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PROMOTING DISENGAGEMENT FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SCANDINAVIA

What, who, how?

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the central principles, actors, and instruments of efforts to promote disengagement from violent extremism in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden and to identify strengths and weaknesses that might inform and inspire the efforts of a broader set of countries. As elaborated below, Scandinavian efforts, and thus this chapter, focus on disengagement from violent extremist groups and networks, not deradicalization, e.g., revising and moderating extremist ideas. The inclination to target behavior rather than beliefs and ideology is evident across time and from efforts to promote exit from different forms of violent extremism in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This aligns with general liberal democratic values – as long as you do not break the law you should be free to think what you like. But it also reflects the strong Scandinavian institutional tradition for social crime prevention work embodied in networks and collaboration structures like the Danish SSP, the Norwegian SLT, and the Swedish SSPF. In light of the preexistence of these mechanisms and the opportunity to leverage economic, social, and general educational services to incentivize pro-social and law-abiding behavior, it is hardly surprising that the Scandinavian countries leaned towards disengagement rather than trying to establish ideological and religious counseling and reeducation services to attempt to deradicalize violent extremists.

The chapter argues that the Scandinavian tradition of institutionalized, cross-governmental efforts to prevent crime, the welfare state, and the emerging willingness of the municipal level to engage with violent extremism, even if this has traditionally been handled by central government security agencies, represent major strengths. But Scandinavian efforts to promote disengagement also face challenges. They include different views of national policy-makers and local actors in collaboration with “gray-zone” actors, e.g., former extremists and individuals or organizations that condemn violence, but still represent conservative, sometimes illiberal, religious and social values. Local level actors tend to take a pragmatic view, stressing the importance of these groups as bridge builders that permit them to reach into otherwise closed
extremist groups and subcultures. National level politicians, particularly in Denmark, tend to emphasize the importance of displaying allegiance to a set of core Western, democratic values before collaboration can take place – rejecting violence is not enough.

Another challenge is the lack of agreement on the appropriate balance between efforts to sanction and efforts to rehabilitate violent extremists. This issue has come to the fore as individuals who joined or attempted to join militant Islamist groups in Syria or Iraq return to Scandinavia. Local level actors attempt to reach out to and facilitate the reintegration of returnees. The national level appears more prone to focus on sanctions, not least in Denmark, where major political parties compete to be “tough on crime” and where recent court cases have led to harsh sentences.

The diverging priorities combined with the absence of clear and consensual measures of success of disengagement programs represent a vulnerability, which proponents of disengagement efforts would arguably do well to address. They raise the specter of a backlash against disengagement efforts in case of a high-profile case of recidivism. The absence of clear and explicit definitions of exit or disengagement in the major national policy strategies pertaining to violent extremism underscores the point.

Below, we first provide a brief overview of violent extremism in Scandinavia since the 1990s. We proceed to address, in turn, the what, who, and how of efforts to promote disengagement in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. What are the core principles? Who are the major actors? What are the ways and means of disengagement efforts? In the last two sections, we discuss strengths and weaknesses of the Scandinavian efforts and argue the need for national dialog about success criteria. The chapter is based on official government documents and policies, threat assessments, evaluation reports, and academic research on deradicalization, exit, and disengagement. Supplementary interviews were carried out with national and local level government officials and civil society actors in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.²

**Violent extremism in Scandinavia: a brief overview**

This section provides a brief overview of violent extremism in the Scandinavian countries from the 1990s till 2017 including violent right-wing and left-wing extremism and militant Islamism. The focus is on movements, groups, and individuals who reject democracy, favoring violent means in pursuit of political, ideological, or religious aims.

