagement and deradicalisation run by state and public actors in North European welfare states and why, as the chapter argues, civil actors per se seem better positioned to gain legitimacy among them.

By shedding light on some of the experiences (former) participants acquire by participating in radical and/or extreme groups, the chapter demonstrates the different positions state and civil actors have in responding to individuals’ particular needs when they leave extreme environments and why civil society actors can play a particular role in disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives.

The idea is to convey, as the chapter argues, that who is in charge of programmes and initiatives aimed at deradicalisation and disengagement has a significant impact on their credibility in the eyes of the target groups and with it the possibility of reaching them. The individuals’ particular experiences as activists in a political and violent context with its crucial factors, moments and dynamics often result in them coming to categorise the state and its actors as part of ‘the enemy’ (Karpantschof 2014). Participants in political radical or extreme environments act in opposition to political powerholders and issues on the national and international agenda (Christensen 2009, Christensen & Mørck 2017). Over the course of their engagement some participants develop into violent extremists as an outcome of a complex interplay of internal and external factors (Karpantschof 2014, p. 3).

Becoming an extremist is an outcome of people’s engagement in a community defined by some sort of common practice and discourse. Once they have become involved their participation entails that they develop or reinforce an ideological orientation, and some gradually come to
accept and/or use violence. Becoming an extremist is thus an outcome of a social and psychological development the individual goes through, which is conditioned by a specific social, historical and political context where no one can be perceived as neutral (Berntzen & Sandberg 2014, Karpantschof 2014, Porta 2009, 2013). By zooming in on the social process making an individual develop an identity as an extremist the chapter demonstrates how participation in extreme groups influences the individual’s life-world (Schutz 1967). In untangling this process, the chapter provides an empirically informed understanding of the personal implication of participation in extreme groups to make participants’ outlook and acquired experiences tangible and thus the conditions which need to be considered in disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives.

During the last decades initiatives and programmes aimed at combating violent extremism have emerged across Europe. State agencies such as probation services, the police and the secret services, among others, have been in charge of initiatives aimed at disengagement and deradicalisation. As the chapter demonstrates, such actors might have a high risk of having setbacks from the very beginning, because the target group’s trust in them may be low or non-existent (Koehler 2017, Lid & Heierstad 2018). Acknowledging that state agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) cooperate to various degrees, civil society actors seem initially better positioned to reach out and gain trust among people leaving extremist groups, which is crucial. Building a trusting relation is essential in any effort aimed at disengagement and deradicalisation, as trust is what makes people become open to input from an outside party, which is necessary for change to occur (Christensen 2015). Trust in the provider on a personal and institutional level is thus key to any successful initiatives as everything in an exit process depends on it (Christensen 2015, Christensen & Bjørgo 2018, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013).

The chapter identifies some of the critical differences between state, public and civil society actors and discusses the possibilities and challenges involved conditioned by the outlook people in an exit process might have and the sort of personal support they require if reintegration into mainstream society should become a genuine possibility.

Becoming a violent extremist is recognised here as an outcome of an individual’s engagement in a situated learning process, implying that learning is perceived as embedded within activity, context and culture and is unintentional (Lave & Wenger 1990). For the sake of clarification ‘radical’ is understood here as anything that deviates from the comparable mainstream, and thus only makes sense within a wider societal context. ‘Violent extremism’ is when individuals approve of and/or use non-democratic and illegal means in a liberal democratic system, such as threats, harassment and violence against political opponents and others categorised as enemies in the pursuance of political goals (Schmid 2013).

**Civil society actors**

Civil actors are NGOs or any association that manifests the interests and will of citizens, such as religious communities, relief organisations and recreational associations. Such organisations in Northern Europe are in general perceived as actors that have a positive role to play in crime-preventive measures and venues supporting the reintegration of former extremists. Yet, handling extremists who have defected or just left a violent environment is a challenge requiring knowledge, insight and understanding, which makes some civil actors more relevant than others. The chapter acknowledges that different actors like governmental non-governmental organisations (GNGOs) also work with violent (extremist) offenders and that civil actors like religious communities and recreational associations have a huge role to
Civil actors’ role

play in the process of reintegrating former violent extremists. Yet, the focus will mainly be on NGOs, which have the experience required to risk assess, handle and support violent extremists, who are motivated to disengage or have just left an extremist environment. Such NGOs are often working against (violent) extremism on several levels. On the one hand they offer support to individuals motivated to leave violent extremist groups and environments, while on the other hand they spread information, training and knowledge about how to prevent violent extremism to a public audience and people working in the field.

