

Achieving Security and Disengagement through Cooperation:

Perspectives on the German success model in the prevention of extremism

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Entwicklung einer bundeszentralen Infrastruktur für Distanzierungs- und Ausstiegsarbeit



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» Abstract

Radicalisation and a willingness to use violence in right-wing extremist and Islamist scenes pose a direct threat to public safety and the status of Germany as a liberal democracy. State intervention through criminal prosecution or surveillance alone is insufficient to ensure long-term disengagement from extremist scenes.

The German model of cooperation is unique on the international stage: civil society expertise is brought together systematically with state security practice. Counsellors in disengagement and exit work provide authentic and low-threshold access and build stable working relationships with clients.

Security authorities enforce the rule of law, perform risk assessment and facilitate access to persons at risk. Close cooperation enables the recognition of risks, targeted interventions and sustainable exits at an early stage – thus preventing criminal offences in the long term, enabling social (re)integration and ensuring the efficient deployment of societal resources.

This Policy Paper advocates for maintaining and further expanding cooperative structures between civil society and state actors in disengagement and exit work. It highlights the opportunities presented by cooperative approaches, identifies the conditions for successful cooperation and presents recommended courses of action for prevention actors and political decision-makers. Building on current successful multi-agency formats and procedures and transferring sustainable structures is particularly important when working with dangerous extremists without intrinsic motivation.



» Current trends and figures

The topics and phenomena of extremism prevention are in a continuous state of flux and repeatedly present fresh challenges for disengagement and exit work. A burgeoning trend towards fragmentation is currently observable within extremist scenes: new alliances and networks are emerging, often across ideological boundaries.

At the same time, the 2024 report by the Berlin Office for the Protection of the Constitution points to the rise of a new extreme right-wing youth culture that is fuelled, among other factors, by digital networks, possesses significant potential for violence and is far more aggressive (Berliner Verfassungsschutz 2025). This is also reflected in the nationwide number of extreme right-wing offences committed by people under the age of 24, which doubled between 2020 and 2024 (Die Zeit 2025).

The number of violent right-wing extremists in Germany has been rising for years, as has the number of politically motivated criminal offences and acts of violence committed by right-wing extremists – by 47.4% year-on-year in 2024. The number of right-wing extremists classed as particularly dangerous is also strikingly high, and specific acts are increasingly being documented: 1,281 violent offences were recorded in 2024, including six attempted homicides. Figures released by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution indicate that the potential number of right-wing extremists is 50,250. There are currently around 15,300 right-wing extremists living in Germany who are willing to use violence to achieve their political goals (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2025: 26). Compounding the issue is the growing socio-political influence of right-wing extremists.

The scene is cross-generational: arrests in the right-wing terrorist group "Letzte Verteidigungswelle", for example, show that minors

are becoming increasingly involved as well. At the same time, the age structure of suspects is also shifting towards adults (cf. Kohlstruck et al. 2020). Conventional prevention programmes – for example in schools or by youth welfare services – are not effective here. Moreover, regular counselling centres for disengagement and exit counselling are rarely used by people with a rigid right-wing extremist world view.

Similar trends can be observed in the area of Islamist extremism: the threat level in this category also remains high. Attacks such as the one in Mannheim in May 2024 – which left one person dead and five injured – or the one in Solingen in August 2024 – with three dead and eight injured – highlight the danger posed by Islamist extremists. Attacks are increasingly being planned and carried out by young perpetrators acting alone. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution warns in particular of the danger posed by individual perpetrators who become radicalised and act in isolation and who can perpetrate attacks with easily accessible everyday objects (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2025: 202). The total potential number of persons in the area of Islamism/Islamist terrorism is 28,280, which marks a slight increase compared to the previous year (27,200). The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimates that 9,540 of these people are violent, prepared to use violence, support violence or advocate the use of violence (ibid: 204). According to The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Middle East conflict has a high potential for emotionalisation and mobilisation. Intensification of the threat scenario in Germany in the wake of the terrorist attack by the Islamist Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent escalation continues (ibid: 4). It is also clear that minors are playing an increasingly important role. Several attacks by minors have been prevented in recent years



(ibid: 205). Various analyses support this thesis: Peter Neumann (2024) points out, among other things, that almost two thirds (64 percent) of the 60 suspected jihadist terrorists in his study are between 13 and 19 years old. What is more, there were also clear indications that the radicalisation of almost all of these persons took place predominantly or even exclusively online.

