

De-Radicalisation in Penal Services

European Member States, and also Austria, are faced with the phenomenon of “foreign fighters”, travelling to Syria or to Iraq. “Foreign fighters”, leaving their home country and thus their local community in order to fight in Syria/Iraq, often disappearing for months and leaving their family or their social environment in the dark about their whereabouts. Once they have eventually returned, their mental, physical and ideological state is mostly different from that of before. It can be assumed that the returnees suffer from the consequences of war trauma. Moreover, there is the danger, that “foreign fighters” abroad will recruit other persons, and what is more, further develop their terrorist and combative skills.

Due to the special structures of prisons, that is the conditions of locking-up and restricting, prisons can be a breeding ground for radicalisation and recruiting. Prisoners are often radicalised by other co-prisoners. Above all those who are vulnerable and easily impressionable are likely to be recruited.

Tendencies of radicalisation among prison inmates have to be countered by good information and messaging services, by close cooperation on a partnership basis within the penal system, by a functioning security system in prisons (“dynamic security”), good training and further education of penal services personnel, programmes of de-radicalisation and general educational programmes for endangered prisoners in the framework of preventive work and cooperation on a partnership basis with other Ministries affected and with administrations of custodial sentences on an international level.

This prevailing geopolitical situation has prompted the Directorate General for the Prison Service and Preventive Detention in the Federal Ministry of Justice in Austria to take adequate measures relative to radicalisation and readiness to use violence in correctional service facilities. In order to be prepared for the challenges connected therewith, a “Task Force De-Radicalisation in Penal Services” was established in the mids of 2015 to prepare and efficiently implement the necessary preventive, de-radicalisation, training and cooperation measures; this task force is comprised of executive personnel from the Directorate General for the Prison Service and Preventive Detention in the Federal Ministry of Justice, including a criminologist, a forensic psychiatrist, a certified psychologist, a female social worker and the Management of the Penal Services Academy. Thus, the Task Force comprises 13 executive officers from the administration of custodial sentences, participating on several occasions during the year in a jour fixe, where decisions can be taken, and an expanded body of external experts, as well as an executive team coordinating and supervising activities in this area, preparing strategies and proposals for implementation, and taking care of current exchange of information between its members. In Addition there is institutionalised cooperation with the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counter-Terrorism and the Federal Ministry for Families and Youth.

Approach of Austria towards persons accused/convicted pursuant to Sections 278b et seqq. of the Austrian Criminal Code

- In the area of assistance to persons released from prison (HEH), the designated contact persons of prisons are called upon to inform the cooperation partner NEUSTART in the course of release preparations.
- The mandatory correctional service plan for persons accused/convicted for offences pursuant to Sections 278b et seqq. of the Austrian Criminal Code has been communicated to the prisons by decree covering all steps to be taken in the areas of counselling and correctional service processes, so that optimal preparations are available for the release and transition management.
- A comprehensive counselling mode (3 different implementation options) in keeping with the correctional service plan pursuant to Sections 278b et seqq. of the Austrian Criminal Code has been prepared. In principle, it shall serve the prisons as some kind of guideline for the counselling process, starting from remand detention up to release (on probation). The counselling process shall be managed dependent upon age group, adults or juveniles/young adults. Moreover the professional team in the respective prison gets in contact with members of the non-governmental organisation DERAD, for them to conduct an orientation interview. Further interviews with an expert from DERAD are carried out on a regular basis, if there is a need for further interventional interviews. The probation service shall be included in the professional team among others to arrange an appropriately timed remand meeting.
- Under the roof of "EUISA Network", the Austrian partner DERAD - social cohesion network for dialogue, prevention of extremism and democracy - offers various discussion programmes for all prisons. The offers are aimed at those prisoners who are sympathising with an extremist ideology based on religion and glorifying violence, and/or who were ready to promote such ideology or were acting as "foreign fighters". These offers are to be understood as complementary to the measures offered by professional services, which exclusively deal with discovering any possible state of radicalisation and ideological sympathies, and offer additional support in the form of a discussion group as preventive measure.
- By intensive exchange of information with other European Member States, data on risk assessment instruments (risk assessment/risk screening) could be obtained and evaluated. These instruments help professional services to discover radicalism, thus guaranteeing a multiple check principle. One screening tool performed by social workers explores whether a prisoner is radicalised or not. The second instrument supports psychologists to observe a possible process of further radicalisation of persons convicted of terrorist crimes.
- For the first time in the framework of the project "PSYBEG", starting in 2010, a psychologically well-founded and standardised treatment programme for violent criminals was established for correctional services. The programme is oriented along factors favouring criminal action, contains clear treatment goals and teaches social skills, cognitive faculty and empowerment. Upon this basis and in cooperation with the Violence Prevention Network

(VPN) from Germany, additional modules and trainings covering radicalism can now be integrated into different treatment programmes.

- In cooperation with external partners several prevention programmes regarding extremism were established in Austrian prisons the last years and addresses topics such as de-radicalising residual identity, developing autonomous identity, human rights, cultural diversity and political education for the purpose of practicing democracy and tolerance developments.

- On an international level (Council of Europe, EuroPris, MECR, RAN, ICPA), Austria participates in various projects and initiatives on the subject matter (de)-radicalization.