Several civil actors with expertise within this field exist across Northern Europe; for example, the German NGO EXIT Germany and the GNGO Violence Prevention Network, both of which aim at disengagement, deradicalisation and exit assistance. The Violence Prevention Network is an example of an NGO which has become a GNGO, as its approach has been implemented across Germany and is now co-funded jointly by the EU, federal governments and others. The organisation works inside and outside prisons with violent offenders from right-wing extremism, Islamism and neo-Salafism. EXIT Germany offers counselling services for individuals who have held high-ranking positions in right-wing extremist groups. It has also expanded its target group as HAYAT, a sub-organisation within EXIT Germany, has been established building on its experiences. HAYAT targets what is defined as Muslim supremacists. In contrast, a different sort of programme is the Danish society Breathe Prison Smart, which runs meditation courses inside and outside prisons across the world and offers individual trauma treatment aimed mainly at violent offenders from gangs and/or extremist groups (Hvid 2017). The Swedish NGO EXIT approach is based on a mentorship programme supporting right-wing extremists leaving the Swedish White Power movement. It is from EXIT Sweden that the present chapter will draw its main examples, stemming from an anthropological investigation as part of a Ph.D. project I conducted based on the organisation and its approach in 2012 (Christensen 2015).

Founded in 1998, EXIT Sweden is the oldest programme of its kind in Europe and is based on cooperation between former neo-Nazis, social workers and academics (ibid). While a few of the employees have a past in extreme groups, the programmes in general share some important characteristics with other similar programmes, such as: participation is voluntary; individuals in the programmes are expected to be motivated for change; methods and approaches are informed by a detailed understanding of the social practices and culture at work in extreme groups; a detailed insight into the impact of participation in extreme groups for the individual; and the benefit of their existence being known among individuals in the target group as well as a high degree of legitimacy.

The entanglement of the state and the impossibility of staying neutral

The national strategies implemented by the municipalities, the probation service and the police and other public institutions aimed at countering violent extremist (CVE) initiatives in Northern Europe are two-fold. They are both preventive, targeting what are opaqueely defined as ‘people at risk of radicalisation’, as well as seeking to motivate people who are or have been involved in extremist groups, or who are convicted of illegal military involvement in armed conflicts also called ‘foreign fighters’ or being charged with terrorism by providing support instigating an exit through exit programmes (Christensen & Bjørgo 2018, Christensen & Mørck 2017, Lid et al. 2016, National handlingsplan 2016).

In Northern Europe societal structure is based on a universal welfare state and principles of United Nations statements of human rights. The state is responsible for protecting citizens and grants their freedom of speech and promotes their economic and social wellbeing (Lid & Heierstad 2018). Citizens in Northern Europe enjoy almost unlimited freedom of expression
and thus the right to express even extreme viewpoints. At the same time school teachers and front-desk personnel in public institutions in, for example, Denmark have over the last decade received training in ‘preventing radicalisation’ by being instructed in the risky endeavour of identifying youth ‘at risk of radicalisation’ and potential ‘violent political offenders’. Part of the training emphasises the right to freedom of expression, yet employees are encouraged to react to expressions of ‘a concerning conviction’ and ‘a rhetoric legitimating or encouraging violent actions’. Such expressions are identified as one of the signs – among others – of radicalisation, which can be interpreted as of ‘concern’ and are identified by the Danish National Center for Prevention of Extremism as worth paying attention to (ibid). The example indicates that, even though initiatives that aim to (risk) assess and reintegrate former extremists generally differentiate between behaviour and attitude relating to the mainly analytical difference between the terms radicalisation/deradicalisation, which concern changes in attitudes/ideology, and engagement/disengagement, which involve changes in behaviour and involvement in violent groups and activities or desisting from this (Bjørgo & Horgan 2009), in practice it can be difficult to separate the two. The difficulty in separating the two may also explain why initiatives targeting people motivated or in the process of disengaging now seek to support individuals reintegrated in democratic society (Marsden 2017).

The state’s responsibility for securing citizens places high demands on the political system and impacts the legislation in relation to CVE and the state and public institutions’ room for manoeuvre. Yet, the ideological orientation to the government in power and the public discourse in relation to radical and/or extreme groups and their activities also influence state and public actors’ understanding of the raison d’être for such groups and the individuals’ involvement in them. This will in turn have an impact on what is identified as the problem, who the target groups are and which measures are required in disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives. The coherence can be illustrated by the present political and public debate in Europe.