Right-wing extremism in Scandinavia in the late 1980s and 1990s was characterized by a move from loosely organized or spontaneous violence targeting immigrants towards more organized and ideologically motivated groups and networks (Ravndal, 2017, 773). The emergence of right-wing extremism in this period can be seen as a reaction to perceived lenient government immigration policies as well as to the more general structural challenges posed by increasing globalization, e.g. migration of labor, outsourcing of jobs, and so on (Ignazi, 2003). However, many of the groups, especially in Sweden, emanated from older political groups adhering to traditional national socialist political agendas, with racism and anti-semitism cutting to the core of their ideology. Amongst the emerging groups and networks this core ideology was supplemented with an increasingly activist agenda morphing into youth cultures and subcultures, especially white-power music and football hooliganism (Fangen, 1998, 203; Lööw, 2000). Today the common ground for right-wing extremism in Scandinavia is a deeply rooted anti-semitism as well as opposition to immigrants and refugees – in particular a strong opposition to a perceived “Islamization” of European and Scandinavian societies. The ideological underpinnings of right-wing extremism in Scandinavia today are characterized by a patchwork of sometimes conflicting streams of thought, political ideology, religious references, and Nordic mythology detached from their original context.
The most extreme act of violence carried out against this background is the terrorist attack committed by Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik, who on July 22, 2011 killed 77 people and injured more than 300 in subsequent bomb and handgun attacks on the office of the Prime Minister in Oslo and the participants at a Workers Youth League camp at the island of Utøya. Despite recurring attacks on immigration centers and despite ideologically being fueled by anti-semitism and strong Islamophobic viewpoints, much of the violence committed by right-wing extremists in Scandinavia is aimed at immediate left-wing political opponents, especially left-wing political activists, themselves seeing their right-wing opponents as prime targets for violent actions (SFI, 2014, 67).

A systematic and activist opposition to all sorts of perceived “right-winging” cuts to the core of the identity of the extremist left-wing, defining itself as anarchist, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist (Ibid, 41). This has resulted in violent attacks on individuals from right-wing groups and organized violent clashes with right-wing demonstrations as well as violent street and city riots, such as at the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001 and on several occasions in Copenhagen in the 1990s and 2000s, oftentimes leading to violent clashes with police being seen as the repressive tool of a potentially fascist state (Ibid 42).

Although individuals in the political extremist milieus in Scandinavia have the capacity to commit acts of violence, the Security and Intelligence Services of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark assess it to be less likely that a terrorist threat currently emanates from here (CTA, 2017; NCT, 2017; PST, 2017). Violent left- and right-wing extremism in Scandinavia today therefore often ends up in a reciprocal relationship in which activity and violence on the one side trigger an adverse response from the other side. In this sense the two mutually constitute each other by engaging in a conflict fundamentally on how Muslim minorities in Scandinavia should be treated (Ibid, 40; Ravndal, 2017, 784).

Throughout the 1990s relatively little attention (from Scandinavian media, academia, and government alike) was given to militant Islamism. The relatively few cases that came to public knowledge were associated with some individuals with contacts to militant Islamist groups in their countries of origin – the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. This obviously changed with September 11, 2001. As in other European countries throughout the 2000s, the Scandinavian countries saw an increasing number of young individuals – many of them descendants of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries – attracted to an Islamist and in some instances militant Islamist ideology. Especially in Denmark a series of terrorism-related court cases in the mid-2000s reflected the much-debated phenomenon of homegrown extremism brought to the forefront with the July 7 and 22, 2005 attacks in London.

For the Scandinavian countries and Denmark in particular the 2005 printing of a series of cartoons intended to depict the Prophet Mohammed marked a watershed. On December 30, 2005 the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published an editorial on free speech and self-censorship, “The Face of Muhammad,” illustrated by 12 cartoons, most of which depicted the Prophet Mohammed. The events following the printing of the cartoons arguably prompted the greatest foreign policy and security crisis Denmark had seen since the Second World War.

The printing and the political aftermath – an unequivocal defense of the cartoonist’s freedom of expression on the part of the Danish Government – prompted strong reactions across a number of countries and were seized by militant Islamist movements, including al-Qaeda, depicting a presumed global war against Islam. Not only were the cartoons seized upon by international militant Islamist media outlets, they also came to play a significant role in the radicalization to violence of individuals in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (PST, 2016).
In January 2010 the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard was attacked in his home by a 28-year-old Somali man living in Denmark. In Norway three men were arrested in July 2010 and charged with attempting to attack Jyllands-Posten and Kurt Westergaard. Two of them were later convicted on the charges. And in late December 2010 four men traveled from Sweden to Denmark in order to launch an attack on Jyllands-Posten. All of them were arrested and later convicted on charges of planning a terrorist attack. Prior to this, on December 11, 2010, Sweden and Scandinavia saw the region’s first militant Islamist suicide attack, when two bombs went off in the midst of Christmas shopping around Drottninggatan in central Stockholm – an attack in which only the attacker died. In an email statement made just before the attack, the perpetrator declared that the attack was in response to Swedish military presence in Afghanistan and the cartoon drawn by Swedish artist Lars Vilks depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a dog.

