No Violent Extremist is An Island: The Role of Communities in the Rehabilitation of Former Extremists and the Reduction of the Risk of Recidivism.

By Dr. Virginie Andre

This article is review on a series of international online workshops on the Multi-Dimensional Role of Former Violent Extremist in the Prevention, Intervention and Countering of Violent Extremism launched by Victoria University in 2020 in partnership with Exit Finland and Exit Germany. And a third workshop was organised by Victoria University in partnership with Exit Finland, Exit Germany and the Lebanese Fighters for Peace.

Summary #1 : Virginie Andre & Onni Sarvela, (2020) Once A Extremist, Always A Extremist

Review workshop series 2020

A series of international online workshops on the Multi-Dimensional Role of Former Violent Extremist in the Prevention, Intervention and Countering of Violent Extremism was launched in 2020 in partnership with Exit Finland and Exit Germany. Last year's workshops brought together forty-eight front line practitioners (including exit workers and law enforcement practitioners), policy-makers, community workers and academics from Australia, Belgium, Canada, the European Union, Finland, Germany, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

A special focus was placed on building an understanding and identifying the role that former violent extremists can play in the prevention and countering of violent extremism as well as disengagement from violent extremism. It addressed some of the following key questions:

- 1) Based on former extremists' experiences, how can the process of disengagement be understood?;
- 2) How should former extremists be engaged in the prevention, intervention and countering of violent extremism?;
- 3) What benefits and challenges can be expected from working with former extremists?.

The second workshop then focused specifically on the risk assessment and risk management in working with former extremists. Significant importance was given to law enforcement contributions as it aimed at generating understanding and exchanges around the challenges and benefits there may be for law enforcement to work with former extremists in this field. The discussions evolved around two main questions:

- 1) From a law enforcement point of view, are there any risk(s) associated with working with former extremists at different levels of intervention?;
- 2) What are the benefits and barriers of involving former extremists in law enforcement work?.

From these workshops emerged a significant issue on the question of rehabilitation of former violent extremists in society and the managing and understanding the perception of communities of former extremists. While there exists a positive (but very fragile) public perception of formers (which carries the idea that change is possible), community perception of former extremists is predominantly built on media portrayals of these individuals. Communities are often reluctant to welcome back former extremists.

This is a particularly important aspect of the discussion on the role communities can play in the rehabilitation of former violent extremists. In fact, community preparedness and readiness of accepting former extremists reintegrating into their communities/society is an important factor in the successful and sustainable disengagement of former extremists.

The Role of Communities in the Rehabilitation of Former Extremists and the Reduction of the Risk of Recidivism.