Over the last decade a general negative discourse about Islam, immigrants and immigration, combined with numerous terror attacks by violent Islamic groups or individuals, has resulted in a general greater political will to apply significant control, surveillance and legal sanctions (Christensen & Bjørgo 2018, Høgestøl 2018 in Lid & Heierstad 2018). But it has also tended to reduce extremism and radicalisation to issues linked to broad categories such as ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ in the public perception. The result is that the daily media discourse and the initiatives merge and tend to stigmatise a minority group, with the outcome that prevention runs the risk of developing into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gemmerli & Hemmingsen in Hemmingsen 2015). Such tendencies might also explain why, for example, several Norwegian municipalities have been rejected by returning foreign fighters and their families in their efforts to offer assistance and support (Lid et al. 2016). Individuals who have returned from Syria/Iraq and been convicted as foreign fighters have expressed little or no trust in the authorities in the light of their experiences after they returned and previous experiences with Norwegian police, health and welfare services. Their experience is that the services they are offered aim to monitor them and reveal them as radical and dangerous (Kristiansen & Lid, 2019).

The current public and political debate affects people’s perception of the risk, the target groups and positions of state actors in the eyes of individuals in the target group. Such conditions also make measures aimed at, for example, reintegration of returned foreign fighters from Syria in Norwegian prisons at the same time a difficult and controversial issue (Christensen & Bjørgo 2018).

While state actors in the perception of the target groups are influenced by the ruling political ideology, discourse and state actors’ activities, civil actors are in general much less
so. The target group’s perception of the link between the government, the state and public actors’ ideological stand is crucial compared to NGOs, which is perceived as less influenced by the given political order as well as bearing the heavy burden of securing the public from terror attacks. The difference between the two has a critical impact on initially reaching the target group and the chance of building up trusting relations, which becomes apparent by zooming in on individuals’ experiences when active in radical and/or violent extremist groups and especially their individual outcomes.

An identity shaped by opposition to outer enemies

Interviewing radical left-wingers as well as former extremists from violent extremist right- or left-wing groups reveals that only a few get involved because of a clear political ideology or undefined feelings of political discontent (Christensen 2009, 2015, Christensen & Mørck 2017). On the contrary, many of them joined initially because of non-ideological reasons, such as being on the lookout for community, excitement and curiosity by attending social events like concerts, parties or other types of informal meetings. These events enabled them to strike up new acquaintances and expand their social network in political environments (ibid). Even though individuals became involved because of multiple reasons, many would eventually increase their social interaction with others from the group. Thereby they would get involved in political discussions and activities as political actions are an integrated part of the social life within radical and/or violent political environments (ibid).

Many radical and/or extreme groups work for a fundamental change in society and the political system. This has an impact on the sort of perception participants develop of the surrounding society and the public and civil actors in it. Being part of a violence-prone radical or extreme group positions the participant vis-à-vis the surrounding society; in addition social life in these environments involves political discussions about local, national and international news and conflicts (Christensen 2009, 2009a). The interpretation of the different events – in radical and extremist groups – is based on an ideologically defined understanding and interpretation framework identifying the problem, friends and enemies and actions the individual ought to take to support the group’s desired goal or changes in society (Christensen 2009, Polleta 2007, Snow et al. 2007). The individual’s framework of interpretation and understanding of the world as well as his or her own position in it will in time be constituted by the group and the narratives and propaganda at work within it (ibid).

In qualitative interviews former right-wing and left-wing extremists from across Scandinavia described how they moved from being active in social gatherings and events to becoming increasingly involved in demonstrations or other political events and handing out leaflets arguing against the existing political and social order. Such activities often involved fights with political opponents and others categorised as legitimate targets for violence, which for some resulted in clashes with the police, detention in custody, trials and imprisonment (Christensen 2009, 2009a, 2015; Christensen & Mørck 2017).