Lars Vilks has been the target of several violent attacks and assassination plots, most recently in February 2015, when two shootings took place in Copenhagen at an event attended by Lars Vilks and at the Jewish Synagogue. Two people were killed. Apparently the street gang-affiliated perpetrator was inspired by ISIS.

In sum, the cartoons and the controversies surrounding them still seem to play a central role in the radicalization of militant Islamists in the Scandinavian countries and beyond.

Since the beginning of 2012 the authorities in the Scandinavian countries have expressed increasing concern about the number of individuals traveling from Scandinavia to join the fighting in Syria and Iraq. In parallel with what is seen in other European countries, the fight against the Assad regime in Syria has been the single most important recruiting ground for the various Islamist groups in Scandinavia. More than 500 individuals are estimated to have left Sweden, Norway, and Denmark to join Islamist groups – especially ISIS in Syria – since 2012 (CTA, 2017; PST, 2016; SÄPO, 2017).

In April 2017 Drottninggatan was again the scene of a terrorist attack when a hijacked truck was rammed into a crowd, resulting in five deaths. In the course of the trial the perpetrator explained his motivation had been to punish Sweden for its participation in the fight against ISIS. As of 2018 the flow of fighters appears to have almost stopped, due to difficulties in entering Syria, the harsh conditions on the ground, and the dismantling of the proclaimed Islamic Caliphate. However the threat from militant Islamist terrorism prevails and together with right wing solo terrorists like Breivik, it is regarded as the most serious terrorist threat to Scandinavian societies by intelligence services in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark alike. Returnees from the battlefield constitute a particular concern due to the skills and networks they may have acquired during their stay abroad. Additional concern is being raised in relation to the women who left Scandinavia for the “Caliphate,” some bringing their children and some giving birth abroad. While some of these women, provided they return, might pose direct threats to their home countries, concern is also centering on their children and how they have been influenced and impacted by their stay in the Islamic State’s “Caliphate.”

Efforts to promote disengagement: what, who, how?

This section outlines and explains the central principles (what), major actors (who), and activities (how) of efforts to promote disengagement in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Today, disengagement efforts are nested within broader national action plans and policies to prevent violent extremism early on. The specific measures of the action plans differ from country to country, but they all emphasize the need to collaborate across different government sectors and across national and local levels. Typically, national level actors provide funding,
knowledge, and best-practice tools. Local actors are supposed to leverage existing collaboration structures (SSP, SLT, SSPF) to engage individuals or groups believed to be at risk of radicalizing (Government Communication, 2014; National Coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism, 2016; Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014; Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016).

Efforts to prompt individuals to leave violent extremist groups and networks are long-standing in Scandinavia. In Norway and Sweden they date back to before the national action plans to the 1990s when the focus was on right-wing extremism. Disengagement efforts targeting militant Islamism are more recent, with Denmark being the first country to develop exit interventions specifically targeting this type of extremism in the late 2000s. Respondents from all three Scandinavian countries point out that, initially, efforts to promote exit from violent extremism met with skepticism—the notion that it is possible to leave violent extremist groups and that one should actually “help these kinds of people” (R1, R3, R4) appeared alien to many. Today, the social and political acceptance of exit, disengagement, and rehabilitation efforts appears firm, at least in so far as the major policy documents pertaining to violent extremism, the national action plans, include such measures (Government Communication, 2014, 35–39; National Coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism, 2016, 5; Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014, 21; Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016, 6).