On 31 May and 3 June 2021, a third workshop was organised by Victoria University in partnership with Exit Finland, Exit Germany and the Lebanese Fighters for Peace organisation to examine the role of communities in the rehabilitation of former violent extremists and the reduction of the risk of recidivism. Among the 28 participants from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Lebanon, Singapore, Sweden, Thailand, UNITAR and the United Kingdom, over half of the participant practitioners were community members or community representatives. Notably, there were participants from the Somali National Association of Sweden, the Finnish Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, the Finnish Muslim Youth Forum, the French Aquitaine's Regional Council of the Muslim Cult as well as the Muslim Association of Britain. The strong community participation and active engagement in this workshop is a testimony of the various partners long-standing relationships established at the grassroots level based on trust, transparency, confidence and reciprocity without which community partnership would not be possible.
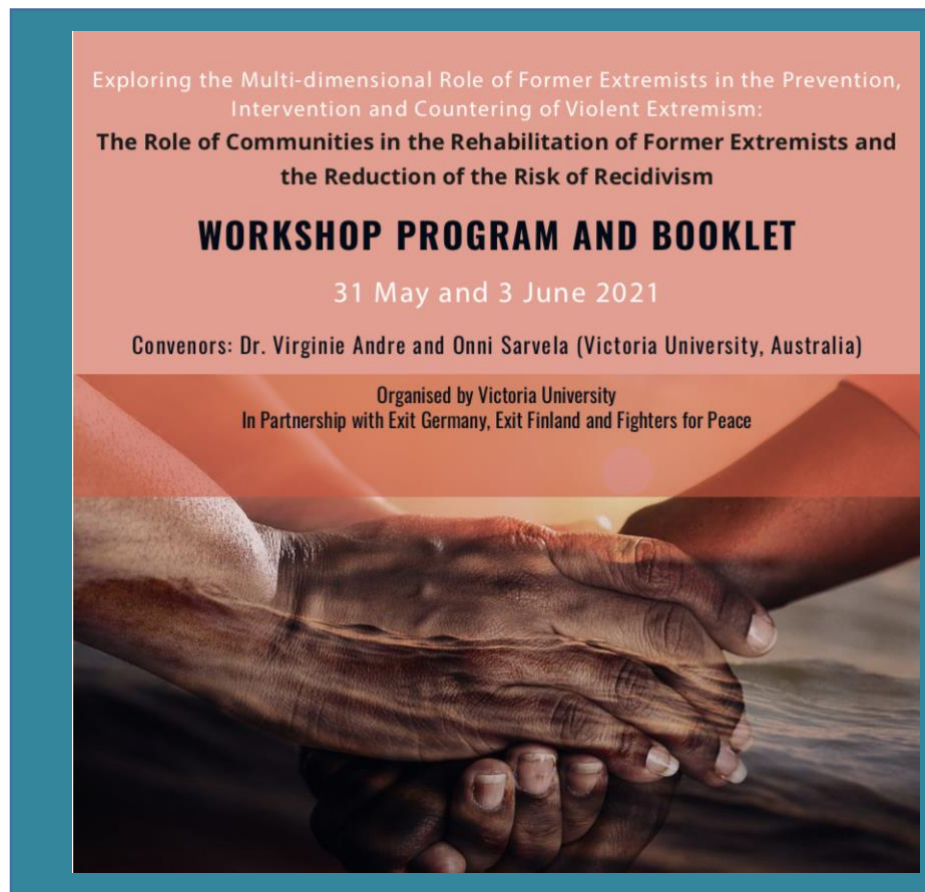
Dr. Andre explains that "as communities across the globe have become more and more instrumentalised (and abused) as well as stigmatised and scrutinized, communities have become increasingly suspicious (and rightly so) and more selective in their engagement, particularly in the field of countering violent extremism. Community partnership has become a buzzword for many, slowly becoming meaningless, if not solidly anchored in a deep trust and a mutual respect. Community trust needs to be continuously earned; it is not a given and remains fragile. When

discussing issues such as the role of communities in the rehabilitation of former violent extremists, it is crucial that we do not speak on behalf of the communities but provide a space and opportunity for the concerned communities to actively participate in a discussion that concerns them first and foremost."

In fact, as one Australian community participant pointed out:

> *"Communities want to do their part; they are not turning away. It affects Muslim communities more than any other community because they are the ones who will feel the brunt of it all when there is a single terror attack that takes place. There is a massive cost to us as community. People want to come on board, but they also need to feel confident that trust is established and to know what they are in for. They are willing to take on the risk; the risk of stigma and bear a part of that. Building that relationship of trust (…) and making things clear is key."*

Some of the key questions that were discussed during the workshop are:

- • Do communities have a role to play in the reintegration of former violent extremists? If any, what challenges do communities face in relation to former violent extremists' reintegration?
- • Do communities play a role in reducing the risk of recidivism in relation to former violent extremists?

Communities play a critical role in developing the protective factors from violent extremism and in reducing recidivism. In determining whether communities have a role to play in the reintegration of former violent extremists, 4 types of community responses were identified in relation to the reintegration of former violent extremists:

- • 1) a push away community which is a community that originally pushed away the former violent extremist into radicalisation and to which he/she reintegrates upon disengagement;
- • 2) a closed community which is a community that does not support reintegration and to which he/she reintegrates upon disengagement;
- • 3) a critical community which is sceptic towards former violent extremist reintegration and to which he/she reintegrates upon disengagement; and,
- • 4) a non-judgmental supportive community which supports former violent extremist reintegration and to which he/she reintegrates upon disengagement.

However, it is important to bear in mind that communities are made of an aggregation of individuals who may have different individual attitudes and perceptions towards reintegration of former violent extremists. For instance, there may be individuals who may hold a push away attitude or a supportive attitude towards former violent extremist reintegration in a same critical type of community.