To illustrate the sort of influence of clashes with the police and how this impacts the individual’s perception of state actors, this quotation from a former left-wing radical is illustrative. The quotation described the individual’s experience, when the person travelled from a neighbouring country with a radical left-wing group known to contain both radical and violent extreme individuals to participate in a demonstration in a middle-sized Swedish town and the influence such experiences can have on a person’s perspective:
I changed my mind about the use of violence while I was in a Swedish town until then I was against it. My experience was that we were stopped at the border, the bus was searched and we had no weapons. We started to walk from the buses up to the main street. Then we heard that the police ordered us to turn around. Then I remember turning around. So, in my mind, I thought they gave us an order and we turned around. Then we saw the police run, while they kept the shields in front of their chest while striking the protesters. The crowd panicked, people started running and every other fell. I remember we turned around and then there was one that had fallen, and the face was full of blood, and then the protesters started throwing what they found ... So I remember, I thought; ‘Why do they beat us when we did as they said?’ That was completely incomprehensible. So, I thought they used dogs and batons on defenseless people. They knew we had no weapons of any kind, and we did as they said. It changed my picture of ... I felt stepped on, violated and that it was so deeply unfair how the system has just kind of revealed itself in ways it shouldn’t. I totally lost faith in the police. Then after that, I was just; ‘let’s use so much violence we can handle. No limits’. But that does not mean that in practice. I participated in demonstrations, I wanted a conflict to occur, but I did not commit violence. But when I entered the extreme right those constraints were gone.

(Christensen & Mørck 2017, pp. 92–93)

The social interaction with other participants in the group, the shared narrative and the personal experience of highly intense and violent situations in general change involved individuals’ perspective of how far-reaching their political struggle is, the use of violence, the legitimacy of the police and sometimes, as this person says, the ‘system’ itself. Clashes in demonstrations and the experience of violence directed against oneself or others can lead to a dramatic change in participants’ overall perspective and their perspective on the legitimacy and use of violence and their own willingness to use it (Christensen & Mørck 2017).

**Personal experiences confirm the propaganda about state actors**

A civil actor with a status as an independent NGO stands a better chance of gaining a position with a higher degree of legitimacy among individuals motivated to disengage (Christensen 2015) as people’s perception of state actors is shaped by personal experience combined with the framework of interpretation and understanding circulation in the radical or extreme environment (Christensen 2009, 2015, Holland et al. 2018). To give an example of the perspective to be found in extreme environments, the case of the neo-Nazi group Nordic Resistance Movement (DNM), which is represented across Scandinavia, is illustrative. They consider the authorities to be directly linked to what the group perceives as the ‘Zionist power’ they wish to fight, so they perceive the authorities, and especially the police, as a power tool to fight their movement (Gjelsvik & Bjørgo 2019). In contrast, the autonomous movement on the extreme left tends to perceive the state and powerholders as part of an illegitimate ‘capitalistic and imperialistic’ system (Karpantschof 2014). Negative perception of the state and its actors such as the police is at work for different reasons at both ends of the political spectrum.
Narrative circulation in radical and extreme environments about the police being biased and violent changes from general perceptions into an accurate rendering of the truth when it becomes a personal experience. The quotation below is from a former participant in a left-wing group which contained both radical and violent extreme individuals. It illustrates how his perception of the police changed when he was participating in a demonstration at the beginning of his involvement in the environment (Christensen 2009, 2009a, Christensen & Mørck 2017). He relates:

‘I was in a demonstration in Germany during the first year I was part of the environment, where I saw a man being kicked in the head by a police officer while lying down. It was extremely violent, so I felt really bad about it … where I was thinking … fuck … they are such pigs, the peelers. Again, here many years after, I can see that a police officer’s violence has conditioned my perception of them all, not only because it confirms the tale being told … well, I was so ready to confirm the understanding amongst my buddies and … their anger. I really wanted to understand it, so if I saw it happen once, then …’ (interviewer): ‘Yes, then it makes sense, or … Yes, so I signed to everything they said, you could say’.

(Christensen & Mørck 2017, p. 94)

The description illustrates how shocked he was by the event. Yet, his interpretation of the experience is also informed by the general narrative established inside the left-wing environment of which he was part at the time. What the person sees in the demonstration is informed by descriptions of the police and ‘the system’ as such shared by radical individuals in the environment and the episode comes to constitute his overall framework of interpretation and understanding.

Violence-ridden situations have the potential to alter individuals’ ontology and reshape their world-view, thereby allowing an alternative sense of identity to emerge and of the individual’s position and perception of the conflict and the actors involved (Christensen 2009, 2009a, Christensen & Mørck 2017).