While the plans carefully define violent extremism and radicalization, the terms “deradicalization” and “disengagement” are not used. But a focus on voluntariness and behavioral change is evident from the general wording. The Norwegian action plan calls for establishing “exit schemes for persons who want to withdraw” (emphasis added) (Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014, 21) and the Swedish strategy underlines that, whereas municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), friends, and family may support an individual who wishes to leave violent extremism, the driving force and the motivation need to be present in that individual him- or herself (National Coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism, 2016, 16). Along the same lines the Danish action plan speaks of “targeted exit programs and rehabilitation efforts in cases where there is a will to change” (emphasis added) (Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016, 3).

In line with the official government texts, the respondents also lean on a behavioral definition, but point out that attitudinal change may follow track if someone physically disengages. In the words of a Norwegian municipal government official: “In our experience, disengagement is the first step. If over time, via mentoring etc. we can also make them deradicalize, that’s a bonus” (R2). A Danish police officer, along similar lines, points out: “We do not aim at changing the mindset of the individual, however this is what often happens. When we focus upon the basic elements of life, i.e. work, education, family and social networks, the mindset will typically change” (R4). The notion that you can engineer a deradicalization process by means of external intervention is rejected. In the words of a Swedish respondent working at the national level: “I do not believe in deradicalization [programs]. You cannot initiate it externally. And how do you judge sincerity?” (R3).

In sum, the Scandinavian approach contrasts with more ideologically focused deradicalization programs in South East Asia and the Middle East that explicitly aim to “re-educate” violent extremists (Barrett and Bokhari, 2009, 175; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013, 100; Gunaratna, 2011, 65). As argued above, this might be seen as an expression of general liberal values such as freedom of thought, but also of a strong, institutional tradition of preventing crime via economic, social, and general educational initiatives.
Turning to the major actors of Scandinavian disengagement efforts, the three countries again resemble each other. While violent extremism is conceived as partly a law enforcement problem and thus the responsibility of the police, it is also conceived as a social problem that needs to be tackled at multiple levels of government by a broad coalition of actors, including civil society actors (Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016, 12; National Coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism, 2016, 2; Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014, 1). Municipalities and the range of social and economic measures they dispose of play a central role next to the security services, the police, probation services, mental health services, educational institutions, and a handful of NGOs (Lid et al., 2016, 27–29).

NGOs are widely believed to have an easier time reaching individuals with limited trust in government authorities – they are in a position to offer counseling and social support, but may also funnel disengagers towards the municipal services, e.g., housing, education, jobs, needed to build a life outside extremist groups (R1, R2). The Swedish NGO “Fryshuset” is one of the most well established. It has helped individuals leave right-wing extremist groups since 1998. Individuals need to volunteer for the program and they receive social support and guidance from former right-wing extremists and professional social workers. Partners or families are often involved and Fryshuset collaborates with the municipalities in providing the disengager with practical help and support (www.fryshuset.se).

NGOs seem to play a stronger part in exit and disengagement efforts in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. In the Danish case this may be a reflection of the less pragmatic attitude of Danish national level policy-makers vis-à-vis collaboration with “gray-zone” actors.

Some respondents point out that, with the plethora of actors, roles and responsibilities are not always clear (R2, R4). However, and in line with conclusions from academic research, they also emphasize the complexity and case-to-case variation of the phenomena of extremism and disengagement. Supporting disengagement therefore takes a broad coalition of actors, who between them dispose of a variety of tools, permitting them to customize interventions to different individual cases (Bjørgo and Carlsson, 2005, 47–50; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2017; Horgan, 2009, 140).

A distinctive feature of the Scandinavian approach is the crucial part played by municipal authorities and local collaborative structures aimed at crime prevention. In Denmark, schools, social authorities, and police work together to prevent youth delinquency in the so-called SSP collaboration. Norway has a comparable set-up in the so-called SLT model. Sweden has local level coordinators of the efforts against violent extremism as well as the so-called SSPF collaboration and, in some municipalities, local crime prevention councils (National Council for Crime Prevention, 2005, 1; Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014, 13; Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016, 12).