Increasing propensity to violence, shifts in age structures and a fragmentation of the scene are cross-phenomena developments that highlight the need for innovative and sustainable approaches and procedures in disengagement and exit counselling.



Increasing propensity to violence, shifts in age structures and a fragmentation of the scene are cross-phenomena trends that highlight the need for innovative and sustainable approaches and procedures in disengagement and exit counselling. In particular, people who are prepared to use violence and have no intrinsic motivation to quit – that is, persons who have not yet taken the initiative to leave the scene – pose challenges for disengagement and exit work. Specific outreach measures are needed to gain access to this largely insular group of persons who are unwilling to leave the organisation and to initiate and sustainably support disengage-

ment processes. Moreover, it is important when counselling persons at risk to consider significant security risks that affect both the counsellors and the (potential) clients themselves.

In order to reach this target group and enable disengagement and exit processes, close, structured cooperation between civil society organisations and security authorities is essential, which, in a constructive manner, brings together registration by the security authorities, constitutional measures and educational intervention.

» Tertiary prevention in Germany

In recent decades, Germany has developed a highly qualified and specialised prevention landscape that is unique at international level. Various actors work together in the area of tertiary prevention to avert extremist (violent) offences and terrorist acts and to turn people away from extremist mindsets and actions.

In many countries, organisation of prevention work remains the responsibility of state actors, although the importance of cooperation between state and civil society actors in disengagement work is increasingly being recognised at international level and stronger civil society structures, similar to those in Germany, are being actively called for (Papp et al. 2022: 33). The first civil society exit programmes were developed in Scandinavia during the 1990s in response to the rise of right-wing extremist groups and organisations among young people (ibid: 7 et seq.). The first NGOs in the field of disengagement and exit work emerged in Germany in this context as well¹ (ibid: 8 et seq.). The comparatively strong focus on civil society actors in

¹ For example, Exit Germany was founded in 2000, followed by Violence Prevention Network in 2004. Hayat was established in 2012 as the first NGO in the field of tertiary prevention. It focused initially on counselling relatives and expanded its remit later on to include direct exit and disengagement work in the area of Islamist extremism.



the implementation of prevention work should be viewed in the context of German history, among other things. In this regard, important factors include consequences drawn from the German experience with authoritarianism and totalitarianism and a special awareness that dealing with extremist attitudes and restricting freedom of expression require a high degree of sensitivity (von Berg 2024: 84; Baaken et al. 2020: 8). Overall, Germany exhibits a particularly broad regional structure that is shaped by methodological and institutional diversity (ibid.). The work in the prison context in Germany in particular is unique and integrates both the social work/educational approaches and perspectives of civil society actors and the security-centred perspective of state actors.

» Opportunities for cooperative approaches

In accordance with their social protection mandate, police and security authorities are focussed on the security of society as a whole. Civil society actors involved in disengagement and exit work help clients to turn away from mindsets and actions that are contemptuous of human life and to move towards a self-reliant life with the aim of becoming part of the democratic community (again). These various perspectives and tasks sometimes present challenges for cooperation, but nevertheless enable opportunities for holistic and sustainable case management by combining the various resources and competences that are obtained through cooperation (cf. von Berg et al. 2022: 16). Cooperation structures are particularly important when working with people who are not intrinsically motivated. After all, individual actors are rarely able to design a suitable and sustainable intervention on their own. Civil society organisations often lack access to people who are not intrinsically motivated and have a blinkered,

extreme world view. At the same time, security authorities have so far only been able to intervene using 'Gefährderansprachen' – warnings to potential offenders – but without educational intervention and support, observation by the security authorities or criminal prosecution will not produce long-term disengagement from extremist scenes and ideologies.

Accordingly, security policy strategies benefit from close cooperation between authorities and civil society actors, in particular due to the following four aspects.