Interviews with former violent right- and left-wing extremists also include descriptions of how, when arrested by the police, the individuals were very conscious of what to say and what not to say in order to avoid being charged. And if they were charged, they knew how to handle the situation to minimise the sentence when going to court. Such knowledge and perceptions of institutions might prove impossible or difficult to override if the same actors were suddenly to cooperate and trust one another in a disengagement and deradicalisation process.

The above gives an insight into individuals’ experiences and framework of understanding and interpretation of themselves and other actors in society when they leave extremist groups, illustrating why building a trusting relationship seems challenging and why civil actors per se seem better positioned to gain legitimacy among individuals in the target group – at least initially.

When everything builds on a trustful relationship

Extreme groups have in general a high turnover. Soon after joining, many people realise that it is not what they expected, while only a few stay for years (Bjørgo 2009). The longer an individual stays the more difficult it becomes for the person to reintegrate into mainstream
society. As illustrated above, participation in extreme groups can have a major impact on a person’s cogitation, embodied knowledge and communal life (Christensen 2015). This quotation from a former participant in an extreme right-wing group illustrates how the feelings of confusion, loss and meaninglessness when leaving an extreme group are far-reaching:

I think it’s very important to understand how much the one leaving the group has invested in it. For that’s what people do not seem to understand. I did not just leave a group; I left an entire life, I left my views, I left my friends, or what I, moreover, had come to see as my family. They were the ones I could do anything with; at least, I thought so. I left a whole lifestyle! I may have developed a lifestyle that did not work in any other context than in the group, really, a way of being, a behavior, a way of supporting myself which could not work afterwards. And you have invested a number of years in it, be it two years or ten, you have still invested quite a large part of your life in it, and it remains important to understand that: it’s a bit like leaving oneself. So, for someone to leave such a group is as if Svensson\textsuperscript{10} would have to pack his bags and leave his wife, children and house to go to Tunisia to live in a tent. That’s almost as likely! It’s not something you just do in a jiffy, and it’s not easy.

\textit{(Christensen 2015)}

As the quotation illustrates, some people are utterly lost when they leave an extreme environment. They are in a vulnerable situation where everything is at stake. Former participants in violent extreme groups in general need support in handling many different issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, aggression, violent response patterns, difficulties in handling stress and in resolving conflicts, mistrust of other people combined with feelings of guilt and shame (Bjørgo 2009, Bjørgo & Horgan 2009, Christensen & Bjørgo 2018). They also often struggle with an ideologically coloured black-and-white mind-set, which means some individuals need support to establish a new framework of references, as the quotation indicates (Christensen 2015). Less acute demands might be their lack of employment opportunities and stigma from society at large and their need for support to further develop social skills making reintegration in mainstream society a real option (ibid).

On top of such issues that it is important to be able to act on, the motivation for disengaging and leaving might only be short-lived (Bjørgo 2009). Such issues are crucial to act on for disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives to work. This means that it might be the end of any motivation for an individual if he/she has to contact what potentially is perceived as ‘the enemy’ if the motivation for an exit occurs. Therefore putting the least offensive providers – from the target group’s perspective – at the forefront of the initiatives is crucial. This is not to argue that state actors have no role in the process; it is just to emphasise the importance of having the right actors in the right place at the right time. The lack of trust in state actors is an issue to be taken seriously. Fortunately, this seems only to be the case initially as the individual’s trust will increase in general the more he or she establishes an alternative identity and life course.

Trust, recognition of individuals in an exit process and legitimacy of the institutions behind it – in the one disengaging perspective – are only crucial initially. Whenever individuals leaving extremist groups have started the process of (re)gaining a position outside the group, the importance of such issues decreases, and other actors become relevant when the need to build new social networks, to find a job, a stable place to live or start an education becomes a core issue (Christensen 2015, Christensen & Bjørgo 2018).
### Similarities and differences between state and civil actors

To identify the role of civil actors in disengagement and deradicalisation processes it is important to compare aspects of civil and state actors to expose differences and similarities between them. Research into state actors and NGOs in regard to supporting people leaving extremist groups shows that they each have a number of possibilities and constraints built into their different positions, organisational structure and economic support (Christensen 2015, Christensen & Bjørgo 2018).