In all 4 types of community responses, the former violent extremist in his/her disengagement and reintegration process faces (not unlike communities themselves) shame, stigma and the fear of rejection. Depending on the type of community responses and its impact on the former's sentiments of shame, stigma and rejection, it may likely impact on his/her successful reintegration as well as putting him/her in the risk of reoffending.

In the current context of returning foreign terrorist fighters (and their families) and the release in some European countries of convicted violent extremists who have reached or are nearing the end of their prison sentence, the question of better understanding the role communities can or

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*Dr. Virginie Andre / **No Violent Extremist is An Island: The Role of Communities in the Rehabilitation of Former Extremists and the Reduction of the Risk of Recidivism.***

are playing in the reintegration of former violent extremist is critical as well as whether they can assist in reducing the risk of recidivism. The 2020 terrorist attack in Austria by a released convicted terrorist offender put back the spotlight on the issues of recidivism, assessment of (un)successful disengagement and (un)successful reintegration.

A UK practitioner also explained that violent extremist recidivism puts not only a heavy burden on but also outs at risk the communities:

> *"There is actually a lot of risks to communities when people reoffend. So, the important question is who takes on the risk? If the risk is taken on collectively or there is a notion of risk sharing such as in Victoria [Australia] then it is different. However, in the UK there is a finger pointing culture. If you failed in your community intervention, then as a community you will be blamed for that. There's a lot of risk for individuals to take on. […] While the communities may play their part, we cannot control all the variables. […] There are other variables such as societal and governmental variables which we cannot control. So, there is a constant push and pull where communities may reduce risk and a few years later other uncontrollable factors may then increase the risk of falling back into extremism. It is unfair to puts this burden onto a community, we have to reduce the risk of recidivism or the risk of radicalisation when we do not have control on all the variables".*

This highlights the importance of the notion of partnership and shared responsibility in the risk of reintegration and responsibility in the risk of recidivism between communities, government and law enforcement. In other words, the type of partnership between communities, government, law enforcement and various institutions will determine how much risk becomes a shared responsibility and ultimately how it will impact on the degree of successful reintegration and the reduction of the reoffending risk.

Communities also face challenges in relation to former violent extremists' reintegration. Four-fold community challenges have been identified when it comes to former violent extremist reintegration:

- #1 how the media portray former violent extremists and how this may impact on community responses to the reintegration process and the former himself/herself;
- #2 the type of community preparedness and readiness to assist or support the reintegration process;
- 3# how governments positioned themselves in terms of engagement and partnerships with the communities can have an impact on the community responses towards supporting reintegration of former violent extremists;
- #4 the sentiment of stigma, fear of rejection and shame of the former themselves, which is also shared by the communities can be impediments to reintegration.

Policy-maker and head of development at the Finnish ministry of interior, Tarja Mankkinen explained how working with communities from a policy perspective in the context of reintegration is something fairly new in Finland and can be challenging. Within the reintegration process, there are many actors involved and these can either support the process or make it more difficult. The current political climate in Europe makes it very difficult to have poised and open discussion on the reintegration of returnees.

Finally, the term community was discussed at length in relation to the notion of reintegration and recidivism, and whether from a community perspective, there was a need to make a difference between the reintegration of former right-wing extremists, religiously motivated extremists and

other types of violent extremists. It is important to note that the notion of communities to which former violent extremist can return to have also changed dramatically, as they can be both in the physical world as well in the online world, and individuals can belong simultaneously to multiple types of communities. To borrow from John Donne's 1642 sermon "No Man is an Island", no extremist is an island and no former extremist is an island, and therefore belong to diverse communities.

There are some nuances between the reintegration of former violent religiously motivated extremists and former violent right-wing extremists. The dynamics at play are different between the two. The process of returning may not be so different but the nuances and considerations that may need to taken into account between the two groups are certainly different. The types of communities former violent extremists return to can influence their degree of successful reintegration. For instance, former right-wing extremist who disengaged from right-wing extremism groups return to communities and societies that in some cases have now become more populist in their outlook, and share the same prejudices as they did before but do not turn to violence as the societies, they return to do not advocate violence.