Whereas other countries have established separate, publicly funded organizations to handle violent extremism and exit, in Scandinavia, existing actors and collaborative structures have largely been willing and able to absorb the task (Lid et al., 2016, 21–22) (Table 18.1). An example is what has become known as the Aarhus model. The local authorities in the city of Aarhus, Denmark, have created a multiagency collaboration aiming at preventing extremism amongst youth and rehabilitating extremists into society. Based upon the existing legal framework for sharing information to prevent crime, the model essentially brings together relevant authorities and civil society actors with the aim of including the at-risk individual in mainstream cultural, social, and societal life.

The advantage to building on existing structures is that, in principle, this ensures strong geographical coverage and close integration between social work, “normal” crime
prevention, and efforts against violent extremism. A downside, as elaborated below, is the risk of undermining trust between social workers and citizens if social workers come to be perceived as the prolonged arm of law enforcement and security services.

The laws that regulate the ability of social authorities and the police to exchange information as well as the institutional traditions and sharing habits differ somewhat from country to country, resulting in differences when it comes to how much is actually shared. Denmark has the most permissive laws for exchanging information between government agencies for the purpose of crime prevention. But, as pointed out by a local level respondent, the extensive amount of sharing is a double-edged sword as it runs the risk of compromising the trust that is crucial to effective social work and the credibility of local efforts (R4). The same concern appears to apply in Sweden and Norway, yet respondents simultaneously express reservations about whether flows of information between central and local authorities and from law enforcement to social authorities are sufficient (R2, R3; Lid et al., 2016, 31).

The activities – the how of disengagement – are manifold in the Scandinavian countries. But they tend to cluster into: (1) mentoring and social-psychological support; and (2) practical support with housing, jobs, and education. The primary target group is individual disengagers. Families and friends are a secondary target group, reflecting a realization that they are crucial actors when it comes to providing emotional and social support to a disengager (Norwegian Ministry of Justice, 2014, 21 and 23).

As regards mentoring, respondents, in line with established research, point out that openness, willingness to listen, and a non-judgmental attitude are essential, not least in the early phase of a disengagement process (Arnstberg and Hållén, 2000, 38; Rabasa, Petty, Ghez and Boucek, 2010, 9). Mentoring, in a Scandinavian context, is not about providing alternative ideologies or telling individuals what is right or wrong. It works more subtly, aiming to facilitate the mentee’s own reflection and realization that things are not as black and white

### Table 18.1 Major central, local, and non-governmental actors in the Scandinavian countries’ efforts to promote disengagement from violent extremism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central government</th>
<th>Regions, municipalities, and police districts</th>
<th>Non-governmental organizations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>National Center for the Prevention of Extremism</td>
<td>SSP, PSP, and KSP (fora for coordination of crime prevention measures) and info houses bridging relevant actors in the disengagement efforts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PET (Security and Intelligence Service)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>NFC (National Crime Prevention Centre)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prison and Probation Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Ministry of Justice and Public Security</td>
<td>SLT (forum for coordination of crime prevention measures)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Probation Service</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PST (Security Service)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>National coordinator for protecting democracy against violent extremism (from 2018 replaced by Center for Preventing Violent Extremism)</td>
<td>SSPF, municipal coordinators (not yet in all municipalities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SÄPO (Security Police)</td>
<td>Fryshuset Another Side of Sweden Save the Children</td>
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as suggested by extremist ideology (R1, Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 2010, 26). In the words of a local level respondent from Denmark: “Although we may personally dislike the extremist mindset and ideas of an individual this is not our focus, instead we try to introduce more perspectives to life” (R4).

Disengagers may also receive practical and economic support. The relative affluence of Scandinavia and the welfare-state tradition appear to play important roles. Lack of economic opportunities may aid violent extremist recruitment and complicate disengagement, even for individuals who are ideologically disillusioned (Rabasa, Petty, Ghez and Boucek, 2010, 35). Still, some respondents call for more flexibility and creativity on the part of municipal authorities when it comes to the forms of help offered. From a democratic accountability point of view, it might be advantageous to observe standard procedures, bureaucratic areas of responsibility, and costs. But successful disengagement often requires willingness to adapt measures to individual, even idiosyncratic, cases. A Swedish respondent relates that not all municipalities are willing to fund, for example, the removal of tattoos: “I had these guys who had been competing. Who could get more swastika tattoos? I believe the guy who led had 17. Now, if you want to disengage and start a new life, it could be good to have them removed” (R1).