First and foremost, civil actors have, as mentioned, a crucial advantage from their position as they do not carry the burden of responsibility of protecting the public from terror attacks. This means that they can also to a much larger extent avoid becoming entangled in any attempt to predefine ‘people at risk of radicalisation’ and identify people being ‘radicalised’ or ‘extreme’, avoiding categorisation and the potential stigmatisation of categories of people. People in an exit process are in a vulnerable and difficult situation with potentially many (urgent) needs, and this touches upon a key element in disengagement and deradicalisation efforts, being easy to localise and to get in touch with. NGOs tend to be small in organisational structure compared to a municipality or other public and state actors, making it relatively easy for the target group and their relatives to identify how to get in touch. This might not be the case with a public institution, where it can be difficult for an outsider to identify who to get in touch with and how, running the risk of exacerbating an already urgent situation (Lid et al. 2016). Besides, a municipality and any state actor seldom have the opportunity to act at short notice, which leads to the next point – timing.

Timing is crucial, as motivation for an exit can occur once and be short-lived. Ideally there should be the opportunity to initiate action at very short notice – often within 24 hours (Christensen & Bjørgo 2018). Some NGOs are open for personal contact 24/7, which can be crucial as the problems occurring in the target group are often unexpected and severe. As a young woman who was dragged to EXIT Sweden by her father explained in an interview that:

> she had no intent of disengaging from the extreme right at the time of the meeting, but she none the less kept the number to one of the employees. One evening she was raped by a man from the groups she was part of and called the employee during the night, which initiated her disengagement.

*(Christensen 2015)*

The example also goes to show that, even though the woman could have called the police, she did not. Instead she called an employee from EXIT Sweden, whom she had already met and who she knew would know the environment and whom she apparently trusted more than anybody else (ibid).

NGOs in general are flexible and can coordinate an initiative across few people, which makes responding easier (Christensen 2015, Lid et al. 2016). In contrast, state actors and municipalities often need to categorise the person first according to a much more complex system. Their action often involves an estimation of the individual’s situation in relation to age, economics, job, housing and personal life situation, which can require personal issues to be sorted out before help can be provided. This can be risky as the individual’s motivation for an exit might be lost in the process, and even worse if it turns out that the individual is in urgent need of protection. Some police units in Scandinavia have specific units to handle gang members who are defecting. But can they also handle people leaving extremist groups?
The police and the secret services may have much better opportunities in supporting an individual who is in need of protection over time, as in general they have more resources and can provide a cover apartment and address and, in very rare cases, even an identity. Yet, it often seems to be a prerequisite that they acknowledge the personal needs and that the individual is already somehow known within the system.

It can be beneficial for initiatives aimed at (former) violent extremists to have formers among their employees – even though it can be difficult to attract the right ones. Provided they develop the right qualifications they can be of great value for a programme because of their personal insight into issues at stake and at the same time their position as an employee also means they gain the possibility of reintegration into mainstream society (Christensen 2015). When organisations succeed in doing so, it gives credibility to the overall programme and makes it easier to support individuals in an exit process. People leaving extreme groups are often ashamed and full of regret, which can make it difficult or impossible for them to communicate with somebody who they perceive to be a complete outsider or even part of ‘the enemy’ (ibid). To have formers as employees counters people’s fear of denunciation and their belief that, in order to understand you must have had the experience yourself, and provides role models to people in the process, as a former is a living proof that leaving is possible (ibid).

By using formers or working very closely with their cases, EXIT Sweden, EXIT Germany and others have gained a thorough knowledge of ways in and out of violent extreme groups and of what it requires of the individual to reintegrate after extremism, imprisonment or other sorts of detention (ibid). It can be hard to reach an employee with the kind of insight formers have for more established initiatives, as these individuals often get involved because they started out by receiving support themselves (ibid). Nonetheless, state and public actors do also possess a thorough knowledge of the target group, but, as argued above, they have initial difficulty in approaching or attracting them. As some positions in municipalities or the probation service, for example, require that employees have no criminal record, which can – at least for a number of years – make it impossible to be employed as a former, it might also prove difficult to attract them to such institutions.

Extremists seeking to disengage are often a small target group, which can make it easier for a small unit such as an NGO to build up and keep the specialised knowledge required over time than a bigger and more complex public system. In an economical calculation it might also be much cheaper for a state system to cooperate with an NGO with the knowledge and capacity than to develop a system of their own, which runs the risk of being unable to justify keeping employees with such qualifications if they are not in reasonable demand. Besides, it can be hard for a public system to build up the required expertise based on a target group that potentially consists of a few hundred individuals spread across a country (Christensen & Bjørgo 2018).