» Cooperation as a source of information

Disengagement and exit work will only be effective if it can draw on the greatest possible clarity in regard to the relevant scene. Individual actors – whether state or civil society – cannot develop this clarity and insight on their own. The only way to obtain a nuanced assessment of risk scenarios and individual needs is through systematic cooperation between different institutions.



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Civil society organisations, for example, possess valuable knowledge of local milieus, scene codes and social dynamics. The counsellors also use socio-educational diagnostic tools, specific threat management and other methods to assess security-related details.



But non-state actors are dependent on the quality of information provided by clients (or their social environment). The counselling work may fail to uncover details that are of relevance to security. State actors, on the other hand, have access to information that can be collected and analysed in various ways and that is particularly important for risk assessment and the prevention of criminal offences (ibid: 17). However, state intervention strategies can often only be initiated when clear warning signals already exist from persons at risk. Cooperative approaches, on the other hand, avoid parallel structures, pool expertise and enable the identification and closure of gaps in the support provided at an early stage. Doing so creates an integrated impression of the situation that supports responsible and targeted decisions in the interests of individual and public safety.

» Regular joint case work and sustainability

Disengagement and exit processes are long-term, gradual developments. They require guidance, relationship-building and continuous support. While measures taken by the security authorities – such as interviews with persons presenting an extremist threat or court orders – can provide access to affected individuals, stabilising these processes in the long term is often the responsibility of civil society experts. At the same time, knowledge of potential or current sanctions by security authorities is an important frame of reference for the continued development of disengagement and exit counselling. Not only do these measures influence the life planning and aspirational goals of clients, they also challenge their frustration tolerance and adaptability.

The combination of interventions by the security authorities and socio-educational support can build a foundation for enduring detachment from

extremist scenes. In some cases, institutional sanctions on their own will occasionally solidify the client's sense of affiliation with the scene, as the sanctions appear to confirm internalised negative stereotypes ("state repression"). It is therefore crucial to embrace a strategy that is geared towards shaping life, that opens the door to new social relationships, provides alternative perspectives and promotes the development of a self-determined life plan. Leaving extremist structures is usually associated with the loss of social ties, friendships and a sense of belonging. Counselling services can exert a compensatory influence here by building new social structures, creating a sense of belonging and offering practical support, for example in finding accommodation or work.

» Authenticity and building trust

Many people with an extremist world view distrust state institutions. Civil society organisations, on the other hand, offer low-threshold access – without themselves being part of 'the state system'. Persons with a distinct mistrust of state structures in particular are then more willing to engage. This approach is perceived as an authentic offer of support and not another layer of control. Trust helps to overcome resistance and create prospects.

» Multi-professional approaches

While security authorities can apply investigative methods, impose conditions or conduct risk interviews to gain valuable formal access to high-risk individuals, civil society actors are able to transform these contacts into reliable working relationships. Providing this support close to the client's real life world reduces the risk of relapse and supports the development of stable living conditions that are outside of extremist milieus and hence beneficial to the protection of society.



The multi-professional teams of civil society disengagement and exit work – which consist of social workers, psychologists and educators – are characterised by a multi-religious and intercultural approach, accompanied by a profound understanding of different lifeworlds and problematic situations, especially among young people. As a result, they provide a credible identification interface and sometimes possess greater social legitimacy than state actors. Their holistic approach takes into account individual biographies, psychosocial stress and social environments in equal measure. Nevertheless, developments towards a stronger multi-professional orientation are also observable in this area among the security authorities (ibid: 19).

» Conditions for successful cooperation

Despite these opportunities, cooperation between security authorities and civil society actors also harbours challenges. A lack of transparency or unclear communication structures may engender mistrust among clients. Another concern is that dependencies may restrict autonomous actions on the part of civil society actors which, as a result, would call into question role relationships or subordinate social work/educational objectives to more security-oriented goals (cf. Schuhmacher 2018; von Berg 2024). It is therefore necessary at all times to reflect critically on cooperation structures and adhere to a few basic requirements: binding regulations are needed that clearly define responsibilities, information flows and aspects of data protection so as to avoid undermining the advantages of civil society actors in regard to authenticity and building trust. Furthermore, cooperation should be shaped by a clear understanding of roles and boundaries as well as knowledge and understanding of the procedural logics applied by the respective actors. Even if the

relationship between actors involves financial dependency, there should still be room for criticism and reflection within the cooperation itself (cf. von Berg 2024: 88 et seq.).