To sum up, the what, who, and how of disengagement vary somewhat across the Scandinavian countries. However, a focus on behavioral disengagement, a broad involvement of actors from central and local government as well as civil society, and intervention efforts that tend to cluster into mentoring and practical support characterize all three countries.

Dilemmas and differing perspectives: central and local perspectives

How firm is the political and popular legitimacy of the efforts and the consensus across from central and local level actors about means and ends? This section identifies some fault lines between key stakeholders as well as dilemmas inherent to the Scandinavian approach to disengagement.

A major strength of the Scandinavian efforts is the willingness of municipal actors to take responsibility. Despite initial skepticism, a national consensus appears to have emerged in all three countries that efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism are not just the responsibility of central government, the police, and security service, but should involve a broader set of actors (Lid et al., 2016, 21; Winsvold, 2017, 7). The municipal level has largely, in the assessment of our respondents, stepped up and accepted responsibility, even if the naturalness and ease of collaboration differ across the region (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5). Particularly in Sweden, the pressure placed on municipalities from national level actors to adopt local action plans has been criticized, amongst others on the grounds that the process was hurried and resulted in local action plans that were rarely based on local needs and threat assessments (Malmros and Mattsson, 2017, 5).

The engagement of local level government is nevertheless a major organizational and political achievement that positions the Scandinavian countries well to tackle a complex and diverse phenomenon like violent extremism. This type of coalition facilitates the mobilization of a variety of resources and permits a tailored approach to individual cases. It also ensures that local government actors, who are closer to the everyday life of citizens and most likely to be plugged into local atmospherics, are committed to the effort to prevent violent extremism.

In Denmark, larger municipalities and police districts have emerged as crucial driving forces in the further development of programs and intervention methods, also inspiring other actors. The Aarhus model has for instance gained widespread attention and served as inspiration both nationally and internationally (R2, R4).
Whilst acknowledging local achievements, a Danish central government respondent points to the need for strengthening the strategic support for local level efforts, including developing common national definitions, tools, and success criteria (R5). Additionally the established “infohouse structure” seems to be in need of incorporating further local authorities to deal with the substantial increase in cases and the plethora of social challenges to address.

While local level respondents tend to agree with the need for such support, they point to a different and more thorny aspect of local–national level cooperation and coordination: across Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, respondents call for more sensitivity on the part of national policy-makers when it comes to local consequences and complications of, for example, tightening legislation or talking tough. One example brought up is national legislation that criminalizes foreign fighting in, for example, Syria and Iraq. The ability of municipal workers to reach returnees is hardly underpinned by the prospect of potential prosecution. In the words of a Swedish respondent: “All I’m saying is, we should think through the consequences of legislation for social workers. I’m not for or against, but how should practitioners work with this?” (R1).

The issue points to a broader dilemma: local level actors, due to their closer interaction with citizens, play a crucial role preventing, but also detecting, violent extremism. Yet, citizens’ trust in social workers, health professionals, and educators could suffer if they are perceived as collaborating too closely with the police and security service, undercutting their ability to fulfill their primary roles as caregivers and educators (R2, R4; Lid et al., 2016, 31). The same goes for civil society actors, for example, religious communities (Winsvold, Mjelde and Loga, 2017, 68).

There are no easy solutions here. A mutual commitment to dialog across levels of governance to raise awareness of the trade-offs between hard and soft measures together with a commitment to seek to balance the needs seems to be the best way to proceed.

The perspectives and priorities of national policy-makers and local practitioners also seem to diverge somewhat on the question of whether to collaborate with “gray-zone” actors – e.g., former extremists and individuals or organizations that might represent conservative or even illiberal values, but who reject violence. Such collaboration can be highly controversial politically, which might explain why there is limited government-sanctioned NGO involvement in disengagement efforts in Denmark and Norway – civil society actors must clear a high bar.