NGOs on the other hand can struggle to maintain the knowledge due to instability in funding, which can result in the loss of experienced staff. To lose core employees can be fatal for NGOs on different levels as it might also imply losing some legitimacy among individuals in extreme environments, because of their profound understanding of the culture and social mechanisms at work within such groups. If rumours start spreading that NGOs working in this field make mistakes leading to people being put at risk because they lack understanding of the potential threats involved, it will soon reach individuals in the target group who often monitor such organisations closely – despite their open disdain for them (Christensen 2015).
The role of other (civil) society actors and concluding remarks

Social relationships play an equally important role in an individual’s reintegration as they do in the preceding radicalisation processes (Christensen 2015). Learning new social skills and behavioural norms, developing an alternative identity and a desire for social involvement in society are necessary to prevent the individual from (re)engaging with violent groups. This increases the chances of his/her (re)integration into mainstream society (Barrelle 2014, Christensen 2015). The development of relationships with others outside the group and social support, irrespective of whether this occurs in a formal setting (mentor/employee from the municipality and/or state actors or an NGO) or an informal one (friends/family), is of decisive importance for a person’s further chances of regaining a non-criminal lifestyle outside the extreme group (Barrelle 2014, Christensen 2015, Christensen & Mørck 2017, Dalsgaard-Nielsen 2013). While NGOs play a vital role in an exit process, other civil society actors like religious communities and associations of different kinds are equally important from a reintegration perspective, as they offer individuals the potential to develop new interests and social networks and thus expand their social skills.

This chapter has argued that it is a disadvantage for public institutions that they do not have a distance and independence from the state, which reduces the trust necessary for reaching out to the target group. As indicated in the introduction, disengagement and deradicalisation initiatives are not a question of either public initiatives or civil actors, but rather a question of which institutions are best positioned to offer which kind of support at what time, in an often prolonged exit process. While NGOs seem well positioned to initially reach out to people who might consider leaving or have just left an extreme environment, other civil actors can offer new social networks and the development of social skills and interests. Public actors can support the individual’s further reintegration into the labour market or the educational system and might provide a place to live. A partnership shared between several different civil state and public actors and institutions that are well informed about the importance of credibility and the task at hand seems a most promising cooperation in the practical field of disengagement and deradicalisation work.

Notes

1 The empirical materials behind the chapter are several ethnographic studies: (1) participant observation of ‘the youth house movement’ – Ungdomshusbevægelsen – a radical left-wing social movement consisting of both radical youths who fought for social change through democratic means and an extreme core that used violence and malicious damage to obtain political goals in Copenhagen in 2007, leading to the largest uprisings since World War II in Denmark. The study also contained 16 qualitative interviews of participants aged between 16 and 44. I participated in demonstrations and analysed much of the written materials, internet pages and films produced by the social movement and other allied political groups (Christensen 2009, 2009a); (2) an ethnographic study of former right-wing extremists leaving the scene with the help of EXIT, Fryshuset – a Swedish non-governmental organisation. The study included two months of participant observation and analysis of autobiographies of former right-wing extremists. I conducted a total of 21 interviews of 15 people, each lasting from one to three hours. The majority were interviewed once, whereas the coaches at EXIT (former right-wing extremists) have been interviewed twice. The study also included 11 interviews of former right-wing extremists who had been clients at EXIT (Christensen 2015); (3) qualitative interview-based research on people moving in and across extremist environments, biker groups and gangs, involving 42 interviews with practitioners and former extremists, of whom 16 people had participated in several extremist and/or criminal groups (Christensen & Mørck 2017).
2 Both terms are in use as extra-parliamentary environments can contain both categories of political agents – radical non-violent and violent (extreme) individuals.


5 https://hayat-deutschland.de/english/.

6 http://breathesmart.dk/ (3.1.2019).


9 The insights come from a research project by the author and Line Lerche Mørck ’Bevægelser i og på tværs af ekstreme grupper og bande- og rockermiljøet. En kritisk undersøgelse og diskussion af “Cross-over” in 2016 (Movements in and across extreme groups and gangs, a critical discussion of “cross-over”). As part of the investigation I conducted 16 qualitative interviews of people who had moved across political violent extremist groups and gangs. The example is from an interview with a former right-wing extremist.

10 Svensson is a typical Swedish surname, but in this context it is used as slang to convey an image of a sort of average middle-class Swedish person, working from 9 to 5 with two children, a wife, a villa and a Volvo.

References


Civil actors’ role