An ethically sustainable and effective model of action can only be created on the basis of mutual reliability, trust and professional cooperation. After all, achieving sustainable effects requires harmonised, binding procedures.

» Multi-agency approaches as a strategy for success

Strategic case-related cooperation between civil society organisations and security authorities has been successfully implemented in the area of Islamist extremism since 2014. Violence Prevention Network initially trialled the cooperative approach in Hesse and was subsequently able to establish systematic cooperation with security authorities in Berlin, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Saxony and Thuringia. The long-standing and successful cooperative architecture with security authorities in the area of Islamist extremism has since experienced further standardisation and professionalisation and is being implemented across all agencies. Since the start of its counselling work in 2014, Violence Prevention Network has provided assistance in 408 cases involving situations of risk as of 2024. These included 69 high-risk individuals and 61 returnees from war zones. Of these cases, only two relapses are documented, both in the area of extremism and violent crime. It is particularly noteworthy that not a single relapse was recorded among the returnees. Sustainable success was also achieved in the judicial context with 132 violent young people, 58 of whom were considered high-risk offenders.

Since 2019, the multi-agency format has also been successfully transferred to the area of right-wing extremism: together with security



authorities, Violence Prevention Network developed an innovative approach to disengagement work with non-intrinsically motivated right-wing extremists exhibiting a potential for violence². This conceptual work led to the REE! – A change of course for right-wing extremists project, which has been successfully implementing the cooperative approach since 2020.

» Conclusion

Disengagement and exit programmes are vital tools in the prevention of extremism, but not a panacea. Their effectiveness hinges crucially on the quality of implementation, the continuity of support and their institutional integration within a cooperative network. This cooperation combines state procedural logics with socio-pedagogical, psychological and intercultural expertise. It enables comprehensive, realistic and sustainable prevention work that goes beyond purely security-related measures.

A sustainable and credible disengagement or exit from an extremist scene becomes more effective when security authorities and civil society expertise work together. The perspectives are mutually complementary: while the state creates the legal and security-related framework and access to clients, civil society organisations engage in relationship work and build trust to enable long-term change processes. This combination is a core feature and success factor of the German model in the prevention of extremism, which can guarantee the security of our society in the long term.

» Recommendations for action for political decision-makers and prevention actors

1. Maintenance and continued expansion of the institutional integration of cooperative structures (cross-phenomena)

Legal and organisational frameworks that enable and safeguard binding cooperation between government agencies and civil society organisations must be maintained. Extending the cooperative approach to all federal states would be welcome.

2. Recognise different perspectives and strengthening dialogue at eye level

We need a culture in which the perspectives of all actors are viewed as equally important. Both perspectives, procedural logics and organisational cultures – applied by the security authorities and civil society – have a right to exist in tertiary prevention and must be made open for coordinated discussion.

Specialised contact points should be established and expanded within the authorities to further strengthen communication and information sharing between security authorities and civil society actors. They should act as central interfaces that enable both structured collection and systematic evaluation of relevant information.

2 These efforts were also included in the “Catalogue of Measures of the Cabinet Committee on Combating Right-Wing Extremism and Racism” in 2020. The creation of trust-building communication formats between security authorities and civil society actors working in the prevention of right-wing extremism at federal and state level as well as the expansion of target group-specific exit counselling were defined as priority tasks (cf. Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (2020): No. 16 and No. 51). Another stipulation was that deradicalisation formats for persons who do not wish to disengage should be (further) developed in all federal states (cf. *ibid*: No. 50).



3. Secure long-term financing

Reliable funding must be provided for civil society projects in order to ensure continuity, quality and innovation in disengagement and exit work.

4. A serious commitment to professional standards and quality assurance

In view of current trends and developments, regular and dynamic reflection on quality standards and evaluation procedures for multi-agency formats is necessary in order to remain flexible and adapt current procedures where necessary.

5. Promote knowledge transfer and networking

Structures for regular dialogue and networking between practice, science and politics must be further strengthened.



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