While setting the bar high might reduce political risks, it arguably increases the risk that local level actors lose touch with specific subcultures and must forgo the possibility of exerting vicarious influence on individuals in such subcultures. Several respondents highlight the need for bridge builders and go-betweens to enable them to reach vulnerable individuals and be in touch with population segments that distrust the authorities. A Norwegian local level respondent explains:

Our principle is that if they do not break any laws, we should be in touch with them … We have an understanding with the mosques that they don’t maintain a low threshold for expelling individuals, but instead remain in touch with us and the police. That way, at least these individuals are in some kind of a community (R2).

Conceivably, local actors who do not have access to classified intelligence reports might find it difficult to judge who to work with and who not to work with. Nevertheless, local level respondents are vocal that national policy-makers should not attempt to micromanage local networks as that would reduce much-needed local flexibility to find workable and customized solutions to local problems. They converge on the notion that central government
should provide tools and legal advice, but leave it to the municipalities to decide how to deal with individual cases and in collaboration with whom.

To sum up, underneath the emerging national consensus on the need for broad coalitions to tackle violent extremism, including via programs and efforts aimed at promoting disengagement, there are still fault lines and dilemmas with no easy solution.

**Success criteria and legitimacy**

How successful have Scandinavian efforts been and how is success conceived of in the Scandinavian context? The short answer to both questions is that it remains unclear.

The difficulties of formulating appropriate success criteria and measuring the impact of disengagement and deradicalization efforts are broadly recognized (Horgan and Braddock, 2010, 266; Lindelild, 2012, 342; Rabasa, Petty, Ghez and Boucek, 2010, xvi; Spalek and Davies, 2012, 363). Frequently, several factors are in play when individuals disengage from violent extremism. How do you isolate the effect of the external intervention? Moreover, oftentimes a disengagement process is gradual and entails some going back and forth. How long should someone have stayed clear of extremist groups to be considered disengaged? Should “formers” be monitored by the authorities? And how much recidivism is acceptable? Considering general recidivism rates for violent criminal offenders in Scandinavia (ranging from 18 to 34 percent), a zero recidivism success criterion for disengagement programs would not be fair or realistic. Yet the public and political tolerance for recidivism might be very low, considering the potential seriousness of crimes related to violent extremism and the emotions activated by terrorist violence (Direktoratet for Kriminalforsorgen, 2016, 17; Nordic Prison and Probation Services, 2010, 32).

The longer-standing Scandinavian programs targeting right-wing extremism have been evaluated and generally found successful. Disengagers state that the help they received from the programs was crucial. As underlined in the evaluation of the Norwegian “Prosjekt Exit” of the late 1990s, however, it is difficult to isolate the effect of the program, given its core philosophy of working with the natural, preexisting factors that push or pull towards disengagement, e.g., disillusionment with the extremist group or leadership, longing for a normal life, stress, or burn-out (National Council for Crime Prevention, 2001, 8; Voksne for barn, Undated, 51).

Most of the initiatives of current national action plans and strategies have not yet undergone systematic and independent evaluation. Respondents report anecdotal evidence of success, but also difficulties, in particular when it comes to reaching into extremist Islamist subcultures (R2, R3; Lid et al., 2016, 27). Frequently, individuals in these subcultures lack trust in government authorities and are disinclined to accept help. In the words of a Norwegian respondent: “These guys will not trust us. You start on minus twenty and work your way up” (R2). And yet, the respondent continues: “We should keep on trying, because motivation [to accept help] may eventually emerge over time” (R2). The inclination to keep at it appears well founded. A Danish respondent indicates that it is possible to overcome trust deficits by establishing a track record of constructive engagement and practical assistance: “The program has increasingly gained such a level of credibility amongst relatives, parents and sometimes extremists themselves that they come to us acknowledging there is help to be found” (R4).

But what would happen if an individual who went through a disengagement program became involved in a high-profile terrorism case? Would a blame game and a backlash ensue? In the words of one respondent: “Yes, probably. But what would be the alternative
to having exit programs? We have to conceive of this in terms of risk. What is the risk of having these programs and what is the risk of not having them?” (R3). Even if the inclusion of exit and disengagement efforts in national action plans across from Scandinavia seems to indicate a high level of political legitimacy and even if respondents point to growing acceptance since the 1990s, it is premature to consider this an irreversible development.

It appears advisable for proponents of disengagement to seek a dialog between the relevant stakeholders and with the broader public about realistic and acceptable success criteria in a Scandinavian context. It will probably remain difficult to isolate the impact and quantify the success rate of disengagement efforts. However, researchers have suggested a variety of possible success indicators, which might serve as a point of departure for debate. They include: disengagement from operational activity; disengagement from violent extremist groups, networks, and subcultures; collaboration with authorities, e.g., testifying in court or providing intelligence; meeting victims or intended victims; publicly denouncing violent extremism; and becoming active in efforts to prevent violent extremism (Bjørgo and Horgan, 2009, 250; Horgan and Braddock, 2010, 281; Rabasa, Petty, Ghez and Boucek, 2010, 35; Spalek and Davies, 2012, 363).

Absent common ground in terms of success criteria, it is difficult to envision an informed debate about how to balance diverging local and national perspectives and priorities discussed above. Arguably, the long-term legitimacy of disengagement efforts as well as the ability to navigate the inherent dilemmas of such efforts hinge on achieving a level of national agreement on realistic success criteria.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of efforts to promote disengagement from violent extremism in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

The chapter shows how an emphasis on voluntariness and behavioral rather than attitudinal definitions of disengagement dominates. It also points to an emerging willingness of central government, municipal authorities, and civil society actors to take responsibility and engage with the tasks of promoting disengagement, even if the degree and closeness of collaboration vary across the region and even if the pressure placed on municipal actors from central actors has been problematized in the Swedish case.

The chapter highlights three major strengths of the Scandinavian efforts: the tradition of institutionalized, cross-governmental efforts to prevent crime, which has offered an established platform and collaboration mechanism for tackling violent extremism; the willingness of the municipal level to accept co-responsibility for disengagement efforts despite the fact that violent extremism has traditionally been handled by central government security agencies; and the ability to offer practical and economic support to disengagers via the Scandinavian welfare state.

Unclear success criteria for disengagement efforts combined with divergence between government authorities at local and national level regarding whether to collaborate with “gray-zone” actors and how to balance sanctions and rehabilitation efforts represent the greatest political and institutional challenges to current efforts. A backlash against disengagement programs is not inconceivable if, for example, an individual who had received aid via a disengagement program later became involved in a high-profile incidence of extremist violence. Other countries, absent the welfare-state tradition and the presence of a legal and institutional platform for collaborating across government actors in crime prevention, could not easily copy Scandinavian solutions. Yet, the Scandinavian case could still offer inspiration.
for others. First, deep knowledge of the political and theological foundations of various forms of extremism might help when trying to promote disengagement. But focusing simply on the practical and social needs of the disengager seems to go a long way. Second, working in a coalition that spans several levels of government is a huge advantage. But a durable coalition will need some mechanism for addressing and negotiating the right balance between divergent needs and priorities. Finally, even if measuring the success of disengagement efforts is no easy task, it appears prudent to address the question explicitly in political and public debates as well as in the policy documents and strategies that guide national efforts.

Notes

1 SSP stands for Schools, Social Services, Police. SLT stands for “Samordning af Lokale rus og kriminalitetsforebyggende Tiltag” (in English: Coordination of local efforts to prevent crime and substance abuse). SSPF stands for Schools, Social Services, Police and “Fritid,” which is the Swedish term for after-school and leisure activities.

2 Five supplementary interviews were carried out with national and local level government officials and civil society actors in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Respondents were selected based on seniority and experience from working at the policy level or from working hands on with violent extremists. Interviews were semi-structured and with a particular focus on questions of collaboration across central and local government and civil society. All respondents were promised anonymity. Interviews were conducted during spring and summer 2017, each lasting between one and two hours.

3 Similar collaboration structures are established with the psychiatric services (PSP) and the Prison and Probation Service (KSP).

4 The F in Sweden’s SSPF stands for “fritid,” which translates roughly to leisure and after-school activities. See also note 1 above.

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